Rachel Heinrichsmeier*

Enacted category claims and tacit orientations to older identities in the telling of a sexually-explicit anecdote

<https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2020-0163>

Received September 15, 2020; accepted February 7, 2022; published online February 17, 2022

Abstract: This paper examines the identities – older and other – being claimed and attributed through the telling of a sexually-explicit anecdote by an older female client in a hair salon. I draw on the methods of conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis to analyse both the anecdote itself and the longer (3 min) sequence of which it was a part. I show that in telling this rather improper anecdote the client was able to *enact* membership of a just-become-valued category in a sequential environment where *asserting* membership of that category, as done by two of her co-participants, was illegitimate for her on the basis of age. I also argue that in choosing *to tell an anecdote* at this point rather than *assert membership* she orientated to that very illegitimacy, and thereby to her own older identity. The analysis and the subsequent discussion highlight the way orientations to ageing and other identities may be displayed less through the semantic surface of talk, than in the sequential structures and interactional practices of the unfolding encounter. As such this paper contributes both to membership categorization analytic research and to the burgeoning corpora of studies loosely categorisable as ‘discursive gerontology’.

Keywords: ageing; discursive gerontology; identities-in-interaction; improprieties; membership categorization analysis (MCA)

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on how ageing and other identities may be tacitly orientated to in interaction, that is, how they may be displayed less through explicit category usage or category-resonant description than in the sequential structures and interactional practices of the unfolding talk. The paper examines, as a case study,

***Corresponding author: Rachel Heinrichsmeier**, School of Education, Communication and Society, King’s College London, Waterloo Road, London SE1 9NH, UK,
E-mail: rachel.heinrichsmeier@kcl.ac.uk. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9433-9317>

Open Access. © 2022 Rachel Heinrichsmeier, published by De Gruyter. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

the telling one day in a hair salon by an older female client, Violet, of a humorous anecdote that has as its climax a piece of sexually-explicit wordplay.

Older people in general are often stereotypically portrayed as uninterested in sex (e.g., Matsumoto 2009: 131; Wada et al. 2015); and talking about sexual matters and making sexually-orientated jokes, particularly for women, and more particularly in lewd terms, is often orientated to as deviant (Charalambidou and Georgakopoulou 2014; Jones 2002: 130; Kothhoff 2006: 21). So when a woman like Violet, who is potentially categorisable as an ‘older woman’ based on both her on-sight identity and her known chronological age of 75, uses sexually-explicit language in an anecdote, it might be tempting to interpret this as the teller seeking to construct for herself a counter-stereotypical older female identity. This is especially so if the crux of the story, as here, is age-based. However, Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) urge analysts to scrutinize the categories to which participants themselves are orientating. These approaches to analysis also examine how any particular turn or series of turns, like a story, is “locally occasioned” (Jefferson 1978: 220) by the sequence that preceded it. Such detailed examination may lead us to modify our initial interpretations.

In this paper I use the methods of CA and MCA to analyse both the anecdote itself and its longer sequential environment I show how the act of telling this sexually-explicit anecdote fulfils the interactional goal of displaying the teller as a current incumbent of a locally-emergent and rather slippery category that had become valued in the here-and-now of the interaction; and I argue that it is in her choice to tell a story to demonstrate her current incumbency of this category that the teller displays her orientation to herself as ‘older’. Overall, the fine-grained analysis of this case study will address the research question as to how participants may display tacit orientations to older age identities.

I start by presenting an overview of previous relevant research (Section 2). I then introduce the data and methods (Section 3) before proceeding to the analytic core of the paper (Section 4). Section 5 recapitulates the argument developed during the analysis and summarises the contribution of the paper to both MCA and discursive gerontological research. Overall, with its focus on the way in which older-age identities are negotiated and co-constructed in this everyday setting, this study contributes to the developing field of ‘discursive gerontology’ (Nikander 2009). This paper also contributes to the membership categorization analytic literature in highlighting both enacted category claims, and ‘unspecified, or tacit, orientations to membership and identity’ (Butler and Fitzgerald 2010: 2433), an area of MCA work that remains relatively understudied (Butler and Fitzgerald 2010: 2464).

2 Literature review

This section situates the current paper in studies of Membership Categorization Analysis and then provides a brief overview of research examining stereotypes relating to older age, particularly sexual.

2.1 Membership categorization analysis and age-in-interaction

Harvey Sacks' (1995) concept of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) encompasses the idea that people are members of multiple numbers of categories – like 'older women', 'men', 'strange people', etc. Categories are like storehouses of knowledge held by society about the kinds of attributes, behaviour, etc., proper to and expectable from members of particular categories (Sacks 1995: Vol I, 40–41): they are "inference rich". One piece of inferential work that categories are used for, is to *explain* behaviour (or attitudes, attributes, states, etc). For example, a boyfriend's reluctance to commit to another meeting can be explained with the categorical generalisation "That's $\uparrow$ me:n" (Stokoe 2009: 82); or as we see in this paper, the category 'old chap' can be used to imply a lack of interest in (or capability for) sex. In each of these cases, the categories achieve their explanatory function because of the attributes (and activities, states, etc) that are 'bound' – normatively associated, rather than inevitably linked – to the categories in question.

Membership categorization analysis has produced a considerable body of work examining how categories may be made relevant through the use of category terms (e.g., 'he's an old man') and category-resonant descriptions (e.g., 'at my age'). This research tradition includes examining how categories and descriptions are designed in talk and their sequential location – for example in complaint sequences (e.g., papers in Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Stokoe 2009; Stokoe and Edwards 2007). However, until recently rather less attention has been given to the way category membership may be made relevant in ways other than using category terms or category-resonant descriptions (Butler and Fitzgerald 2010: 2464). One way this is achieved is through the sequential structures and a range of interactional practices of the evolving talk, for example: making offers (Sacks 1995: Vol II: 318–331); making the other accountable (Paoletti 1998a); producing assessments (Raymond and Heritage 2006); turning-taking structures (Butler and Fitzgerald 2010: 2463); or initiating repair (Egbert 2004; Raymond 2019).

