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“That’s very rude, I shouldn’t be telling you that”:

Older women talking about sex

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Abstract

This paper discusses narratives created during interviews with 23 older women (aged 61-90) about their experiences of sex and intimate relationships in later life.

For analytic purposes, the paper understands narratives to be neither pre-existing nor a simple reflection of experience, but to be made moment-by-moment in the interaction between parties drawing on available cultural resources. Attention to the interactional situation in which the narrative is produced helps to explain the ways in which speakers perpetuate or resist dominant cultural storylines. Older women's accounts of sexual relationships provide a particularly rich site for this analysis because a dominant cultural storyline of 'asexual older people' is often evident in popular culture. This storyline provides an important cultural resource which older women who are talking about sex can both draw on and resist in order to produce their own accounts. This paper uses a discourse analytic approach to discuss some of the moments in which speakers explicitly produce counter-narratives. These moments are visible to the analyst by the participants' own orientations to telling a counter-narrative. The paper also considers parts of the accounts which the analyst identifies as counter-narratives, although the speakers do not orient to this. The analyst's own position is thus implicated in the analysis and is reflexively considered.

This paper aims to add to the debate about how speakers draw on cultural resources in producing narratives about their personal experiences. It focuses particularly on the question of how counter-narratives might be defined and identified within data. It uses data from accounts given by older women (aged over 60) of their experiences of intimate relationships in later life. The paper begins with a brief summary of the circumstances of creation of the narratives that are analysed. I then move on to a summary of the discursive approach to narratives used here and discuss the idea of ‘dominant cultural storylines’. There follows a section on the identification of dominant cultural storylines and counter-narratives in relation to the topic of older women and sexual activity. The fourth section is a more detailed consideration of how these different sorts of narratives, and in particular counter-narratives, might be identified within the data. The fifth section begins the analysis of data from my research by looking at parts of narratives where participants themselves ‘orient’ to telling a counter-narrative. The sixth section returns to a more theoretical discussion of how one might identify counter-narratives when participants do not orient to telling them. The final section discusses some examples of these parts of narratives which I, as the analyst, identify as counter-narratives, including reflexive consideration of that process of identification.

The creation of the narratives

This paper draws on data from interviews with 23 women aged between 61 and 90 living in different parts of England. Respondents replied to newspaper and newsletter articles, posters and local radio features asking them to talk about their experiences of intimate relationships in later life. The group of women who

responded were not intended to be a representative sample of women aged over 60, but they are a reasonably diverse group in terms of age, social class, sexual orientation and past and present sexual experience.¹ The interviews were undertaken mainly between January and July 2001. Most women were interviewed once in a session that lasted for around an hour to an hour and a half. Interviews were relatively unstructured and varied in the topics covered.

In the recruitment phase and in the introductory phases of the interview, I used the phrase 'intimate relationships' rather than 'sex'. This was for a variety of reasons² and has important implications for an analysis of the narratives that were then produced. This phrase is one of the many factors that created the local context of the talk. Many of the women appeared to understand 'intimate relationships' as a euphemism for 'sex', but they did not all do so and additionally they all will have understood the phrase in slightly different ways. But, in general, the phrase 'intimate relationships' places sex within a context of relationships and thus may have made less likely narratives about sex outside relationships, masturbation or biological or medical accounts. Such approaches, however, were not entirely absent from the interviews, since the local context of a narrative, whilst crucially important, does not completely determine the account which is given.

A discursive approach to narratives

The analysis of narratives has been approached in many different ways, and each type of analysis has tended to take a different definition of what constitutes a narrative. In this paper I do not focus on the structural features of narratives in the way that much work following Labov has done (Labov & Waletzky, 1967); neither do I take the very broad interest and definition that some writers have done (Seale, 2000).

Any definition of narrative is imperfect and encounters examples that are problematic. I define narratives quite narrowly to be consequentially ordered talk which predominantly relates past events, and which is to some degree distinct and separable from the surrounding talk (Riessman, 1993). I therefore consider that some of the talk that takes place in an interview cannot be considered to be a narrative and I explicitly exclude activities such as explaining, theorising or justifying from the category of narrative. Whilst these activities may refer to narratives, they are not themselves part of a narrative. The border between narrative and commentary on narrative is sometimes unclear in practice, but the distinction remains a useful one.

