On age coding and lived experiences of old age

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Abstract

Using the concept of age codings, I illustrate in this article how conceptions of ages are used in interactions as both resources and to limit individuals. I show that they can contribute to both positive and negative experiences of old age. The concept age coding reveals that references to ages marks that a negotiation is taking place over relations between age categories and the resources these are assumed to give access to, and it contributes to analyzing how power relations are maintained and challenged. The utility of problematizing age relations from the perspective of activies and ambivalence is also illustrated through the concept.

Keywords: age coding, age identity, othering, categorizing, chronological age.

In social gerontological research, work that gives voice to the negative social effects of ageing has been prominent. This viewpoint, which for example can be found in studies with a politico-economic perspective, focus on old age as a time of marginalization and resistance to ruling discourses on ageing as social, economic and physical decline (Biggs 2003, 2005). As a consequence of this, questions on ageism have been given much attention (Biggs, Hendricks & Lowenstein 2003). As such, less attention has been given to how social discourses on ages and ageing can contribute to positive subjective experiences of old age.

In this article I discuss how assumptions about ages are used in interactions. I illustrate that making assumptions about ages can be used both to create opportunities as well as to limit individuals when they negotiate possible actions. Thus they can contribute to positive as well as negative experiences of old age. Although my theoretical argument refers to age relations generally, I am writing in this context from a social gerontological position and focus on the consequences these have for individuals' lived experiences of old age.

The social gerontological perspective involves a focus on the psychological, social psychological and social aspects of ageing. This includes, among other things, social constructionist analyses of ageing and of age relations. According to this viewpoint, which forms a point of departure for this article, chronological age is not assumed to hold an inherent meaning; it is only an indication of the amount of time an individual has lived. Social and cultural constructions of life phases are therefore viewed as a result of how scientific disciplines that study different age phases like childhood, youth and old age, define ages and ageing by linking chronological age with cognitive and physiological processes, among other things.

I use quotes to illustrate the phenomena I discuss. These quotes are excerpts from twelve qualitative interviews with women 75 years of age and older and three focus group interviews with sixteen women between 75–96 years old (for more information see Krekula 2006, 2007). The interviews centered upon questions of how identities change over the life course and on the importance identification with age categories has when they are used in the present to interpret possible actions. Because the narratives were constructive retrospectively, I used a visual data collection method, by which the women were asked to choose personal photos from periods in their lives that they regarded as important to them. These photos were used as

a "hook" for their memories and as a point of departure for our discussions (see Rasmussen 2004). The informants' talk reveals both identification with, and categorizations related to one and the same social location, in this case age. In this way they capture the heart of the processes whereby individuals create subjective experiences of social locations such as gender and age in relation to social discourses about the same category. They shed light, therefore, upon aspects of how individuals "do old age" in interactions and the importance hegemonic conceptions of ageing and of ages have as these are played out.

Age coding – practices of distinction

In everyday interactions we find many examples of how individuals make use of conceptions of ages and age categories. Number of years is used to justify what one does or refrains from doing. It is also used to judge one's actions. One example is the expression,"mutton dressed as lamb", which is a derogatory description of women who do not dress in accordance with what is expected based on their ages (see e.g. Hockey & James 1993). Talk about ages is used also as a sufficient explanation for changed living conditions such as in the statement that "I am no longer curious because I am 80 years old" (Krekula 2006). That ages are used in this way indicates that references to age should be understood as *practices*, that is, as something that is done.

Elsewhere I have used the concept *age coding* for these assumptions about the assumed meanings of ages and defined it as *practices of distinction that are based on and preserve representations of actions, phenomena and characteristics as associated with and applicable to demarcated ages* (Krekula 2009a, see also Krekula 2006, 2009b, Krekula & Trost 2007, Heikkinen & Krekula 2008).

In other words, age codings are actions whereby ages and age-based groups and categories are endowed with assumed qualities. At the same time they emphasize differences and dissimilarities between different ages, they also articulate similarities within age groups. Codings are carried out by individuals regardless of their ages. Common to codings, regardless of whether they limit individuals' opportunities or are used as a strategy, is the notion that ages and age-related categories and groups, have assumed qualities. One and the same action can, therefore, have different consequences dependent upon the actors' apparent ages.

Similar to stereotypes, age condings maintain conceptions of age-based categories with different qualities. An important difference between the two concepts, however, is that the age coding concept has a broader analytic perspective. It also encompasses codings of *phenomenon*, of situations and activities, while the concept stereotypes refers only to opinions and beliefs about behaviors, characteristics and attributes of *members of groups* (see e.g. Baron & Byrne 2003, Braithwaite 2002, Feldman 2001, Whitley & Kite 2006). Within those research fields where the intersections between social positions are problematized, it has been argued that individuals' "doing of" identities (such as engendered age) takes place in concrete contexts where factors such as surroundings and space are also of importance (see e.g. Crenshaw 1994, Staunæs 2003). Because the coding concept highlights how social categories and identities are constructed as individuals, space and practices are ascribed age-based qualities, it contributes to broader analyses in situ of how age relations are constructed and of how they can shift depending on the context.