Particularly relevant to this paper are the examples that focus on older age. In this regard Sacks (1995: Vol II: 318–331) showed how the categories 'widower',

‘stubborn old man’ and ‘burden’ became progressively and successively relevant and orientated to by participants over a family meal through shifts in the way an offer (of a piece of herring) was made and rejected; and Paoletti (1998a) illustrated how a man, who *looked* old, was constructed as ‘senile’ through the way the interviewer did not make him accountable for incoherence in his responses. Importantly, these structures of talk display participants’ tacit, unstated, and so deniable orientations to the relevant category-bound activities, attributes, states, etc. For example, in Paoletti’s (1998a) account, the stereotypical link at issue is that between incoherent or mumbling talk and ‘senile’ older age. The category ‘senile old man’ or even ‘old man’ was never stated. However, through refraining from a normative interactional practice (insisting on clarification upon receipt of an incoherent response), the interviewer’s orientation to the other’s incoherence as being *because* he ‘was’ a ‘senile old man’ was made evident. In the case study analysed in this paper, explicit categories are named, both age-related and other; but orientations to ageing and other categories are also displayed and enacted through interactional choices and the structures of interaction.

Until relatively recently, and with some notable exceptions (e.g., Coupland and Coupland 1994; Paoletti 1998b, 1998a), older age-in-interaction was the poor relation in terms of studies of identities-in-interaction (Georgakopoulou and Charalambidou 2011: 31; Matsumoto 2009: 129–130). Recent years, though, have seen a burgeoning interest in the construction of older age-in-interaction, with much of this drawing on MCA (e.g., Heinrichsmeier 2020; Jolanki 2004; Näslund 2017; Poullos 2009). These studies, variously, explore the way – and show how – participants orientate to social norms or stereotypes about appropriate behaviour, states or attitudes for particular ages (Nikander 2000, 2009), for example, the appropriate age for entering into the stage-of-life category ‘first-time parent’ (Ylänne and Nikander 2019); the positive value of being busy and active in later life (Jolanki 2004; Underwood 2011); or, particularly relevant for this paper, the taboo nature of telling sexually explicit or ‘dirty’ jokes by older women (Charalambidou and Georgakopoulou 2014).

2.2 Older women, older men: sexual and other stereotypes

Western culture is replete with images and stereotypes of later life. The dominant image of ageing is of decline, both physical and cognitive (Bowd 2003: 32; Coupland 2014 [2001]; Heinrichsmeier 2020: 48–67), with the latter especially signalling ‘real old age’ (Degnen 2012: 92–94). Failing memory, inability to learn new things (particularly technological), increased confusion and loss of behavioural restraint are all associated with ageing (Heinrichsmeier 2020: 54–60).

Various sexual losses and taboos are also associated with ageing. Coupland et al. (1991: 133) commented on the way the teasing of middle-aged people on their birthdays helps reproduce a range of negative elderly stereotypes, including sexual inactivity. In fact birthday cards, among other negative portrayals of ageing (Ellis and Morrison 2005), commonly include disparaging comments about appearance and sexual failure (Bytheway 1995: 76–77). More generally, older bodies tend to be portrayed as sexually unattractive, particularly women's (e.g., Gatling et al. 2017: 27); as sexually impotent; and, indeed, as asexual (Bowd 2003: 27, 32; Bytheway 1995: 84; Gatling et al. 2017: 23; Heywood et al. 2017: 797; Wada et al. 2015). This is despite studies showing that older people do still engage in pleasurable and fulfilling sex (Heywood et al. 2017: 797; Wada et al. 2015: 46).

Whereas men tend to be the butt of jokes relating to sexual impotence with age (Bowd 2003), women tend predominantly to be portrayed as undesirable and uninterested in sex (Kessler et al. 2004: 547; Nimrod and Berdychewsky 2017). Furthermore, and perhaps precisely *because* older women are supposed to be uninterested in sexual matters, lewd and sexually-explicit talk, such as telling sexually-orientated jokes or engaging in talk that displays the speaker's interest in sex, is often orientated to as deviant for this group (Jones 2002: 130; Matsumoto 2009: 145), e.g., by laughter, delays in telling, or even not articulating the supposedly lewd word. When older women do, then, engage in such talk, it can have the effect of contesting stereotypical constructions of older womanhood (e.g., Charalambidou and Georgakopoulou 2014: 148; Kotthoff 2006: 21), even if, as we shall see in the case study in this paper, the sexually-explicit talk has been introduced to achieve other interactional goals.

3 Data and methods

The data on which this paper draws derive from a longer study into older women's construction of identities through their talk and practices in a hair salon. This salon, Joellen's Hair Palace,¹ was characterised by a light-hearted atmosphere and frequent laughter. It was run by the owner, Joellen, with two other members of staff, one of whom, Bethan, features in the case study discussed.

The wider study was informed by interactional sociolinguistics (IS), which approaches interaction as the key locus for identity construction, with ethnographic methods allowing for insights into the practices and relationships of particular settings (Rampton 2006: 24). Consonant with this IS approach, the core data for the wider study were 20 h of audio-recordings of talk between nine older

¹ This name is a pseudonym.

female clients (55–90) and their stylist or other salon-worker during a total of 27 hair-appointments. These ‘naturally-occurring’ data were supplemented by nearly two years’ participant observation in the site and 15 h of interviews with each of the client participants and the salon-owner, Joellen. Ethical approval was granted by King’s College London Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Panel. Consent was obtained from all participants, all of whose names are pseudonyms.

The audio-recorded data were analysed using the tools of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA). In line with CA and MCA approaches, the analysis started with intensive listening and re-listening to recordings and reading of transcripts to identify patterns of phenomena in the data. Collections of such phenomena were then subjected to a ‘bottom up’ turn-by-turn micro-analysis of participants’ emerging talk (Sidnell 2013).