This paper applies a discursive approach to narratives, drawing particularly on the work of discursive psychologists (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and also on less discursive work which is interested in questions of representation (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Such an approach treats narratives not as reflections of reality but as themselves shaping the social world (Abell, Stokoe, & Billig, 2000). Narratives are argued not to pre-exist, even though participants may have told similar stories before, but to be created in the interaction between the participants. I understand narratives to draw on culturally and locally specific discursive resources and to be produced by speakers in order to do particular rhetorical work within an interaction. This rhetorical work is both small-scale and constantly changing (as analysed by conversation analysts in terms of turn taking, preferred and dis-preferred responses, membership categorisation analysis etc. Sacks, 1995) and longer term and more constant. This longer term and more constant rhetorical work is particularly influenced, in this context, by questions asked during the interview designed to invoke narratives - e.g., “tell me about your own experiences of intimate relationships and growing older”. I understand the form,

content and unfolding of the narrative to be influenced not only by the relationship between the people involved but by their shared and differing understandings of what sort of talk is appropriate to this context (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

Another important concept that I use in this paper is that of ‘storyline’. By this I mean a family of related plots which carry with them recognisable characters, expected situations and anticipated outcomes. So, for example, one might write of a ‘Mills and Boon’³ storyline, although individual books have their own plots as well as different characters, situations and resolutions. If speakers share cultural knowledge, then the evocation of a storyline is sufficient to suggest to the listener the sort of characters, situations and outcomes which go with it, regardless of whether the speaker actually elaborates these. I thus discuss narratives as relatively small and discrete entities and storylines as broader, more general phenomena, rather than using one term for both.

Whilst there are a large number of potential storylines relating to a topic, not all storylines have the same cultural status. Some storylines attain the status of normative or dominant storylines. These powerful and prevalent storylines have been theorised variously as: culturally available narratives (Antaki, 1994); canonical narratives (Bruner, 1987, 1991) dominant discourses (Gergen, 1995; Gee, 1992, both cited in Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, & Bamberg, 1996) and master narratives (Mishler, 1995), amongst other approaches. Whilst all these terms differ somewhat in their implications, concerns and underlying epistemology, I would argue that there is sufficient similarity between the phenomena they are describing to treat their existence as an acceptable working assumption. In this paper, I use the term ‘dominant cultural storyline’.

Dominant cultural storylines and counter-narratives

Whilst the theoretical existence of dominant cultural storylines may be relatively uncontested, the establishment of the existence and nature of any one dominant cultural storyline is a far from straightforward matter. It is particularly complex in relation to the topic of older people and sex. Many academics and practitioners working in this area assert that older people are expected to have lost interest in sex. See, for example, two particularly well known books on the subject, (Greengross & Greengross, 1989, p.20; Brecher, 1984, pp.17-21). This dominant cultural storyline is almost always challenged as soon as it has been invoked in practitioner literature, in academic work or in ‘serious’ journalism. There is little published work which can be cited straightforwardly to support the existence of this storyline. However, it is implicitly present in much popular culture, especially in the realm of ageist jokes and birthday cards. For the rest of this paper, I shall describe this complex of ideas as the ‘asexual older people’ storyline.

The situation is complicated by the existence of another very available cultural storyline which I shall describe from here on as the ‘liberal’ storyline. This might be summarised as ‘of course older people have sex too’ and is associated with the idea that sexuality is lifelong (or at least adult-life long); that sexual activity is basically good for people; and that it is ageist to treat older people as asexual. It is particularly prominent in academic and practitioner literature about older people and sexuality. (See for example, Hodson & Skeen, 1994; Weg, 1983; Herron & Herron, 1999). This liberal storyline draws on a wider interest in telling sexual stories (Plummer, 1995) and an accompanying tendency to treat sexual experience as the touchstone of truth. An important part of this storyline is the idea that ‘in the past’ people did not speak about sex and that by speaking about sex we are breaking taboos and taking part in a

liberatory project (Foucault, 1976). Whilst not all types of sexual stories are valued equally, Foucault argues that we are peculiarly prone to seeing the locus of truth in confessions of sexual secrets. I would also argue that the popularity of talk shows such as 'Oprah' and the frequency of articles about unusual sexual experiences in women's magazines means that very many people, even if they have never talked about their own sexual behaviour before, have heard other people do so. This provides them with interpretative resources, storylines, topics and even vocabulary that they can draw on in constructing their own narratives in accordance with the liberal storyline.

Significantly, this liberal storyline is constituted as explicitly counter to the first asexual older people storyline - for example, practitioner literature on older people and sexuality has an almost inevitable first paragraph about the common idea that older people are asexual. The asexual older people storyline is often described as 'a myth' and writers then proceed to set up the liberal storyline as the truth. Thus (Brecher, 1984) in the introduction to one of the major studies of sexuality in later life describes how more than 3,000 of their 4,246 respondents agreed with the statement that "society thinks of older people as nonsexual" and then describes this statement as a "misconception." Thus a narrative drawing on the liberal storyline can be argued to be a counter-narrative, precisely because it constitutes itself counter to the asexual older people storyline. Whilst the asexual older people storyline logically runs counter to the liberal one and appears to be its mirror image, I would argue that narratives drawing on it are seldom counter-narratives because they are rarely set up as such. Talbot et al (Talbot et al., 1996) argue that "because the propositions implicit in master narratives or dominant discourses are widely accepted as self-evident, narrators who cast their own account in terms deriving from such a discourse are free

to present the personal story as a description of events that is isomorphic to ‘reality’.” This means that, in this context, people using the asexual older people storyline do not usually have to do the discursive work of establishing the truth of their account that people using the liberal storyline do.

