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Title:

'Older people' talking as if they are not older people: Positioning Theory as an

explanation

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the question of how we account for 'older people' talking as if they are not older people. Membership of an age category is usually conceptualised as having a pre-discursive reality, as is inherent in the concept of 'denial of ageing'. This paper theorises membership of an age category as a discursive resource and uses positioning theory to examine what is said. Working within the framework of discursive psychology, it demonstrates both the complexity and the fruitfulness of identifying older-age related positions in talk. Data is presented where speakers position themselves as not-older-people or modify positionings of themselves as older. The data comes from interviews about a topic where age status is often treated as pertinent: sexual activity in later life. The analysis demonstrates that how speakers position themselves in relation to older age depends on, and has important consequences for, the particular local business of the interaction.

Introduction

Gerontologists have long noted that people tend to disassociate themselves from the category of being old. This extends to people who are commonly categorised as old or older on the basis of their age-in-years, their appearance or their life-stage: even 'older people' sometimes talk as if they are not older people. Humorous stories are told of 90-year-olds describing 70-year-olds as 'old dears' or 'old ladies'. At a recent older people's conference I attended, a speaker in his 70s described himself as not an older person because he was active and fit. The focus of this paper is on this phenomenon of people who would often be categorised as older people (or old people, the elderly etc.) talking as if they are not older people.

There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. Many are realist: they treat age categories as pre-existing and fixed. The category 'older person' is understood to more-or-less transparently describe a pre-existing reality. One such realist explanation is implied by the now rarely used description of the phenomenon as 'denial of ageing' (Bultena and Powers 1978). This term is inherently realist: a person has a true age which they are 'denying'. Although modern academic gerontology rarely draws on it, the idea that someone is denying their own ageing remains a discursive resource that is often used in ordinary talk. The expression 'mutton dressed as lamb' and the exhortation, 'Act your age!' can both draw on the idea that someone is denying their ageing. When the speaker at the conference mentioned above described himself as not an older person, a member of the audience accused him of denying his own ageing and being ageist. This last example introduces an important way in which the phenomenon has been explained. As many

gerontologists have documented, the social meanings attached to older age are largely (although not exclusively) negative. This might suggest that negative stereotypes about what older people are like mean that older people do not recognise themselves as older and so talk as if the category 'older person' does not include themselves. Such an explanation might make reference to concepts such as false consciousness or internalised ageist attitudes.

However, a major difficulty with such explanations is that they do not address the issue of variability in what people say. In the corpus of data which I discuss in this paper, interviewees sometimes talked as if they were older people and at other points as if they were not. If the explanation for such talk was false consciousness or internalised ageist attitudes, we would not expect as high a degree of inconsistency in how people talked. In this paper I demonstrate that treating older age status as socially constructed in discourse, and using positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and van Langenhove 1999) to examine what is said, provides an alternative explanation for the phenomenon of 'older people' talking as if they are not older people. Significantly, such an explanation is able to account for the variability in what people say about their own older age.

Older age as socially constructed

There is a strong tradition, particularly within social gerontology, of at least troubling the straightforward use of 'older people' as a category. Jamieson (2002) points out that many gerontologists emphasise the difficulties of generalising about older people

and make distinctions between different sorts of older people (Laslett 1996). Such work may still assume that age itself is a pre-determined fact, but by treating age-in-years as at least a problematic determinant of a person's characteristics (Bernard and Meade 1993), it creates some space for more social constructionist work. There is a growing body of work which studies the changing social construction of later life. Cultural gerontologists have used the concept of a post-modern life course to argue that boundaries between life stages are gradually eroding and that this affects the ways in which individuals understand their own ageing (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989; 1991; Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Studies of the construction of gerontological knowledge also contribute to theorisations of older age as socially constructed (Green 1993; Hazan 1994; Katz 1996). Bytheway (1995; 1997) problematises the facticity of older age in the context of a concern with ageism.

Discursive approaches

This paper draws on a form of discourse analysis and thereby theorises older age status as discursively constructed. Discursive Psychology builds on a distinctive theory of language: that it is constitutive, not representational (Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1996; Potter and Wetherell 1987). Representational theories of language treat it as a more or less transparent, passive medium that is used to convey extra-discursive realities such as opinions, ideas, emotions, actions or states such as 'being an older person'. In contrast, theorising language as constitutive means understanding it as fundamentally and actively involved in reality construction. The constitutive theory of language means that discursive analysis is not about trying to discover pre-

existing cognition, actions, intentions, or states beyond the words that are used, although there is often a working assumption of at least the possibility of phenomena beyond the words. The argument is that by excluding the idea of emotions, intentions, cognition and extra-discursive states (such as older age) as potential explanations for what goes on in discourse, the analyst gains new and valuable insights. This paper draws particularly on what is sometimes described as 'critical discursive psychology' (Edley 2001; Edley and Wetherell 2001; Wetherell 1998) which combines the characteristic discursive interest in what participants themselves treat as relevant with more ethnographic and post-structuralist interests in the broader historical and cultural context in which talk occurs. This approach takes a less narrow definition of what constitutes a participants' orientation than that used in some other types of discursive psychology (Jones 2004; Wetherell 1998; c.f. Edwards and Potter 1992) and this has consequences for the analysis I present.