The focal case lies at the intersection of two collections in my data. The first of these was a collection of 78 ageing-relevant terms and expressions, such as ‘at my age’, ‘as you get older’, ‘old man’ (Heinrichsmeier 2020: 41–42).² The second was a small collection of what I loosely called ‘improprieties’. These were six sequences of varying lengths in which the speakers produced sexual innuendos or made more or less explicit comments about bodily parts and functions. In all cases, they were orientated to by the participants themselves as improprieties, either through explicit commentary, or through intense laughter by all participants, or both. The small number of these improprieties indicates what observation bears out, namely that they were departures from the general discursive practices in the site; and as Charalambidou and Georgakopoulou (2014: 136) point out, it is precisely this “deviation from norms that renders [these improprieties] interesting”, helping us to examine what is achieved through “an activity that is seen as forbidden, illicit and transgressive” (p.136).

The focal case involves a 3-min sequence in which the 75-year-old client, Violet, recounts a sexually-explicit anecdote. In the course of the sequence she also produces several ageing-relevant terms and expressions, e.g., ‘my age’, ‘lots of old ladies’ and associates a number of decline-related attributes with these ageing-relevant expressions, like ‘getting worse’. The case stands out in a number of ways. First, it has a relatively high number of ageing-relevant terms and expressions (six in all). Secondly, it is the only sequence in my data that combines repeated use of older-age terms and expressions with the telling of an impropriety. Finally, it stands out as arguably the ‘dirtiest’ of the improprieties in my collection, with, as we shall see, its not-quite-mention of male genitalia. As a case of extremes, and one

² These were identified as *ageing-relevant* terms and expressions after scrutinizing the participants’ orientation to ageing (for themselves or other), even if not necessarily *being old*, in the emerging interaction.

that clearly makes ageing relevant, it invites exploration of just what kind of ageing is being orientated to, and how and for whom. It also entices us to examine the role being played, identity-wise, by the sexually-explicit anecdote, i.e. whether this is a bid by the teller, Violet, to claim for herself a counter-stereotypical older-age identity, or whether it fulfils some other goal in this interaction.

4 Analysis

The point of analytic entry is the anecdote recounted by Violet. This relates to her plans to transform a mildly sexually suggestive birthday card for an older relative ('my ex father in law', ll.56–57 in Extract 1) into something decidedly cruder. Violet's anecdote was greeted with 16 s of laughter by her two recipients, followed by a commentary that demonstrated participants' orientation to this as an impropriety. Having scrutinised this anecdote for orientations to ageing and other identities, I shall then examine the prior sequence to see how the anecdote was occasioned. The line numbering of the extracts reflects their location in the longer sequence under the spotlight in this paper.

4.1 Telling a sexually-explicit anecdote: older age and other identities

Violet first sets up the background, portraying the prospective recipient as someone who has always sent her 'cheeky or rude birthday cards' (Extract 1, l.64), which he laughs at (l.68), and which – in common with many birthday cards in Western countries (Bytheway 1995) – are rude (l.70) or 'really naughty' (ll.70, 73). Her 'so' in l.75 draws a consequence from what went before, and the reference to 'his birthday' (l.76) primes Violet's recipient to expect some sort of revenge story, some plan to mirror to her relative his behaviour to her: they will be looking for something 'cheeky' or 'rude' in her tale. Violet then continues by explaining the form this 'revenge' is going to take (ll.77ff). See Appendix for transcription notation.

Extract 1 "I'm gonna take the R out of 'wrinkle'" (ll.55–107)

55.	Violet	my ex (.)
56.		my ex
57.		ffa:ther in law[:
58.	Bethan	[quarter to
59.	Violet	[um

60. Joellen [twenty five she had
 61. (1)
 62. Violet he um (0.5)
 63. he's always sent me very (.)
 64. cheeky or rude birthday cards (.)
 65. ever since we've known him
 66. Joellen re[ally
 67. Violet [he goes round and he-
 68. the one he laughs at most
 69. when he's in the shop (.)
 70. that's either rude or really (.)
 71. you know (.)
 72. Joellen ye[ah
 73. Violet [naughty (.) he's sent it to me
 74. ffa:ther in law:
 75. so .h it's
 76. his birthday in a couple of weeks
 77. and I found this card (.)
 78. this picture of (.)
 79. an old chap in the middle (.)
 80. and lots of old ladies
 81. round him and (.) whatever
 82. Joellen [mm
 83. Violet [and 'es in the middle
 84. of these old ladies
 85. you know (.).h um
 86. and its (.)
 87. they're on a (.) an outing (.)
 88. right which is (.)
 89. °you know° very (.)
 90. appropriate (.)
 91. .h and it says at the top
 92. (.) um (.)
 93. >what was it<
 94. always keep a (.)
 95. always keep
 96. a twinkle in your wrinkle
 97. Joellen .hh he [he he he
 98. Rachel [.hh he [he hhe

99. Violet [.h he so(h)
 100. I'm gonna t-[.h
 101. Joellen [.h he
 102. Violet I'm go(h)nna take
 103. the R out of (.) out
 104. of [wri(h)nk]le .hh he he ha ha ha ha
 105. Joellen [.h [o(h)h m(h)y he he ha ha ha ha
 106. Rachel [.h he he he he he he he heh he
 107. ((16 seconds of laughter follow))

We could say a lot about how Violet builds to the climax and creates involvement, but our focus here is on how she makes ageing and other identities relevant for herself and others. As we see, she repeats the ageing-relevant term 'old' three times (l.79, 80, 84); and she does this as part of reiterating her description of how the figures in the card are grouped (ll.79–81, 83–84), making gender as well as age relevant. The introduction of gender relevance adds to the expectations that Violet's story will have something rather rude about it. At this point she seems possibly about to introduce the card's caption (l.86) but then breaks off and adds further descriptive detail. This detail – being on an outing – is an activity stereotypically associated with older folk (Ylänne-McEwen 1999: 419), and Violet herself orientates to this association (l.88–90). Her repetition in ll.83–84 and her parenthetical insert of ll. 87–90 have the effect of deferring the actual denouement. This builds suspense; also, though, it is a further signal (along with the rarity of such talk in this site) that telling sexually-explicit anecdotes are taboo in this setting (Charalambidou and Georgakopoulou 2014: 141).