Whilst, by this definition, a narrative drawing on the asexual older people storyline is not usually a counter-narrative, since it is normally presented as uncontested, in my data it was occasionally treated as a counter-narrative. Similarly, the liberal storyline was occasionally treated as a dominant cultural storyline when speakers invoked it in an uncontested and normative way. Thus, one storyline cannot be argued to be exclusively dominant and the other to be associated exclusively with counter-narratives. While the asexual older people storyline is more often treated as a dominant cultural storyline and the liberal storyline is more often drawn on by counter-narratives, this is not always the case. In this paper, I take the position that the status of narratives and storylines as dominant or counter is determined not by a property of their content but either by participants’ orientations or by explicit analyst’s identification.

During the course of a long narrative, speakers rarely draw exclusively on only one of these storylines. Although if asked directly they might state that they agreed with one or the other storyline, in actual talk, most speakers draw on both storylines at different points, depending on the interactional work they are undertaking at that particular moment. In order to achieve their conversational aims, speakers perform complex negotiations around the more available storylines.

In the next section I move from the more theoretical question of how dominant cultural storylines and counter-narratives might relate to one another to the more technical question of how one might be able to identify counter-narratives within data.

One way of thinking about the different levels at which one might identify counter-narratives is in terms of the difference between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ analyses. Silverman (Silverman, 1993, p.24) describes emic analyses as “working within the conceptual framework of those studied” and etic analyses as “using an imposed frame of reference”. In the following section, I discuss one way of identifying counter-narratives by undertaking an ‘emic’ analysis. In later sections I deal with the use of ‘etic’ analysis.

Identifying counter-narratives within data – emic analysis

Conversation analysis has predominantly worked with emic analyses and makes particular use of the concept of participants ‘orienting to’ a topic. Whilst this paper is not itself within the domain of conversation analysis, and indeed later sections will deal with etic analyses, the concept of ‘orienting to’ is worthy of attention as one level at which one might identify counter-narratives. Sacks (Sacks, 1995, vol. 2. p.223), in a discussion of the status of analysts’ categories, suggests a useful way of identifying when someone is orienting to telling a story. He argues that the analyst should ask, “Is the fact that someone is telling a story something that matters to the teller and the hearer?” Sacks argues that a story can only be considered to be a story if participants orient to it as a story, but this paper also uses etic analysis at a later stage. His question can be transposed to my context as one emic angle of approach in the identification of counter-narratives. The question becomes “is the fact that someone is telling a counter-narrative something that matters to the teller and the hearer?”

Participants are said to have ‘oriented to’ something if they invoke it and then treat it as relevant and pertinent to the conversation. Stokoe and Smithson (Stokoe &

Smithson, 2001) provide a useful discussion of the uses and limitations of the idea of 'orientation' in relation to gender. Applying their summary to my context suggests paying attention to those instances where participants overtly disagree with another statement, use words or phrases such as 'taboo', 'I know I shouldn't' or 'I know most people wouldn't agree' or characterise themselves as rebellious. In the analysis that follows, I take the use of such phrases and rhetorical moves to indicate orientation to telling a counter-narrative. It should be noted that orientations by speakers to telling a counter-narrative rarely take place within the body of the narrative. That is to say, such orientations usually take the form of commentary on a narrative and are thus not considered to be themselves part of a narrative.

Participants' orientations to telling a counter-narrative

This section begins the analysis of my data by looking at those points in the interviews where participants themselves oriented to telling a counter-narrative. One example of someone overtly orienting to telling a counter-narrative comes from Liz's⁴ account. Liz had been in a relationship with one woman for nearly 40 years when her partner left her. She now has a new partner and is describing the early stages of their sexual relationship:

Liz: Erm she erm she has, as many many women do, even younger women, she has she has a very very dry vagina

Rebecca: Right.

Liz: So erm, you know, there has to be care taken but, in fact, erm she said it was because she was, erm it was to do with her

hormones but we discovered that it wasn't anything to do with that at all

Rebecca: Right.

Liz: Which was a huge awakening for her

Rebecca: Right yes

Liz: you know

Rebecca: Yes yes,

Liz: So that's interesting you know cos several of my friends have said "oh I couldn't possibly have sex any more because" and they're in their fifties.

Rebecca: mmm

Liz : Erm "because, you know, erm I couldn't possibly because I have a problem" you know erm and it's quite interesting

Rebecca: Mmm.