This paper builds on the developing field of discursive gerontological studies (Buchanan and Middleton 1990; Coupland 2000; Coupland and Coupland 1991; Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991a; Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991b; Jolanki, Jylhä, and Hervonen 2000; Latimer 1997; Middleton and Buchanan 1993; Nikander 2000; Nikander 2002; Ylänne-McEwen 1999). This body of work demonstrates that older age status is negotiated within interactions and is changeable. It points to the intertwining of life course norms and talk about age and it suggests that talk about age may be treated as a sensitive, and even moral, issue. Theorising older age status as discursively produced by the exigencies of talk provides a way of

accounting for the variability in whether 'older people' speak as if they are older people or not.

Within this tradition there is a body of work which is particularly relevant to this topic because it addresses directly the question of how older age identities appear in talk. Coupland et al have focused particularly on displays of older age identity in intergenerational talk using a socio-linguistic form of discourse analysis (Coupland and Coupland 1991; Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991a; Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991b). Nikander (2000; 2002) uses membership categorisation analysis (Sacks 1995) to analyse the ways in which age identities and ideas about the life course are used. She demonstrates that age identities are often treated as potentially morally accountable. While it would be instructive to compare and contrast the contributions which these and other relevant approaches can make, such a comparison in beyond the scope of this paper. In this paper I aim merely to demonstrate that positioning theory can be a fruitful analytic techniques within discursive gerontology.

Positioning theory

Positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and van Langenhove 1999) is explicitly offered as a more dynamic and flexible version of the idea of 'role' (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 14). Positions are like roles in that someone taking up a particular role/position will also take up attributes that entail interactional rights, such as the right of a teacher to reprimand pupils. However, positions are theorised to be much more variable, multiple and shifting than roles and may well be contradictory. Positioning occurs as part of an ongoing process of interaction. People

are not positioned simply by what they say about themselves but also by what other people say. Many positionings of other people also position the speaker as, for example, when a positioning of one person as old positions the speaker relatively as young. Subjectivity itself is argued to be made and remade through discourse and positions are key sites in which personal and moral attributes are displayed. Hollway's (1984) work on the construction of subjectivity within heterosexual relationships is often cited as the work that brought positioning theory to prominence within the social sciences.

Harré and van Langenhove argue that positions also make available particular storylines (and vice versa). So, for example, being positioned as a retired nurse makes available a storyline about changes in nursing practice. Positions and storylines are, of course, not deterministically linked but sensitivity to the associations between positions and storylines proves particularly useful in allowing scrutiny of the interactional work achieved by changes of position. Positioning theory provides a useful tool to address the question of how what is said comes to be said, without invoking intentions and psychological states.

Harré and van Langenhove do not detail how positions are to be identified within data. This is a particular issue for work within the discursive tradition because of its emphasis on warranting claims in data. In this paper I demonstrate an approach to identifying older age positions in data which is compatible with critical discursive psychology.

Identifying older age positions in data

There are many different ways in which older age status may be referenced. Terms such as 'old', 'older', 'senior', 'elderly' or 'elder' are commonly used but are not synonymous and are the subject of debate about the implications of their use (Andrews 1999; Andrews 2000; Bytheway 2000; Gibson 2000). Differences of terminology exist between versions of English, such as the relative availability of the terms 'elder' and 'senior' in the US compared to in the UK. Differences also exist between different speech communities. For example, in the UK, gerontological academics tend to use the term 'older people' but medics tend to use the term 'elderly', which itself has largely superseded 'geriatric'. These terms have different meanings and implications depending on the context in which they are used. The terminology I use in this paper, such as 'older', 'older age' and 'older people', is not itself neutrally outside the field but necessarily draws on the very language it seeks to examine. There is no stable terminology against which the distinctions I wish to draw can be mapped. What can be specified, however, is that there is an everyday discursive practice by which some people are positioned in relation to their 'older age'. It is the flexibility of this positioning process which is the focus of this paper.