Continuing her story, Violet now focusses on the card's caption; and with the self-speak of l.93 and the repetition of ll.94–95 she alerts her recipients to the importance of the exact words of the caption. This caption – 'always keep a twinkle in your wrinkle' – already carries mild sexual innuendos: the picture of the old man surrounded by old ladies is intended to offer an example of successful sexual encounters even in later life. The humour depends on the sexist and ageist stereotype of older men not engaging in sexual relations as they age (Bowd 2003: 28); and the 'old chap' is presented as a possible – perhaps absurd – exception to that stereotype (Bowd 2003: 32). As such, the caption to this card could already have been taken as the point of Violet's story, as being both 'cheeky' and 'rude'.

However, Violet goes further. In overlap with Rachel's and Joellen's laughter, she draws a consequence of this caption ('so', l.99), her laughter warning that this consequence is going to 'cap' the caption she has just provided. The action she proposes taking ('taking the R out of wrinkle') does indeed cap the card's original caption. It turns the sexual innuendo into something rather more improper, that in

the context of the card's illustration, produces a caption that is certainly 'rude' (l.70), if not crude or even 'dirty'.³ Notably, Violet does not actually articulate the sexually-explicit word, 'winkle'; instead she leaves it to her interlocutors to work things out. Among other things, this 'non-stating' further points to Violet's own orientation to her anecdote as delicate (Bredmar and Linell 2007), as an impropriety, as pushing at the bounds of polite discourse. By not mentioning this, she implicates her interlocutors in her own impropriety, making them party to it.

We now turn to the identities constructed by and for Violet. In telling the anecdote, she positions herself as lively, witty, and as uninhibited enough to push the bounds of polite discourse to the point of using improper language – at least in the card to her relative, even if she stopped short of actually uttering the word 'winkle' in the salon interaction itself. These attributes, and the activity she describes herself as having in mind to do, are bound to some category like 'social rule breaker' or 'uninhibited person'. Violet's enacted claim to this vague category is endorsed by Joellen and Rachel. Sacks (1974: 346) argued that jokes, and especially dirty jokes, are like understanding tests, whereby asserting a lack of understanding can display a lack of sophistication. One obvious way of asserting understanding of a joke is to laugh; this anecdote, that relies on the recipients' quick understanding of the implications of 'taking the R out of wrinkle', works similarly. As we see, both Joellen and Rachel, with their immediate shared laughter (ll.105ff) that lasts for 16 s, assert that they've got the point. This offers strong ratification of Violet's identity claims, at least as witty.

They then go further. As the laughter dies, first Joellen and then Rachel comment on their reactions to Violet's anecdote (not shown in detail, for reasons of space). First Joellen, audibly smiling, says: 'I think our spellings are okay', which generates renewed laughter. Rachel then observes, 'sadly so's our slang knowledges'. This latter comment triggers a short sequence in which the participants propose that they should have responded with displays of (faked) innocent ignorance ('I don't know what you mean', 'whaaat?'). Through these utterances, Joellen and Rachel further display their understanding of Violet's anecdote – and its risqué nature; they also confirm the characterization of Violet's current and proposed activities as not only witty, but also as an impropriety. This in turn further reinforces Violet's incumbency of some category like 'uninhibited person'.

What about ageing? This has been made repeatedly relevant through ageing-relevant terms, through references to category-bound activities (outings) and through drawing on ageist and sexist stereotypes of older men. However, none of

³ To understand this joke, the recipients (and readers) need to know that 'winkle', i.e., wrinkle without the 'r' (ll.102–4), is a (juvenile's) slang term for a penis, particularly of a young boy [OED online]. So Violet's reworking will, effectively, have the card saying 'keep a twinkle in your penis'. As the recipients' responses indicate, they at least *acted* as if they understood this.

this obviously implicates Violet. Indeed, the action Violet proposes taking with the card could have been undertaken by anyone. Rather, all the ageing-relevance has been directed at the recipient. He has already been described by a kinship term that suggests he is older than Violet ('ex father-in-law', ll.55–57). If we apply the principle of "recipient design" (Sacks et al. 1974: 727) to the activity of choosing a card for someone, we can infer that Violet is orientating to her relative as being old enough for this age-loaded card to be appropriate for him. Furthermore, Violet's amendment casts the recipient of the card into the category of an 'old chap' for whom the tease of the amended caption might be sufficiently relevant to have enough bite for a revenge card.

So Violet has recounted a risqué anecdote which has drawn on widely circulating ageist and sexist stereotypes and which has been very appreciatively received and has cast her into a positive identity category. Despite her use of these ageist stereotypes, though, and her clear orientation to ageing, it is not clear that Violet – in the *content* of her story – has orientated to herself as 'older'. However, when we examine what preceded Violet's anecdote we gain richer insights into what Violet is doing with this telling.

4.2 Local occasioning: claiming and enacting category incumbency

The immediate occasioning of Violet's anecdote is shown as Extract 2. This starts two 'lines' prior to Extract 1 and reproduces the start of that extract. Jefferson (1978: 220) showed how prospective tellers tend to design their stories to be locally occasioned, such that they are shown to be somehow related to prior talk. Here, we see that Violet's bid to tell a story (ll.55–57, l.59, l.62) is interspersed with Bethan's and Joellen's business-orientated talk (l.54, l.58, l.60). With the mention of 'cheeky' and 'rude' (l.64), Violet more clearly signals a possible story in the offing, and this wins a display of interest from Joellen (l.66). At first glance, it looks as if her 'w(r)inkle' story was launched 'out of the blue', perhaps to win back the stylist's temporarily-diverted attention.