Liz: and what it means is, I think, is that you're not with the right person for sex anyway, you know.

In this section, Liz ascribes the notion she is countering to her friends - she claims that they say "Oh I couldn't possibly have sex any more because ... I have a problem". In this context, it seems likely that Liz is saying that their problem is vaginal dryness, although she does not spell this out. She makes their age relevant, when she states that they are "in their fifties" and thus implies that they are claiming that their experience of painful sex due to vaginal dryness is because of their age. This idea is congruent with the asexual older people storyline, although Liz does not explicitly refer to it. Having invoked this notion, she then positions her own experience and understanding

counter to it. She asserts that vaginal dryness is not due to increasing age but to not being “with the right person for sex.”

A sub-category of the counter-narrative could be described as the transgressive narrative. Speakers can be said to have oriented to telling a transgressive narrative if they invoke the notion of taboo, rule breaking or sanction, for example. Not all counter-narratives take the form of transgressive narratives - a counter-narrative could take the form 'people always say ... but I know...', which does not engage with the notion of transgression or taboo. But I consider all transgressive narratives to come within the category of counter-narratives. Such transgressive narratives are marked in my data by the use of phrases such as, “it’s all getting very frank” (Polly), “this is getting pornographic” (Liz) and “if we’re going to be basic” (Kate), which pay attention to the possibility of offence in telling a transgressive narrative and attempt to ward it off. Another such example comes from the extract that includes the phrase I have used in the title of this paper. Lesley begins this part of her narrative by talking about when she had first learnt the term ‘wanker’⁵. She moves into a story about her last sexual partner:

Lesley: She used to like being held and doing, masturbating herself.

Rebecca: Right yeah yeah.

Lesley: sometimes it was just one of the things she liked but

Rebecca: Yeah yeah.

Lesley: but erm she she, I don’t know why she found that so comforting, but that’s what she wanted to do. Wanted somebody to hold her kiss her and comfort her and erm make her feel loved and feel in the mood, and then do this for herself.

Rebecca: Yeah yeah mm.

Lesley: and we used to talk about it quite a lot and we heard the term frequently in the town, village rather, village a hundred and two in the population erm was Wigton. We nicknamed ourselves the Wigton wankers. [both laugh] [laughing] That's very rude I shouldn't be telling you that.

Lesley explicitly orients here to telling a narrative that is counter to normative storylines, when she says "I shouldn't be telling you that." However, it should be noted that whilst it is clear that in the phrase "I shouldn't be telling you that" Lesley orients to having just told a counter-narrative, it is far from clear what it is a counter-narrative to. It could be counter to the idea that one should not speak explicitly about sex, to the idea that one should not use explicit slang in interview situations or when being tape recorded or to the idea that she should not talk to me, perhaps as a younger person, in this way. Although she says that she shouldn't have told me this, which might be argued to be in line with the dominant cultural storyline of asexual older people, in one sense at least this is still a counter-narrative in that she has told me it, even if she does regret doing so. However I would also argue that the laugh which accompanies "that's very rude I shouldn't be telling you that" constitutes an instruction to hear this comment as not entirely serious. She orients briefly to the asexual older people storyline when she says "I shouldn't be telling you that". With this comment she seems to hold up the asexual older people storyline like a mirror to her other comments, but in a way which points up her more common orientation to the liberal storyline, which is a type of counter-narrative. It can thus be seen that

narratives drawing on dominant cultural storylines and counter-narratives can be used within the same sentence.

One way of orienting to telling a counter-narrative is to briefly orient to the dominant cultural storyline and then to resist it. Lesley could be argued to do this in the example above, and Liz does something similar when she talks about her new sexual relationship:

Liz: I've had difficulties with this relationship as one always does you know with new relationships.

Rebecca: Yes.

Liz: Erm and sometimes I'm I get fed up and I think at my age what the hell am I doing? You know shouldn't, shouldn't I just be a grandmother figure at home, you know, knitting or something.

Rebecca: Mmmm

Liz: And er and I touch wood that neither one of my children have got grandchildren cos I haven't got time actually [both laugh]

Rebecca: Yeah

Liz: And erm you know erm so there you go. I mean obviously if they did have one I'd be all over it and all that stuff

Rebecca: Mmm.

Liz: but erm you know that hasn't happened so erm erm.

Rebecca: A lot of the grandmothers I've spoken to are off having new relationships anyway so.

Liz : I think that's wonderful. I really do

Liz's use of the phrases "at my age", "shouldn't I" and the emphatic "what the hell am I doing" point out her experiences as untypical and arguably unsuitable in establishing a new sexual relationship at her age. These phrases constitute a brief orientation to the asexual older people storyline. Her rejection of this storyline is suggested by her use of the caricature of "a grandmother figure at home knitting". This caricature makes it clear that she does not see her current existence in these terms. My comment "a lot of the grandmothers I've spoken to are off having new relationships anyway" invokes the liberal storyline without orienting to it as a counter-narrative. This, then is an example of the liberal storyline being treated as a dominant cultural storyline, in that its truthfulness is taken for granted.