To further complicate the picture, there are also a wide range of less direct ways in which reference may be made to a person's membership of an older age category. Bytheway (1997) and Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991b) provide taxonomies which include such items as talk about bodily change and decline, words such as 'pensioner' and 'retired', references to generational position ('grandmother') and references to chronological age. However, the question of what constitutes a

positioning of someone as older cannot simply be answered by looking for occurrences of words such as 'grandmother' or references to chronological age. Most phrases that might be expected to position someone as older do not do so in all circumstances. For example, reference to age-in-years with a relatively high number might be expected to position someone as old. However, in some particular circumstances, such as a gathering of centenarians, being described as 90 years old might position someone as relatively young. Terms such as 'grandmother', 'retired' and 'pensioner' are also problematic because they are not synonymous with being older. Grandmothers can be any age from their late 20s, dot-com millionaires may have retired at 35 and fire-fighters become pensioners in their 50s in the UK.

Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991b) include in their taxonomy of ways in which an 'elderly identity' is displayed three items which are even further from necessarily indicating that the speaker is positioned as older. These are adding a time-past perspective to current topics, associating yourself with the past, and recognising historical, cultural or social change. While these conversational activities do indeed have a stereotypical recognisability as supposedly characterising older people's talk, they do not necessarily position a speaker who uses them as older. Academics, particularly historians and sociologists, often add a time-past perspective to current topics and recognise historical change. Similarly, associating oneself with the past need not position someone as older, as when someone in their thirties describes themselves as 'a child of the Eighties'.

However, there are familiar cultural associations between being an older person and being a grandmother or talking about the past all the time (see Sacks' (1995) work on 'inference-rich categories' for a theorisation of this and Nikander (2002) for a specific application of this to older age). Pensioners are expected to be in their 60s or older, to the extent that, as Bytheway (1997) notes, in the UK 'pensioner' is often used as a synonym for 'old person'. A grandmother in her 40s will, in most contexts where this identity becomes pertinent, make some reference to her atypical youthfulness, indicating that grandmothers are normatively expected to be 'older people'. There is a strong association between belonging to such groups and being an older person.

Thus, it seems that words and types of talk which may position someone as an older person exist on a continuum of how likely they are to do so. While words such as 'old', 'older' and 'elderly' and references to high chronological age are relatively likely to position someone as older, talking about the past is much less likely to do so. This suggests that while the analyst needs to be aware of these common ways of positioning someone as older, each case needs to be decided individually on its own merits. As I demonstrate in this paper, identifying older age positions in data is complex and requires quite detailed attention to what is said.

The data

The data I now present come from a study entitled 'Older women talking about sex: A discursive analysis'(Jones 2003). The study used interviews with 23 women aged between 60 and 90 to explore the ways in which sex in later life is talked about. It focused particularly on speakers drawing on or countering ideas about sexual activity

being inappropriate or non-normative for older people. The women who took part

responded to newspaper and newsletter articles, posters and local radio features

asking them to talk about their experiences of intimate relationships in later life. The

interviewees lived in different parts of England and were a reasonably diverse group

in terms of age, social class, sexual orientation and past and present sexual

experience[1], but are in no sense intended to be a representative group of older women.

In specifying interviewees' ages in the analysis that follows I do not mean to imply

that chronological age has an extra-discursive reality any more than their status as

'older person' does. I understand chronological age to be a social construction in just

the same way, albeit a social construction which is particularly powerful in being used

to signify something factual and not open to debate. I specify interviewees' ages

merely in order to show that whether they position themselves as an older person or

not is not simply related to their (socially constructed) chronological age.

The topic of later life sex is a fruitful one for looking at older age positionings

because sex and older age are often treated as a problematic combination (for more

substantive discussion of these issues, see, Jones 2002). This means that

interviewees' older age status was often treated as relevant. There were many

occasions when interviewees were positioned straightforwardly as older people.

'Older person' was a particularly available position for interviewees within the

interaction because the recruitment process required interviewees to position

themselves, at least initially, as older people. In addition, the apparent age difference

between myself and the interviewees, which was often oriented to by interviewees,

also positioned them as relatively old in comparison to my relative youth. My own

chronological age (30 at the time of the interviews) sometimes became a topic of conversation and this further positioned interviewees as older and often led to the disclosure of their own chronological age. Interviewees being positioned straightforwardly as older people served a variety of different interactional ends such as providing explanations for noteworthy phenomena and justifying the research topic. However, the focus of this paper is on those occasions when interviewees were not positioned straightforwardly as older people, in order to demonstrate the utility of this approach in explaining the phenomenon of 'older people' talking as if they are not older people.

Older people as Other

My data do not contain any occasions when interviewees say anything as direct as 'I'm not an older person', as the speaker at the conference mentioned in the first paragraph did. However, one of the subtler ways in which positioning occurs is when speakers position someone else and thereby positions themselves by contrast. Sometimes interviewees speak as if older people are in a different category from themselves and, in so doing, position themselves as not-older-people. The extract which follows comes from an interview with Betty[2] (aged 75 at the time). 'The group' to which Betty refers is a campaigning and educational project of a local older people's voluntary agency. The group focuses on the sexual health needs of older people and is planning to publish an information booklet. Betty is a member of the group.