Extract 2 "My ex father-in-law" (ll.53–66)

53. (4)
 54. Bethan think it was (ten past)
 55. Violet my ex (.)
 56. my ex
 57. fə:θər in law[:
 58. Bethan [quarter to

59. Violet [um
 60. Joellen [twenty five she had
 61. (1)
 62. Violet he um (0.5)
 63. he's always sent me very (.)
 64. cheeky or rude birthday cards (.)
 65. ever since we've known him
 66. Joellen re[ally ((*story continues*))

However, a story's genesis may have its roots further back in an interaction. Moreover, much conversation analytic work has shown that stories get worked up to *do* something in the evolving sequence (e.g., Stokoe and Edwards 2006: 57). When we examine the longer sequential environment in which Violet tells her story, we shall see that it is precisely placed and designed to accomplish a particular interactional goal, that it does indeed “articulat[ate] with the particular context in which [it is] told” (Jefferson 1978: 219).

To examine the more distal occasioning of Violet's story we need to go back nearly a minute to scrutinize the sequence leading up to its immediate launch (Extract 2 above). This more distal occasioning starts with Extract 3, below. In the 2½ min preceding Extract 3, Violet had been talking of a forthcoming trip to see a theatre production of a well-known British television sitcom that ran from 1989–1998. This had prompted Bethan, overhearing the conversation from where she was cleaning, to recount how she used to watch the sitcom as a child. She had then given an uninhibited rendition of the series' theme tune, apparently unconcerned about the audience of Violet, Joellen, Rachel and the older client sitting under the hood-dryer. This had occasioned considerable laughter, and Joellen and Violet had commented upon the implications for Violet's enhanced enjoyment of her theatre trip. We pick up the talk as Bethan recounts how her father had categorized her as a 'strange child' (Extract 3, ll.1–3).

Extract 3 “Strange child” (ll.1–15)

1. Bethan my Dad said
 2. you were a stra(h)nge
 3. chi(h)ld ha ha [ha ha
 4. Joellen [she
 5. ha(h)sn't al(h)tered
 6. [he he he
 7. Violet [ha ha ha
 8. ha ha ha he .h
 9. she's [£just the samef

10. Rachel [he he he he he h
11. Bethan [no
12. Joellen yeah
13. Violet fjust the samef he he he
14. Bethan tha(h)nk you
15. Joellen he he [he

Bethan's father is the author (Goffman 1981: 144) of the reported speech of 1l.2–3. However, Bethan chooses to animate her father to utter this categorial evaluation of her at *just this point*, immediately following her rendition of the sitcom's theme tune in the small salon. Furthermore, she embeds laughter particles in his words 'strange child' and follows up with more laughter. This invites us to see her adopting the roles of both co-author and principal of her father's reported utterance; that is, she is claiming that utterance as voicing her own beliefs. Furthermore, by invoking her father's authority at precisely this point, Bethan is implicitly claiming the continued currency of at least part of that categorization ('strange'). By claiming this category, effectively 'strange person', for herself, Bethan also displays a positive stance towards that category. Indeed, being considered a 'strange person' can be considered a positive categorial identity ascription, signalling independence of thought or a certain eccentricity in action.

Joellen (1l.4–5) and Violet (1.9) teasingly respond that she has not changed. Given that Bethan is observably no longer a child, these teases must be asserting that what has not changed is the 'strangeness' element of her father's evaluation. However, given Bethan's alignment with her father's utterance and the laughter with which Joellen's and Violet's assessments are produced, these teases have more 'bonding' than 'biting' to them (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997: 279). Indeed Bethan first agrees with Joellen (1.11) and then produces a 'thank you' in response to Violet (1.14), whose laughter particles mark this as ironic in line with the teasing environment that is being constructed. With Bethan's thanks (1.14) and Joellen's laughter (1.15) the sequence seems to have come to an end, with the category 'strange person' attributed to Bethan cast as more positive than negative.

However, instead of letting the topic close, Violet continues the tease (Extract 4 below); and in doing this, she introduces two ageing-relevant expressions – 'my age' (1.21); and 'as you get older' (1.24) – to make a prediction about Bethan's future state: she'll be even worse by the time she's Violet's age (1l.21–22). Violet bases this prediction by universalising the experiences of ageing (with a 'generic you'): 'you get worse as you get older' (1.24), 'you go back to your childhood' (1l.31–32), and 'you act silly' (1.45).

Extract 4 'You get worse as you get older' (ll.16–52)⁴

16. Violet [fI tell you whatf
 17. if she ge-
 18. when she gets to my
 19. f°I say if°f
 20. when she gets to
 21. m(h)y a(h)g(h)e(h)
 22. sh(h)e'll be even fworsef
 23. 'cos you do
 24. you get worse as you [get older
 25. Bethan [he he
 26. Violet [y'know
 27. Bethan [he I'll be co(h)mple(h)tely
 28. Rachel [he he he he he he
 29. Bethan insa(h)[ne .h he he he he he
 30. Violet [you go you go
 31. back to your (.)
 32. fyourf chi(h)ldho(h)od[d
 33. Bethan [ha he
 34. ha ha ha [ha
 35. Joellen [go ba(h)ck
 36. to your [↑child [hood
 37. Bethan [he he [he he
 38. Violet [he he he he
 39. Joellen [oh my god he he he he
 40. Bethan [he he he he he he he he
 41. Violet [he he he he he he he
 42. Joellen [he oh dear (.)
 43. Violet [he he he he .hh
 44. Rachel [he he he he he he
 45. Violet fyou act [sillyf
 46. Joellen [NO HO(h)PE FOR ME then
 47. [he he he]
 48. Violet [fyou actf
 49. you act silly [you know (.)
 50. Joellen [.h

⁴ Lines 16–32 from p.56, *Ageing Identities and Women's Everyday Talk in a Hair Salon*, first edition, London: Routledge © Heinrichsmeier (2020). Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group.