As well as the asexual older people storyline, there are other associated storylines which speakers sometimes orient to. In the following example, Win refers to the dominant cultural storyline that disabled people are asexual, which seems closely related to the storyline that older people are asexual. Win has been disabled all her life and was married to a disabled man. Her account is characterised by a lot of explicit orientation to telling a counter-narrative. She rarely positions herself as an older woman but constantly positions herself as a disabled woman. She describes what happened sexually when her husband had a stroke and lost his speech:

Win: So, and then the frustrations get worse and worse. But we tried. Sometimes we were, sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. But we could still give each other pleasure, and to me, penetrative sex is not essential. It has, as long as we can pleasure each other, and the... erm ... hmm, what do I say? ... both have orgasm, does it matter? Am I shocking you?

Rebecca: No, not at all. Several people have said this to me, because, you know, particularly as men get older, more of them become impotent

Win: Yeah, but, you see

Rebecca: and it doesn't mean the end

Win: they, they, you see, if you look at what people assume to be normal, at our point, at that point in time they would have assumed that we hadn't, we wouldn't bother. But there are still people that think that disabled people have no sexual needs.

In this extract, Win deals with dominant cultural storyline and counter-narrative in reverse order to what might be expected. Firstly she tells her counter-narrative, oriented to in the question "am I shocking you?" She then sets up the dominant storyline that she is resisting "at that point in time they would have assumed that we hadn't, we wouldn't bother. But there are still people that think that disabled people have no sexual needs." This contrast structure creates an orientation to telling a counter-narrative. It seems possible that she presents dominant cultural storyline and counter-narrative in this backwards form because she positions me as sharing her belief that disabled people do have sexual needs.

In the example above, it is very clear which narrative Win presents as her favoured one. In the following example, Win very clearly orients to telling a counter-narrative but she is guarded as to whether she agrees with the mainstream storyline or the counter-narrative. She is talking about how when she was growing up she never expected to marry:

Win: And, as I say, the idea that a disabled person wants, has sexual needs had never even been thought of. Although, thinking back, when I was a child in hospital, there was an Algerian nurse who taught us, the girls, to masturbate.

Rebecca: Really? Gosh.

Win: Because, she said to us, there were three of us in the ward together, erm she said “I can’t imagine you’ll ever get married, but you’re going to need to learn to relieve yourself”.

Rebecca: Right

Win: So we were fourteen when she taught us

Rebecca: Gosh

Win: to masturbate. But that would be regarded as totally shocking in today’s world, they’d call it abuse.

Rebecca: They would, wouldn’t they.

Win: But ... it stood me in good stead on, at times. As I say, how much of this you dare put into it I don’t know [laughs]

Rebecca: [laughs]

Win: But ... I hope it’s not shocking you.

Rebecca: No, it’s not, it’s really [?good]

Win: Erm but you see, people d-, because people don’t think I need anything like that, mostly if I spoke to friends of mine in this vein, they’d be absolutely erm ... well, they wouldn’t believe me.

Rebecca: Mmm

Win: But, from what you said you wanted, you wanted some base honesty

Rebecca: Yeah absolutely

Win: So I'm

Rebecca: this is, this is great

Win: trying to be as honest as I can be.

Her phrase “it would probably be regarded as abuse in today's world” seems carefully neutral - she does not say that she regards it as abuse or whether she thinks that ‘they’ are right to regard it as abuse, she merely states that this is the case. She further marks this account as a counter-narrative when she says “how much of this you dare put into it I don't know.” The “it” in this sentence seems to refer to my research, a comment which invokes the notion of a distinction between what she can tell me in private and what I can report in public, which seems highly relevant to the question of how counter-narratives come to be produced. Win seems to be implying that her counter-narrative is more acceptable in a relatively private sphere than in a relatively public one. Not only is Win cautious in her telling of this counter-narrative but I respond in an equally cautious detached way (“they would, wouldn't they”). By claiming that she is being honest, Win draws on the notion of being a good interviewee who helps the interviewer by telling the truth despite difficulties - behaviour which is affirmed by my comment “this is great.” This good behaviour helps to further legitimise the telling of her counter-narrative. Invoking the notion of being honest also serves to establish that these events really happened which pre-empt any potential criticism of her for supporting the nurse’s potentially unacceptable behaviour. If she were to be so challenged she could respond along the

lines of “but it did happen, I'm just telling you the honest facts”. In setting up the interview I did not use terms such as ‘honesty’, ‘truth’ or ‘myth’ because my theoretical framework was discursive, not realist, so her introduction of the concept of honesty seems particularly significant. In interpreting my research interests in this way, Win establishes a particularly enabling context for the telling of counter-narratives.