Extract 1

1	Betty:	What the group is doing. Well I think basically it's trying to alleviate
2		a lot of the anxiety that older people have over sexual issues. And it's
3		worth doing because the anxiety that they suffer so often can destroy a
4		relationship at a time of life when it's the most important thing they
5		can have
6	Rebecca:	Yes when personal support is really important
7	Betty:	Absolutely yes. And also because the generation that it's dealing with
8		is not used to talking through that type of issue. But possibly the
9		couple actually read jointly a booklet of the sort that's proposed it
10		might get them talking and solve problems or even prevent their
11		occurring.

Betty is not talking directly about herself in this extract. Instead, she generalises about older people. She uses the third person form 'they' in lines 3 and 4, rather than the first person 'we' or even the more ambiguous possibility 'you', which is hearable as either second or third person in informal English. In line 4, Betty makes a somewhat allusive comment about what older age is like. She says that a relationship can be the most important thing in an older person's life. Rebecca's[3] response is also unclear but can perhaps be understood as her orienting to Betty's last comment as if she had said that older age is a time of difficulty. Her reference to the need for personal support is certainly consonant with the idea that difficulties are experienced and Betty's earlier talk about anxieties and suffering (line 3) may have made this relevant. In line 7, Betty emphatically agrees with Rebecca and goes on to add a

further generalisation about people in this generation. She again uses a formulation that does not include herself – 'the generation that it's dealing with' – and positions herself as a detached observer of this generation. In lines 7–8, she invokes the idea that older people are not used to talking about sexual issues.

These two lines provides a clear example of van Langenhove's and Harré's (1999) contention that positioning and storylines are closely interrelated. It seems highly unlikely that Betty could have invoked this storyline about older people categorically 'not being used to talking through that type of issue' while being positioned as an older person herself. She returns to the idea of older people as people who experience problems in lines 10–11. Throughout this extract, Betty and, to a lesser extent, Rebecca associate being older with experiencing negative things such as anxiety, suffering, destroyed relationships and problems. It is perhaps not surprising that Betty does not position herself as older if being older entails all these negative experiences. In this extract, Betty's positioning of herself as not an older person has very significant effects. It enables detached authoritative talk about older people's sexual difficulties and difficulties in talking about sex, without Betty herself being positioned as having these difficulties.

In her interview, Avril (aged 65) mainly talks about the many attempts she has made to start a new relationship since her husband died. She describes a whole series of dates and several more ongoing relationships, none of which has proved satisfactory. Here she has just told a story about how she met the first man with whom she had a relationship after her husband died. She then says:

Extract 2

1	Avril:	So I say he was nearly 20 years older than me it was [pause] it was
2		companionship but um. It got a bit um [pause] he aged quicker than
3		I did [laughs]
4	Rebecca:	Right yes. Did you think the age difference made a difference?
5	Avril:	Mmm it did in the end yes
6	Rebecca:	Wh-what sort of ways?
7	Avril:	Erm he kept talking about the war and
8	Rebecca:	Right yeah
9	Avril:	You know and he kept [short pause] on about [long pause] the same
10		thing
11	Rebecca:	Right
12	Avril:	You know he'd say the same things all the time
13	Rebecca:	Mmm
14	Avril:	Like they do don't they you know [laughs]
15	Rebecca:	[very quietly] Mmm
16		[pause]
17	Avril:	Mmm. Nice old boy but he meant well but [laughs]

In this extract Avril positions herself by age only in relation to her former partner's age. Many factors position him as different from her because of his greater age. Avril introduces the idea of an age difference between herself and this man in line 1. She uses a vague number: 'nearly 20 years older.' The interactional work that this vague number does can be seen if we imagine what would be different if she had said

that he was, for example, 18 years older. 'Nearly 20' rounds up the actual age difference and makes it greater. This makes the age difference more noteworthy and thus contributes significantly to her later talk about the differences between them. The hearer is expected to find 'nearly 20 years' significant, perhaps as a numerical way of signifying a generational difference.

In lines 7–17, Avril rather hesitantly lists two ways in which his greater age made a difference to their relationship. The first example she gives is that 'he kept talking about the war' (line 7). In the UK, 'the war', if not otherwise specified, usually means World War Two. The idea that older people talk incessantly about the war is, I would argue, so prevalent that in this context it contributes to positioning him as an old person. This idea is, of course, historically and culturally specific to people who experienced 'the (second world) war' and is thus not universally attributable to older people. Perhaps the next generation of older people will be characterised as talking incessantly about the revolutionary 1960s. As already argued, what positions someone as older is highly context dependent. This example emphasises that this context dependence also includes the historical point at which the interaction takes place.