51. Violet do silly things
 52. Joellen he he he

With the reference to ‘going back to your childhood’ Violet is arguably constructing ‘worse’ in line with the stereotype of the inverted-U model of older age, whereby older people lose behavioural restraint, act childish (N. Coupland 2014 [2001]: 200). The ‘getting worse’ of ageing is a picture of decremental older age. However, being a ‘strange child’, and by extension a ‘strange person’, has already been imbued with positive connotations.

Furthermore, Violet infiltrates laughter particles and smiles into this expanded tease of Bethan (e.g., ll.21–22, 32, 45), which mitigates its ‘bite’. Then Bethan herself, also laughing, quickly appropriates and upgrades the categorisation of her future self: she’ll not just be much stranger, she’ll be ‘completely insane’ (ll.27, 29). Given that being ‘completely insane’ is being claimed as the consequence of being ‘even worse’ by the time she is Violet’s age, Bethan’s assertion has the effect of reinforcing her current categorial claim of being a ‘strange person’ now. Moreover, it is not only Bethan who appropriates the category for herself; a couple of seconds later Joellen does likewise, claiming ‘no hope for me then’ (ll.46–47). By claiming intensified future incumbency of the vague emerging category of ‘strange person’, Joellen, like Bethan, also implicitly asserts recognisable current incumbency of that category. So by the end of this sequence, by appropriating the (intensified) category for themselves in the future both Bethan and Joellen have implicitly claimed current (mitigated) incumbency of that category of ‘strange person’. By making such a claim, and with laughter, they have also transformed a possibly negative category, something related to decremental older age, into something, by definition, ‘claimable’, something valued in the here-and-now of the interaction, something closer to being eccentric or rather uninhibited, as Bethan was with her singing in the salon.

As far as Violet is concerned, most obviously she has adopted the role of authoritative commentator on *ageing*. With her assertion of ll.20–21 she has cast herself as considerably *older than* Bethan; and in producing her subsequent utterances about how ‘you’ are when you are older (‘worse’ (l.22); going ‘back to your childhood’ (ll.30–32); acting ‘silly’ (ll.45–51)) with unreduced epistemic authority (Heritage and Raymond 2005), Violet has cast herself as *old enough* to have the knowledge to make such unmitigated categorial claims. In neither case, though, is it clear that she is orientating to herself as ‘old’.

However, Violet alone has not, yet, in this sequence, claimed or demonstrated incumbency of the transformed and temporarily-made-valuable category, ‘strange person’. She could simply leave it. But given her knowledgeable assertions, along with her on-sight identity and her known chronological age of 75, and given the

slippery lack of specificity of the ‘strange person’ category that has come into play, whose positive attributes are very similar to the attributes of the highly negative category of decremental older age, doing nothing opens Violet to the risk of being categorised as ‘old’, perhaps with decremental connotations. Alternatively, she could make claims similar to Bethan and Joellen, for example, by responding to Joellen with something like “no hope for you? Definitely no hope for me.” But of course she does not.

Rather, Violet’s way out of this dilemma is to launch her anecdote, that we examined as Extract 1. This displays her as *currently* engaging in activities that, in this sequential environment, are to be understood as bound to the vague category of ‘strange person’ who has ‘gone back to her childhood’ and is ‘acting silly’ or ‘doing silly things’; and these attributes and activities are cast as positive rather than indicators of decline. That is, she *enacts* current category incumbency rather than, like Bethan and Joellen, claiming current incumbency via assertions of intensified future incumbency. Furthermore, the story she tells, with its reliance on clever wordplay, also displays her as cognitively sharp, which distances her from any lurking notions of decremental older age. Nevertheless, by not adopting the same approach to claiming current incumbency as Bethan and Joellen, she has tacitly orientated to herself as too *old* to take their approach. That is, she displays her orientation to her older identity through her choice to tell her anecdote to claim current incumbency of the newly-valued category, rather than adopt another approach.

5 Discussion and conclusions

This paper has focussed on a sexually-explicit anecdote told in the hair salon by an older client, Violet. The anecdote, which plays on the ageist and sexist stereotype of sexual dysfunction in later life, is typical of many jokes and (purportedly funny) stories relating to older age (Bowd 2003; Nimrod and Berdychevsky 2017). Violet was ‘known’ *a priori* to be ‘older’ given her age of 75. It might therefore be tempting to assume that in telling this anecdote she is orientating to herself – and seeking to construct herself – as a counter-stereotypical older woman, as someone ready to contravene the implicit taboos of older womanhood with respect to talking about sex. However, as we saw upon closer inspection, although the prospective *recipient* was constructed as older, there is nothing *in the anecdote itself* to indicate that Violet is orientating to her own (older) age in the telling. And in fact, such an anecdote, involving the proposed alteration of a typical ageist (and sexist) card for older men to make it even more sexually explicit, could have been recounted by anyone of any age or gender. Taken alone, neither the action in which Violet is

proposing to engage nor her recounting of that action here cast her as 'older'. Her anecdote does, of course, cast her as witty, a taboo-breaker (at least in this setting), uninhibited (as well as possibly momentarily ageist and sexist); and this in turn makes the category 'counter-stereotypical older woman' *available* to her. It is not clear, though, that she herself orientates to this identity in telling the story.