All the examples discussed so far have involved interviewees countering the asexual older people storyline or the closely related storyline of ‘asexual disabled people’. I move now to a much more unusual example where an interviewee, Kate, orients to telling a narrative which is counter to the liberal storyline. Kate talked about probably not wanting a new relationship in the future and has just told a story about looking at other older people's relationships and thinking how horrible they are. The extract that follows can be understood as her theorising about the story she has just told:

Kate: I suppose it's also the thing of of er, sex drive is not meant to exist in older people and I certainly think it probably does decrease. I imagine if you're in a partnership it doesn't necessarily ever decrease. But I don't think you're the hunter or want to be the hunter or want to be the hunted anymore as you get older. I mean I think biologically, um, certainly I didn't find any huge difference pre and post menopause but I think in in in what's important to you as a person you certainly wouldn't seek casual sex, I don't think. Well I don't think I ever did but, and I did, I've had a number of affairs through my life but er yes, I think I think probably sex, and [laugh in voice] I know this is against

all Women's Hour⁶ teaching, [voice normal again] I think sex probably does become less important.

Her movements between the asexual older people and liberal storylines are complex and are further complicated by her final orientation to telling a narrative which is counter to the liberal storyline. She initially orients to the asexual older people storyline when she says "sex drive is not meant to exist in older people and I certainly think it probably does decrease." The word "meant" provides strong evidence that she is orienting to this as a dominant cultural storyline, since it invokes normative expectations. When she says "I imagine if you're in a partnership it doesn't necessarily ever decrease" she could be argued both to be resisting the dominant cultural storyline of asexual older people and to be perpetuating the associated storyline that older people who are sexually active are monogamous. She concludes her summary of the role of sex in later life by positioning what she has just said in contrast to another point of view which she draws on assumed shared cultural knowledge to describe as "Women's Hour teaching." Although she does not spell out what this is, it is clear from context that this is congruent with the liberal storyline and Kate can thus be argued to be orienting to telling a narrative which is counter to a storyline which is constituted as a counter-storyline itself. This extract further complicates the question of what constitutes a dominant cultural storyline because Kate positions the liberal storyline as dominant when she orients to her own account as a counter-narrative.

This section has analysed one angle of approach in identifying counter-narratives - those moments in interviews when participants themselves orient to telling a counter-narrative. The next section discusses a different angle of approach to

identifying counter-narratives when participants do not orient to telling a counter-narrative.

Identifying counter-narratives within data - etic analysis

The second approach to the problem of identifying counter-narratives is to undertake an etic analysis of the data. Instead of looking for moments when the participants themselves orient to telling a counter-narratives, an etic approach uses the analyst's knowledge as an interpretative resource (Billig, 1999; Wetherell, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This knowledge includes awareness of the ways in which respondents were recruited, the interviews were set up and of the conversations that took place before the tape recorder was switched on.

A very important feature of the context in which these accounts were produced is that it was one that was permissive of accounts of being a sexually active older person. At some stage before I switched the tape recorder on, I usually said that I had been introduced to this topic when I was working for a local Age Concern⁷ group and was asked by the local hospital to produce a leaflet on HIV & AIDS and older people. I described how I got together a group of older people to produce this leaflet and how the conversations that went on in this group made me think about the assumption that older people were no longer sexually active and were unwilling to talk about their experiences. Although I made considerable efforts to make space for accounts in which speakers did feel that older people are no longer sexually active (and some respondents did produce accounts along these lines), it seems unlikely that I was perceived as entirely neutral myself. In explaining my interest in the topic, I revealed that I had produced a leaflet on HIV & AIDS and older people - there would be no point in doing this unless I thought that older people were sexually active and

potentially at risk of contracting HIV. In addition, the word ‘assumptions’ is perhaps hearable as an undesirable thing, and the very fact of doing research on this topic suggests that I think there are at least some things to say about it. All these factors meant that the accounts were produced in a context that was at least permissive of, and arguably encouraged, accounts of being a sexually active older person. This meant that, in interactional terms, respondents did not always need to do the work to establish the possibility of being a sexual person that that they might have needed to do in other contexts. So orienting to telling a counter-narrative was not always work that was necessary to produce the accounts.