The turns from line 14 onwards provide a classic example of a dispreferred response and a 'backdown'. Pomerantz (1984) argues that when speakers say something that invites agreement, as Avril does in line 14, and the other person responds in a way that neither agrees nor disagrees, typically including a silence, as in line 16, the first speaker often orients to this as an unstated disagreement and may then 'backdown'

from their previous statement. With this hesitancy and backdown, Avril orients to

potential trouble, but the source of this trouble is not clear, although it could be

'saying ageist things'.

In line 17, Avril veers between mitigating her previous comments by talking about his

good points 'nice old boy' and 'he meant well' and continuing to refer to his

inadequacies with her repeated use of the modifier 'but'. Even her praise is rather

limited, treating him as a less than full member, particularly through the downgrade of

status of describing him as a boy although he would usually be categorised as a man,

c.f. Edwards' (1998) work on upgrades from 'girl' to 'woman'. This downgrade also

has other effects, such as implying that he is harmless.

All these factors function to position Avril herself as not an old person – she does not

share these stigmatised characteristics and she is therefore different from him. In this

way, Avril provides an explanation for the failure of their relationship that leaves her

blameless. Since the interview contains many accounts of her failed relationships this

is a particularly pertinent issue since the explanation that it is her fault that she cannot

find a new partner would otherwise be available. By positioning him as in a different

age category from herself, Avril is able to naturalise and treat as inevitable the

differences between them that led to the breakdown of their relationship.

It should be emphasised that positioning oneself as not-an-older-person was not

limited to the interviewees who were at the younger age of the age spectrum. For

example, the oldest interviewee, Mrs Rosenberg (who was 90), also uses the third person pronoun 'they' to talk about older people at some points.

In addition to the many occasions on which interviewees speak as if they are not older people, there are also several different ways in which interviewees modify the positioning of themselves as an older person. It is to these modified older age positionings that I turn in the rest of this paper. I examine them in order to demonstrate the complexity of identifying age related positions in data and to add to theorisations about how older age identities appear in talk. The first modified older age position I identify is when speakers draw on the idea of 'a mask of ageing'. The second is when interviewees are positioned as if they are a special type of older person. The third modified older age position is when interviewees do position themselves as older but explicitly reject what they treat as normative assumptions about what being older means.

The mask of ageing

Featherstone and Hepworth (1989; 1991) argue that people often describe their experience of growing older by drawing on the idea that they remain the same person but a mask of an older person appears on their face. Several of the interviewees draw on this idea, which has a complex relationship to positioning as older or not, as I will demonstrate.

In the interview with Marguerite (aged 63 at the time), there is an unusual section

where she and Rebecca tell each other what they describe as dirty jokes about older

people and sex. Marguerite tells a joke about a 90-year-old man and then comments:

Extract 3

1	Marguerite:	I notice I make sure they're ninety not not around my age.
2		[both laugh]
3	Rebecca:	Yes but I think I think that's one of the one of the things really
4		that erm, in a way nobody thinks of themselves as an older person.
5	Marguerite:	No they don't you're you're still a young person looking out of
6		an older body.
7	Rebecca:	That's right.
8	Marguerite:	And and you in here you never age.
9	Rebecca:	Mmm.
10	Marguerite:	You become a trifle more sensible.
11	Rebecca:	Mmm. Perhaps more more experienced.
12	Marguerite:	More experienced. More able to weigh up and rationalise things
13	Rebecca:	Mmm.
14	Marguerite:	But you don't you don't get old er in fact it's much better than
15		being young.

In line 1, Marguerite makes a reflexive comment about the way she is distancing

herself from the category of older people whose sexual activity is humorous. This

comment only makes sense if there is some danger of 'older people' being hearable as

her age. She positions herself as older by the way she attends to the possibility of being in the same category. Rebecca introduces the idea of people not thinking of themselves as older and Marguerite takes up this theme in lines 5–6. While neither speaker uses the phrase 'the mask of ageing', the broader definition of participants' orientations argued by Wetherell (1998) justifies the analyst considering wider culturally familiar argumentative threads. This means that it is legitimate to describe Marguerite's comments at lines 5-6 as invoking the idea of a mask of ageing. At line 8 she uses an extreme case formulation: 'you *never* age.' Pomerantz (1986) argues that extreme cases such as 'I always', 'brand new' and 'completely innocent' play an important role in legitimising claims. Nikander (2002) found in her data that speakers often used extreme case formulations to construct personal continuity across the life course. Marguerite does this at line 8 with the phrase, 'in here you never age.' In lines 10–12, Marguerite and Rebecca jointly construct the difference growing older does make, using valorising and positive words. At line 14, Marguerite returns to the idea of not being old before contradicting this by saying that it is in fact better than being young, which implies that she has become old.