Participants may, though, pursue interactional projects over several minutes (Schegloff 1992); and the analysis of the longer sequence offers more insights into the interactional project that Violet mobilized her anecdote to achieve. Violet's anecdote was produced in a sequential environment in which the predicates associated with decremental old age (getting worse, doing silly things) shifted and were transformed (Butler and Fitzgerald 2010: 2473) into attributes associated with a momentarily valued but slippery and unspecified category of (something like) 'strange person', someone uninhibited and unconventional, as represented by Bethan, the stylist, singing in the salon. This shift and transformation left Violet with a dilemma in respect of claiming that category for herself. I have argued that Violet's orientation to her older-age identity lies, not so much in the content of her story, as in the fact that she chose to tell a story at this point. In short, by engaging in uninhibited behaviour (telling a rather sexually-explicit anecdote in this site) at just this point in the longer sequence, Violet works to *enact* incumbency of the category 'strange person' constructed as momentarily valuable in that longer sequence. And in adopting this course of action rather than claiming incumbency of the category on the basis of the other participants (claiming that in the future they will be *much* worse, thereby implying current incumbency) she also displays an orientation to her own older age.

Of course, across this sequence, ageing is also being orientated to and made relevant much more obviously – through the use of ageing-relevant expressions and a range of category bound activities/attributes. As I have shown, though, Violet's orientation to *herself* as 'older' is not static; and in the *content* of the central anecdote itself, Violet's orientation to her *own* older-age identity is not made visible at all. The implication of this for studies of ageing-in-interaction is to reinforce what has long been noted by scholars drawing on MCA, namely, that the mention of a category term does not mean the speaker is claiming or attributing membership of that category; and that different mentions by the same speaker of category-resonant terms and descriptions – ageing or other – do not necessarily mean that the speaker is orientating to the same kind of category for either herself/himself or others.

In conclusion, this paper adds to MCA research and to interactional studies of older identities. Firstly, it highlights the slipperiness and continual mutability of older and other identity categories and their associated attributes, revealing the way categories may emerge in the course of talk and become variously valued or

disparaged and how categorial work in ordinary conversation can be vague, un-specific and shifting, yet also demonstrably orientated to by participants. Secondly, many studies of older-age in interaction – and membership categorization analytic studies more generally – have focussed on the use of explicit category terms and expressions; tacit orientations have received less attention (Butler and Fitzgerald 2010: 2464). This paper has aimed to show how such tacit claims to incumbency of a category can be made through what participants choose *not* to do in interaction as much as through what they choose to *do* – like choosing not to *assert* incumbency, instead choosing to tell a story that enables the teller to *enact* incumbency. As conversational analytic research has shown, an important consideration in storytelling is the implication of the teller’s selection of this form over other means to undertake local action (e.g., Stokoe and Edwards 2006). The analysis presented here demonstrates that categorial membership may be claimed through the very choice to *tell* a story, quite apart from the ‘aboutness’ of the story. This in turn highlights the importance of exploring processes like identity orientations, claims and ratifications in longer stretches of talk.

Transcription key (from Jefferson (2004))

(0.0)	Pause (seconds/half seconds)
(.)	Micro pause
[]	Overlap onset/cessation
—	Stress on underscored syllable
↓↑	Pitch step down/up in following syllable
WORD, °word°	Louder/softer, relative to surrounding talk
< > > <	Slower/faster, relative to surrounding talk
wo:rd	Syllable stretched out
.h	In-breath
£word£	‘Smile voice’
wo(h)rd	‘Plosiveness’ (here, exclusively laughter)
((word))	Transcriber’s descriptions

Acknowledgements: I gratefully acknowledge the support of an Arts and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Studentship (AHRC BGP 2011-AH/J500215/1) to undertake the research underpinning this article. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Conflicts of interest: None.

References

- Antaki, Charles & Sue Widdicombe (eds.). 1998. *Identities in talk*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bowd, Alan D. 2003. Stereotypes of elderly persons in narrative jokes. *Research on Aging* 25(1). 3–21.
- Boxer, Diana & Florencia Cortés-Conde. 1997. From bonding to biting: Conversational joking and identity display. *Journal of Pragmatics* 27(3). 275–294.
- Bredmar, Margareta & Per Linell. 2007. Reconstructing topical sensitivity: Aspects of face-work in talks between midwives and expectant mothers. In Teun Adrianus van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies* (Sage Benchmarks in Discourse Studies, III), 418–444. London: Sage Publications.
- Butler, Carly W. & Richard Fitzgerald. 2010. Membership-in-action: Operative identities in a family meal. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42(9). 2462–2474.
- Bytheway, Bill. 1995. Ageism. In Brian Gearing (ed.), *Rethinking ageing series*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Charalambidou, Anna & Alexandra Georgakopoulou. 2014. ‘I will make you widows laugh’: A narrative-analytic perspective on conversational joke telling and tellers in a group of older Greek Cypriot women. In Maria Christodoulidou (ed.), *Analysing Greek talk-in-interaction*, 130–156. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Coupland, Justine & Nikolas Coupland. 1994. “Old age doesn’t come alone”: Discursive representations of health-in-ageing in geriatric medicine. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 39(1). 81–95.
- Coupland, Nikolas. 2014[2001]. Age in social and sociolinguistic theory. In Nikolas Coupland, Srikanth Sarangi & Christopher Candlin (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and social theory* (Language in Social Life) (Kindle edn.), 185–212. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Coupland, Nikolas, Justine Coupland & Howard Giles. 1991. *Language, society & the elderly*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Degen, Catherine. 2012. *Ageing selves and everyday life in the north of England: Years in the making*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Egbert, Maria. 2004. Other-initiated repair and membership categorization—some conversational events that trigger linguistic and regional membership categorization. *Journal of Pragmatics* 36(8). 1467–1498.
- Ellis, Shannon R. & Todd G. Morrison. 2005. Stereotypes of ageing: Messages promoted by age-specific paper birthday cards available in Canada. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 61(1). 57–73.
- Gatling, Margaret, Jane Mills & David Lindsay. 2017. Sex after 60? You’ve got to be joking! Senior sexuality in comedy film. *Journal of Aging Studies* 40. 23–28.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra & Anna Charalambidou. 2011. Doing age and ageing: Language, discourse and social interaction. In Gisle Andersen & Karin Aijmer (eds.), *Pragmatics of society*, 31–51. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Goffman, Erving. 1981. Footing. In Erving Goffman (ed.), *Forms of talk*, 124–159. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Heinrichsmeier, Rachel. 2020. *Ageing identities and women’s everyday talk in a hair salon* [Routledge Studies in Sociolinguistics]. New York: Routledge.
- Heritage, John & Geoffrey Raymond. 2005. The terms of agreement: Indexing epistemic authority and subordination in talk-in-interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 68(1). 15–38.