The analyst’s identification of counter-narratives

However, I as the analyst, using my cultural knowledge still want to argue that they are producing counter-narratives. Given the existence and prevalence of the asexual older people storyline, it seems reasonable to argue that, at this level, narratives by older women concerning their sexual activity constitute counter-narratives. Thirteen of the 23 women who talked to me told stories about being sexually active after the age of 60 so these narratives can be argued to be counter-narratives. In addition, an idea which is often associated with the asexual older people storyline is that older people are unwilling to talk about topics to do with sex. Most of the other ten interviewees told stories about wanting or not wanting a new sexual relationship, about past experiences of sexual activity and about other older people’s sexual relationships. In doing so, I would argue that they were telling narratives counter to the associated idea that older people do not talk about sex.

I will discuss in more detail one particular example where I argue that the speaker is telling a narrative which constitutes a counter-narrative to the asexual older

people storyline. This comes from the interview with Rosa. A few years ago, Rosa had a sexual relationship with a man she knew to be married to someone else. Her account involves a lot of talk about the moral status of this man. She seems to be trying to reconcile the contradictory facts that he made her very happy and that she feels that he cannot have been a good man because he was deceiving his wife. She says:

Rosa: So the whole sexual part of it was absolutely wonderful.

Rebecca: Mmm.

Rosa: Erm and like nothing I'd ever experienced before, which is so strange.

Rebecca: Yes.

Rosa: Erm being that er he was also on Warfarin, so what you got effectively, I'm trying to talk something which isn't my language

Rebecca: Mmm.

Rosa: Erm, there was no erection, there was no completion as such. But there's what I think, I don't know this woman certainly found enormously satisfying, joyous and satisfying and erm it was wonderful. And we both thought it was wonderful.

In these extracts, Rosa does not explicitly orient to telling a counter-narrative. But since she was in her mid-70s at the time of the events she describes, she is telling a counter-narrative to the storyline that older people are asexual.

The dominant cultural storyline of asexual older people is closely related to a number of other dominant cultural storylines of particular relevance to narratives about being a sexual older person. One prevalent associated storyline is that really good sex happens between young people because youth is sexually attractive and age is physically repulsive (The Hen Co-op, 1993). Not only is Rosa clear that this was ‘wonderful’ sex but she comments several times that her partner was very attractive and ‘trim’. Another associated storyline about sexual activity is that it is synonymous with heterosexual penetrative intercourse (Koedt, 1996 (1972)). In this example, whilst the couple are a man and woman, the man is impotent and there is an implication that they did not have penetrative sex. However, Rosa is clear that both partners experienced great pleasure. Her phrase “there was no erection, there was no completion as such” is ambiguous. She might mean that he or possibly both of them did not have an orgasm or she might just be referring to the fact that they did not have penetrative sex (understanding anything else to be ‘foreplay’ and penetration to be ‘completion’). If she does mean that they did not have orgasms, then this account is still more of a counter-narrative, since mutual orgasm is usually taken to be an essential part of good sex.

Liz was the interviewee who made the most overt references to her experiences being untypical and possibly unsuitable for a woman of her own age. As already mentioned, she had lived for nearly 40 years with her female partner and they had adopted and brought up two children together. As they were approaching retirement, her partner left her. Since then, Liz has started a new relationship with a woman who lives in Switzerland. Liz is currently trying to decide whether to move to Switzerland to be with her partner or to remain in the UK to look after one of her sons who is disabled. Throughout her account, Liz orients to how unusual her experiences

are in that her life is changing radically so late in her life. She does not usually orient to her experiences in having women partners as unusual and indeed says that she had never really considered herself to be a lesbian until her partner left her - she just thought that she loved one particular woman. Her talk about being a lesbian tends to normalise her experiences, not to set them up as counter to a dominant cultural storyline of heteronormativity. Whilst she does not orient to telling a narrative which is counter to a heteronormative storyline, I would argue that she is still doing so because not only does heteronormativity mean that heterosexuality is taken as the norm but older women are not generally expected to be lesbian.

In earlier sections of this paper I have described another very prevalent storyline which affects older women's narratives about sexual activity; this is the liberal storyline. Whilst interviewees seldom explicitly oriented to telling a narrative which was counter to the liberal storyline, some of their narratives can be argued to run counter to it. Betty's husband was severely disabled in later life, eventually losing his speech as well as being completely physically dependent on her. Betty talked about how she felt that her relationship with her husband improved during the years when his disability meant that they were no longer sexually active. She characterises these years as lovely, calm and peaceful. She says that whilst she would not describe herself as exactly frigid, she had never been that interested in sex so did not really miss it. She comments that people do tend to be less interested in sex as they get older and that older people who remarry are probably doing so for companionship alone. I would argue that her narratives about this period run counter to the liberal storyline which states that sexuality is lifelong and that sexual activity an important part of a successful relationship.