The contradiction is indicative of the complexity of the positioning about age inherent in the idea of the mask of ageing. On the one hand, invoking the idea of a mask of ageing implies that Marguerite is not positioning herself as older because she is 'really' still young. On the other hand, the idea of a mask of ageing being present is specific to people who are older so it positions people who use it to describe their own experience as themselves older. In the light of the prevalence of the idea that older people are not sexually active, this positioning of herself as outwardly older but still

young inside perhaps helps to account for Marguerite's own continuing sexual activity. Positioning yourself as still young in essence, as the idea of the mask of ageing does, is one way to avoid any potential tension between being older and being sexually active. The idea of a mask of ageing is one familiar discursive resource which speakers can draw on to account for themselves. It provides an example of the complexity of older age positions which detailed analysis can illuminate.

Being a special older person

The second way in which interviewees are not positioned straightforwardly as older people is when they are positioned as special or unusual older people. Jolanki, Jylhä, & Hervonen (1989) briefly mention an occasion when an interviewee's talk about being a special 90-year-old depends upon a contrast with other older people who are treated as ordinary. This phenomenon was relatively common in my data. At the beginning of the interview with Mrs Rosenberg (aged 90 at the time) her daughter-in-law, Ann, is also present and says:

Extract 5

1	Ann:	But there's certain ladies of your generation that would never
2		hold this sort of conversation would they even today?
3	Mrs Rosenberg:	I wouldn't think so.
4	Rebecca:	Yeah yeah.
5	Mrs Rosenberg:	Well.
6	Ann:	I mean Maud would be horrified wouldn't she if she found out.
7	Mrs Rosenberg:	Absolutely if I told her I had someone coming this afternoon

| 8 | | to talk about sex. |
| 9 | Rebecca: | [laughs] |

In this extract and the surrounding talk, there are no explicit references to being old or older. However, this extract does contain an item from the associated characteristics identified by Bytheway (1997) and Coupland et al. (1991b). Mrs Rosenberg is clearly positioned as a member of a particular generation in line 1. By talking about 'your' generation, Ann positions Mrs Rosenberg as belonging to a different generation from herself but there is no indication in the transcript here as to whether Mrs Rosenberg's generation is earlier or later than Ann's is. However, at other points in the interview Mrs Rosenberg refers to Ann as her daughter-in-law and this clearly does position Mrs Rosenberg as of an older generation as, of course, does the general context of the interview. Thus, if we look at the ongoing threads of the interaction, Ann's positioning of Mrs Rosenberg by generation also positions her by older age.

Ann upgrades her initial assertion (lines 1–2) at line 6 by invoking a particular individual, Maud, and postulating that she 'would be horrified' if she knew about the interview. Positioning someone as countering norms or taboos can have the very significant effect of valorising them as honest, unusual, or freethinking. In the context of this interview, which has been specified as about intimate relationships in later life, being valorised for talking about sex in contrast to other people of her generation clearly positions Mrs Rosenberg herself as an older person. In this extract, Mrs Rosenberg is positioned by all the participants as a special person of her generation because she is willing to talk about sex. We might then expect to see significant

amounts of talk about sex in the interview because this positioning has valorised and enabled it. However, this was not the case, which draws attention to the important point that positioning does not determine particular storylines: it merely enables them.

Interviewees often draw on the idea of having an unusual biography to account for this special or unusual status. Esther (aged 68) has been talking about how when she was growing up she knew very little about sex. She says:

Extract 4

1	Esther:	You see it was a taboo subject. You would never have caught
2		someone of my age now talking to someone of your age oh no that
3		just would not have been (inaudible) but er I've got a more open view
4		because my husband's not around, neither of them sort of thing, and I
5		have had to talk to my boys and my daughter.
6	Rebecca:	Yes because were you widowed quite young?
7	Esther:	Yes 29 first time and 39 the next time so it's a matter that there's
8		been me there so any problems come to me where they might have
9		gone to their dad. So I've had to learn as well.

Esther positions herself as an older person only very indirectly via the associated idea of different age groups. In line 2, she positions herself as a member of a different age group from Rebecca and in the context of the previous positionings around age in the interview, this positions her relatively as older. She accounts for her own divergence from the norm she has just describes (talking about sex to someone of a different age

– lines 4–5). She continues to elaborate on this explanation (8–9). She argues that her 'more open view' has been caused by her unusual biography of having brought up her children on her own. In this way, Esther positions herself as an older person but as an unusual one. This enables her to characterise people of her own generation as people who do not talk about sex, whilst herself doing so.

When people are positioned as 'special older people' they are, in one sense, positioned as older people. However, the ascription of special characteristics to these individuals means that they are differentiated from 'ordinary older people' and so are not straightforwardly positioned as older people. Once more it is apparent that older age related positioning are complex and subtle in use.