- Heywood, Wendy, Victor Minichiello, Anthony Lyons, Bianca Fileborn, Rafat Hussain, Sharron Hinchliff, SUE Malta, Catherine Barrett & Briony Dow. 2017. The impact of experiences of ageism on sexual activity and interest in later life. *Ageing and Society* 39(4). 795–814.
- Jefferson, Gail. 1978. Sequential aspects of story-telling in conversation. In James N. Schenkein (ed.), *Studies in the organisation of conversational interaction*, 219–248. New York: Academic Press.
- Jefferson, Gail. 2004. Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In Gene H. Lerner (ed.), *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation*, 13–31. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jolanki, Outi Hannele. 2004. Moral argumentation in talk about health and old age. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine* 8(4). 483–503.
- Jones, Rebecca L. 2002. “That’s very rude, I shouldn’t be telling you that.”: Older women talking about sex. *Narrative Inquiry* 12(1). 121–143.
- Kessler, Eva-Marie, Katrin Rakoczy & Ursula M. Staudinger. 2004. The portrayal of older people in prime time television series: The match with gerontological evidence. *Ageing and Society* 24(4). 531–552.
- Kotthoff, Helga. 2006. Gender and humor: The state of the art. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38(1). 4–25.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko. 2009. Beyond stereotypes of old age: The discourse of elderly Japanese women. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2009. 129–151.
- Näslund, Shirley. 2017. Age ascription as a resource and a source of resistance – An interactional study of health professionals’ castings of patients into the category ‘old’. *Journal of Aging Studies* 41(Suppl C). 28–35.
- Nikander, Pirjo. 2000. “Old” versus “little girl” a discursive approach to age categorization and morality. *Journal of Aging Studies* 14(4). 335–358.
- Nikander, Pirjo. 2009. Doing change and continuity: Age identity and the micro–macro divide. *Ageing & Society* 29(Special Issue 06). 863–881.
- Nimrod, Galit & Liza Berdychevsky. 2017. Laughing off the stereotypes: Age and aging in seniors’ online sex-related humor. *The Gerontologist* 58(5). 960–969.
- Paoletti, Isabella. 1998a. Handling ‘incoherence’ according to the speaker’s on-sight categorization. In Charles Antaki & Sue Widdicombe (eds.), *Identities in talk*, 171–190. London: Sage Publications.
- Paoletti, Isabella. 1998b. Being an older woman. A study in the social production of identity. In Leeds-Hurwitz Wendy & Stuart J. Sigman (eds.), *Everyday communication: Case studies of behavior in context*. Mahway, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Poulios, Apostolos. 2009. Age categories as an argumentative resource in conflict talk: Evidence from a Greek television reality show. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 200(2009). 189–208.
- Rampton, Ben. 2006. *Language in late modernity. Interaction in an urban school*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raymond, Chase Wesley. 2019. Category accounts: Identity and normativity in sequences of action. *Language in Society* 48(4). 585–606.
- Raymond, Geoffrey & John Heritage. 2006. The epistemics of social relations: Owning grandchildren. *Language in Society* 35(5). 677–705.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1974. An analysis of the course of a joke’s telling in conversation. In Richard Bauman & Joel Sherzer (eds.), *Explorations in the ethnography of speaking*, 337–353. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1995. *Lectures on conversation*, vols. I and II. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

- Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel A. Schegloff & Gail Jefferson. 1974. A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language* 50(4.1). 696–735.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. 1992. In another context. In Alessandro Duranti & Charles Goodwin (eds.), *Rethinking context*, 191–227. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sidnell, Jack. 2013. Basic conversation analytic methods. In Jack Sidnell & Tanya Stivers (eds.), *The handbook of conversation analysis* (Kindle edn.), 77–99. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Stokoe, Elizabeth. 2009. Doing actions with identity categories: Complaints and denials in neighbor disputes. *Text & Talk* 29(1). 75.
- Stokoe, Elizabeth & Derek Edwards. 2006. Story formulations in talk-in-interaction. *Narrative Inquiry* 16(1). 56–65.
- Stokoe, Elizabeth & Derek Edwards. 2007. ‘Black this, black that’: Racial insults and reported speech in neighbour complaints and police interrogations. *Discourse Society* 18(3). 337–372.
- Underwood, Kate. 2011. Facework as self-heroicisation: A case study of three elderly women. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(8). 2215–2242.
- Wada, Mineko, Laura Hurd Clarke & Julia Rozanova. 2015. Constructions of sexuality in later life: Analyses of Canadian magazine and newspaper portrayals of online dating. *Journal of Aging Studies* 32. 40–49.
- Ylännö-McEwen, Virpi. 1999. ‘Young at heart’: Discourses of age identity in travel agency interaction. *Ageing & Society* 19(4). 417–440.
- Ylännö, Virpi & Pirjo Nikander. 2019. Being an ‘older parent’: Chrononormativity and practices of stage of life categorisation. *Text & Talk* 39(4). 465.

Bionote

Rachel Heinrichsmeier

School of Education, Communication and Society, King’s College London, Waterloo Road, London SE1 9NH, UK

rachel.heinrichsmeier@kcl.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9433-9317>

Rachel Heinrichsmeier is a Visiting Research Fellow at King’s College London. Her research focusses on identity construction in interaction, particularly older-age, gender and institutional identities, and combines a conversation analytic-informed discourse analysis with ethnographic methods. Her monograph, *Ageing Identities and Women’s Everyday Talk in a Hair Salon*, was published by Routledge in Spring 2020.