In producing such an etic analysis of this data questions arise as to the analyst's own interests and how these have influenced the sort of analysis which is produced. In identifying counter-narratives which are not oriented to by speakers, I necessarily draw on my own particular cultural knowledge and am more prone to noticing counter-narratives relating to my own interests and commitments. The analysis above is undoubtedly influenced by my readings in feminist theory which has drawn attention to the social construction of sexuality, gender and, more recently, 'biological' sex (Jackson & Scott, 1996; Segal, 1997). In particular, feminist theory around heteronormativity and its implications, has influenced my thinking very greatly. In addition to this influence, my interest and work in HIV & AIDS awareness have sensitised me to accounts of non-penetrative sex, since this forms part of the advice on 'safer sex' practices. My very terminology is influenced by this - I tend to use the phrase 'penetrative sex' without problematising it, but my own use of the phrase derives from 1980s health promotion literature. Finally, my past employment in an organisation working with older people and my current membership of various academic gerontological networks have sensitised me to the social construction of ageing and the often negative effects of such constructions, particularly as they affect older women (Macdonald & Rich, 1984; Pearsall, 1997; Harper, 1997). This makes me particularly prone to notice narratives relating to this.

The logical extension to this question of how I come to pay attention to particular sorts of counter-narratives is to ask what happens if interviewees want to create narratives which run counter to my own preferred storylines. My own preferred storylines were not straightforward or always constant, but it seems fair to say that I did want people to have something to say about intimate relationships in later life. What this 'something' was could include no longer being interested in sex,

but the interviews were predicated on the assumption that interviewees had a story to tell about this topic. The two interviews where this was not the case were very difficult and rather uncomfortable. In both cases, the women had unusual reasons for taking part in the research. Jo claimed that she had nothing particular to say and that she had just responded to my advert in a moment of boredom. She was no longer interested in either sex or intimate relationships and did not seem to want to talk about them except to reiterate how much she did not want anything to do with them. I did not manage to induce accounts about this lack of interest. I had the impression that Mrs Rosenberg had only taken part in the research to oblige her daughter-in-law, who is an acquaintance of mine. The interview with her was particularly uncomfortable and a close analysis of the transcript suggests that this was at least partly because she was treating the interaction as a social occasion whilst I was treating it as an interview, situations which have very different conversational norms. It could be argued that Mrs Rosenberg was resisting being positioned as an interviewee and repositioned herself in the arguably more powerful position of 'the hostess' (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). In both these interviews, I found it very difficult to induce the extended turns of talk by interviewees that usually characterise interviews. It can thus be seen that the production of counter-narratives, or even narratives at all, is greatly affected by the researcher's assumptions and interests, making reflexive considerations of the processes of research and analysis essential in the use of etic analysis.

Conclusion

In this paper I hope to have demonstrated that the dominant cultural storylines relating to older women and sexual activity are very complex and that the

identification of counter-narratives is far from straightforward. One level at which counter-narratives can be identified is by looking at participants' own orientations to telling a counter-narrative. Sometimes participants do this in a relatively straightforward manner, but more often the teasing out of narratives drawing on dominant cultural storylines and counter-narratives is difficult because they are intertwined. While they are telling counter-narratives speakers often briefly orient to telling narratives that draw on dominant cultural storylines. I have suggested that a sub-category of counter-narratives might be described as transgressive narratives. I have demonstrated that the production of some counter-narratives is particularly strongly indicated in speech and that speakers can make moves to protect themselves from the potential danger of telling unacceptable counter-narratives. At another level I have argued that a contrasting way of identifying counter-narratives is by using the analyst's categories. This is a particularly valuable approach when the context in which the narrative is created makes it easy to tell counter-narratives without orienting to doing so. Any such use of the analyst's categories requires reflexive consideration of the ways in which their cultural knowledge and commitments affect their analysis.

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¹ They are less diverse in terms of 'race'/ethnicity: ethnicity is a complex issue which was often not explicitly oriented to by the speakers in this study. However, two women identified themselves as Jewish.

² I wanted to imply a broad and contextualised definition of 'sex', particularly in contrast to much of the gerontological literature which has often limited discussion to heterosexual penetrative sex. I also chose this phrase rather than 'sex' because, in recognition of the sensitivity of the topic, I wanted to give respondents the scope to talk at different levels of explicitness. I also felt some hesitation at putting my own name in public places next to the word 'sex' when recruiting for respondents.

³ 'Mills and Boon' are the publishers of numerous relatively formulaic romances. An equivalent series in the US is 'Harlequin Romance'.

⁴ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms and all references to places and unusual professions or hobbies have also been changed.

⁵ British slang term for someone who masturbates, usually used as an insult.

⁶ 'Woman's Hour' is a long-running radio programme on BBC Radio 4 in the UK. It has a broadly liberal agenda and often features stories about women overcoming difficulties, experiencing previously unnoticed discrimination or undertaking unusual activities.

⁷ Age Concern is a well-known voluntary organisation in the UK that provides services and runs campaigns around older people's issues.