Rejecting normative assumptions about being older

The third and final modified older age position I discuss is when normative assumptions about being older are rejected although being old or older in itself is not. In the following extract, Win (aged 62) has just told a story about her aunt refusing to have sex with her husband after she was 65. She concludes that individuals vary and says:

Extract 6

1	Win:	This is where I think it's wrong when they try and fit us in boxes
2		'Ooh you're over sixty so you mustn't do this and you couldn't do
3		that and you're stupid. You're senile.'
4	Rebecca:	Yeah

5	Win:	I mean all I that was it you see I was over sixty and I was in a
6		wheelchair. Well a lot of people in wheelchairs when I was young,
7		with disabilities not necessarily wheelchairs it was assumed you
8		were dim, dumb and stupid. And er [pause] I I used to get very
9		very angry. I mean I've got a lot more tolerant as I've got old.
10	Rebecca:	[laughs]
11	Win:	Very, very angry as a kid. 'It's not my brain that needs a crutch.'
12	Rebecca:	Yes. [laughs] Absolutely.
13	Win:	Er [pause] yeah I mean and I as a younger person I had to prove
14		that I could do it. Now [pause] I've got nothing to prove.

In lines 1-2 Win positions herself as 'over sixty' by using the pronoun 'us'. She

positions herself as old in line 9 where she says, 'as I've got old,' a phrase that treats

her current state as that of being old. As in many other places during this interview,

Win positions herself as a disabled person as much as, or indeed more than, she

positions herself as an old or older person. Her comments in lines 5–11 deal as much

with category associations about disabled people as they do with category associations

about old people. She explicitly denies what she treats as common associations made

between being old and/or disabled and being stupid. Interviewees seldom apply the

word 'old' to themselves, usually using the relative term 'older'. In this extract,

Win's positioning of herself as an *old* person contributes to the authority with which

she counters and dismisses the ideas that she treats as stereotypes. By claiming to

already be in the state of being old Win takes up a position with more entitlement to

know these things than if she was merely relatively older. Taking into account the

story about her aunt that precedes this extract, Win's positioning of herself as 'old but not stupid' enables her to say authoritatively that old people vary in their interest in sex, as in many other ways.

Marguerite also positions herself as older but rejects what she treats as normative assumptions about what being older means. In this interview, Marguerite (aged 63) talks a lot about how much she is enjoying this stage of her life. In the extract that follows, she has just been talking about how important friendships and close relationships are to her:

Extract 7

1	Rebecca:	And would you say you've always been like that or have they got
2		more important to you as you've got older or?
3	Marguerite:	I've had more time to be like that now.
4	Rebecca:	Mmm.
5	Marguerite:	When you're younger you've got your children
6	Rebecca:	Mmm.
7	Marguerite:	And whoever tells they're the best years of your life
8	Rebecca:	[laughs]
9	Marguerite:	Are very very mistaken.
10	Rebecca:	[laughs]
11	Marguerite:	The best years of my life are now.
12	Rebecca:	Right. Mmm.
13	Marguerite:	I can indulge in real hedonism now.

14   Rebecca: Mmm. Excellent [laughs]

15   Marguerite: It's lovely it's wonderful.

Rebecca positions Marguerite as currently older by her question at lines 1-2, a positioning that Marguerite takes up by answering the question in a straightforward manner and by making a comparison with being younger in line 5. She draws on normative ideas about the life course to make this contrast (younger people have children). At line 7 she draws on the idea of conventional wisdom to characterise the idea that being younger constitutes 'the best days of your life'. Positioning one's opinions contrary to normative ones can be a powerful way of warranting them (Bamberg and Andrews 2004). In this example, the force of Marguerite's argument that the best years of her life are as an older person is increased by her initial reference to conventional ideas. Marguerite positions herself as an older person but counters the associated idea that being older is not the high point of the life. She takes up Rebecca's positioning of her as older but refuses an idea that she treats as normative about what being older entails. Her claim that these are her best years and that she is a hedonist now is repeated in similar terms in other parts of the interview. It plays an important part in her generally optimistic account of her experiences of sex in later life. Her positioning of herself as older and having a wonderful time thus plays a significant role in how the talk about sex in the interview proceeds.

Both Win and Marguerite position themselves as old or older but reject what they treat as normative assumptions about what that means. The ideas that they reject modify their positioning as older people. This discursive strategy carries the

rhetorical benefit to speakers of addressing directly particular associations of being positioned as an older person.

Summary and conclusions

Four of the extracts I have presented use the word 'older', whereas only three use the word 'old', and in only one of these (Extract 6) is 'old' treated as applying to the interviewee. In the other two examples (Extracts 2 and 3), 'old' is either explicitly rejected or applied to someone else who is different from the speaker. When interviewees do use these terms to describe themselves and their peers they usually use 'older'. This positions them in a relative but not an absolute way in relation to their age since 'older' is relative but 'old' is absolute. This preference for the word 'older' and paucity of use of the word 'old' is reflected in the whole corpus of data.

Coupland et al. (1991b) found that 'old' and 'geriatric' were usually used by older speakers as outgroup categories, whereas 'pensioner' and 'grandmother' were often used to describe themselves. My data does not contain any uses of the word 'geriatric' but it does confirm their finding that 'old' is seldom used to describe oneself. It should also be noted that the uses of terminology such as 'old' and 'older' as well as 'pensioner' and other related terms is culturally specific to the UK. It would be interesting to compare the ways in which more apparently positive terms, such as the American 'senior', are used and negotiated around in talk.

However, confirming the discourse analytic understanding of variability and the indexicality of terminology, Win, in Extract 6, does position herself as old and this

adds to the authority of her account, as discussed. It should be noted that Win is one of the youngest interviewees (aged 62), which demonstrates that how people position themselves in relation to being old or older is not simply related to their chronological age. Positioning is context-determined and locally very variable and this means that people positioning themselves as older or not should not be understood to reflect underlying attitudes or beliefs.

The interviews contain many qualified forms of positioning as older. Being positioned as a special older person, or as still young inside, modifies the position of older person in very significant ways. These modified positions have a range of effects on the talk about sex in later life. In particular, several interviewees are able to draw on the idea that older people are unwilling to talk about sex by positioning themselves as unusual or special older people. Similarly, in Extract 1, Betty draws on the idea that older people are unaccustomed to talking about sex and positions older people as different from herself. It would be nonsensical to claim that older people are unwilling to talk about sex and then to talk about sex yourself while positioned as a typical older person. Thus the positioning of speakers as not older people or as not straightforwardly older people and the storyline about older people being unwilling to talk about sex go hand in hand.

My analysis confirms the finding of other discursive gerontological studies that a person's age status forms a relatively flexible discursive resource. This is in marked contrast to other common categories such as gender that are usually treated as absolute and non-negotiable. It is also in contrast to some of the less direct ways in

which older age may be invoked, such as references to being a pensioner or retired. Being a certain age-in-years, being a grandmother or being retired are not usually treated as flexible categories: someone is a certain age, they either are a grandmother or they are not, etc. In contrast, as I have demonstrated, being an 'older person' is much more fluid and variable. However, these interviewees do not ever position themselves directly as young, which indicates something of the limits of the flexibility of age-related categorisations, at least in this particular context. Further studies of which categorisations are commonly treated as flexible and which as non-negotiable would be illuminating.

In this paper I have demonstrated how older-age related positions may be identified in data. I have shown that such positions are often complex and subtle but can be examined through detailed analysis of what is said. I have argued that the concept of positioning theory provides an explanation of the phenomenon of people who are often categorised as old disassociating themselves from the category of being old. I have shown that speakers position themselves as older or not depending on the particular interactional work that is occurring at that moment. Positioning theory, along with other discursive explanations, has the benefit of not treating speakers as wrong or foolish when they claim not to be old. Such approaches enable the analyst to theorise age as a discursive resource that may or may not be invoked in a range of flexible ways. In this way, positioning theory treats older people as competent rather than as incompetent, because they are not 'wrongly' claiming not to be older. Rather, as competent members of society, they are drawing on the different associations of

what it means to be an older person in ways that suit the immediate business of the conversation.

This issue of older people's competence is important to both academic and practice/policy concerns. Bytheway has argued that gerontology itself has contributed to ageist understandings of the nature of ageing by often being reducible to the question 'what have we learnt about these older people?' (Bytheway 1995, p. 98). A discursive focus on the socially constructed meanings of older age, exemplified here by the use of positioning theory, provides one way of researching later life without objectifying older people. Underlying theorisations of the nature of age status also have a wide range of effects on practice and policy. An 85 year old refusing attendance at a day centre because 'its full of old folks' is likely to be categorised as out of touch with the reality of their own ageing. This may mean that they are not treated as fully competent in other areas and further services may not be offered. If, however, age status is understood to be inference rich and interactionally varied this may help service providers to respond more helpfully. It may be possible to find out what it is that characterises 'old folks' that is not appropriate for this person and to offer services in a way that is acceptable. Positioning theory can thus usefully contribute to the wider academic endeavour of reconceptualising everyday phenomena and thereby opening up possibilities for new ways of acting.

Notes

1. They were less diverse in terms of 'race'/ethnicity: they were all 'white' and two identified themselves as Jewish.

2. All names are pseudonyms and all identifying details have been changed.

3. I refer to myself in the interviews as 'Rebecca' in the third person, in order to facilitate attention to my own role in the positionings that go on. This is part of an underlying theorisation of interviews as a particular type of interactional occasion with no privileged access to extra-discursive realities.

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