When individuals make use of codings and are categorized or identify with age categories, the assigned qualities of the categories are reproduced (see Wethrell & Potter 1988, Widdicombe

& Woffitt 1995). Categorizing is therefore a central aspect of age codings. However, the concepts are not synonymous as the coding concept also encompasses processes of *identifying with* categories. Age codings are also a more overarching concept than categorizing because it also encompasses those practices in which the assumed qualities of ages are used as resources and strategies. The age coding concept thus reveals categories, identities and situational manuscripts as social practices; they are not regarded as given or static. Age relations and inequality based on age are understood as a consequence therewith, as a result of these simultaneously operating codings where groups, actions and phenomena are ascribed inherent qualities.

Individuals can hold in multiple social positions, such as age, gender and race/ethnicity. Categories such as old/young, woman/man, etc. are created in relation to one another, as the other's counterpoint. Boundaries between what is included and what is excluded are not given because individuals' multiple social locations imply that many different categorizings are always possible. This involves being able to share some positions with those one interacts with, while differing in other respects. When in the context of the interaction one stresses a homogeneous category such as "we elderly", this is therefore only possible because one simultaneously disregards those differences that are found within the category with respect to gender and race/ethnicity, for example. Individuals' multiple social locations also involve access to several codings that they can alternate between in an interaction. Therefore, the point of departure should be that parallel with age codings there also exists, for example, gender coding, class coding, ethnicity/race coding, professional coding, etc. (for a discussion on multiple codings, see Krekula 2009a). In this article I discuss only age codings, however.

Elsewhere I have illustrated that age-based distinctions can be involved in many different processes. For example, they can be used (1) as age norms; (2) to legitimize, negotiate and regulate symbolic and material resources; (3) as a resource in interactions, as well as (4) to create age-based norms and deviance (Krekula 2009a). Below I will illustrate some of these by discussing how age codings are used in interactions.

When age codings are used as a resource in interactions

When age codings are used in interactions such that individuals gain some type of advantage, they can be understood as *interaction resources,* as *strategies.* An example of this is the Swedish expression "*med ålderns rätt"* (the entitlements of age), which can be used, for example, by an elderly person seeking support for an argument in a discussion or who would like to jump a queue.

Also groups and organizations can take advantage of age codings to strengthen their positions. This emerges in descriptions of how activist organizations for the elderly encourage their members to bring walkers and canes with them to public meetings in order to win public sympathy (see Grenier & Hanley 2007). In other words, they are to use conceptions of the elderly as weak to gain an advantage.

Identity negotiations are a more general example of how age codings can be used as resources in interactions. In an interaction it is not only the individuals that meet, but also roles, for example care personnel and older users or different professional roles. The participating individuals face different tasks and different circumstances, and have different power and rights. Their identities are staged in interactions; that is, they "do identity" as age, gender and profession (see e.g. West & Zimmerman 1987, West & Fenstermaker 1995). Doing identities

is, in Goffman's words (1959 [1990]) a way for individuals to communicate how they wish to be seen and treated, and what rights they therefore expect to have. Age codings are, as I illustrate below, central aspects of these achievements.

Actors' attempts to communicate the social location from which they base their actions (and what they expect from their surroundings) means that the interaction can be understood as a negotiation between the participants (see e.g. Krekula 2006, Stets & Burke 2000, Stryker & Burke 2000). When age codings are used in identity negotiations they involve *identity strategies.* Using them, individuals ascribe to one another a certain age identity, expect actions in accordance with the norms for this age category as well as distribute treatment and other resources on the basis of such a categorization. This assignment does not necessarily mean that the counterpart acts on the basis of the same identity claim. They could very well react on the basis of other identity claims and expect to receive respect and resources that are relevant to these. The recurrent research on persons of high chronologic age that directly deny the category "old" (Coupland, Coupland & Giles 1991) or elderly persons who do not identify with the category "the elderly" but regard themselves as an exception, are examples of such identity negotiations (see e.g. Barak 1987, Kaufman & Elder 2002, Uotinen 1998, Westerhof m.fl. 2003, Westerhof & Barrett 2005).

With the help of a quote from a 78 year old woman who runs her own business and who is fully engaged in working life I will illustrate how age codings can constitute strategies. The informant describes herself as successful and as full of ideas for the future and says:

> I don't feel like an elderly woman. I feel like I am at the midpoint of my life. For me
> an elderly woman is a lady with a cane, someone hobbling along the street, on the

fringes of life. Sometimes I feel younger than my son's wife. It depends upon one's manner. I want so much more.

In the quote, the informant ascribes the category "elderly woman" with declining physical capacities ("hobbling along") and diminishing social roles ("on the fringes of life"). Because she does not characterize herself in the same way, she is unable to identify with this category to express how she wishes to be perceived. When she wants to present herself as some who strives to achieve many things, she therefore does so by describing herself as "younger than" her middle-aged daughter-in-law. That is, she stages herself by describing characteristics such as being active and seeking achievements as age-related terms, i.e. by age coding a striving to achieve and ambition as belonging to middle age and younger people, and declining physical strength and limited social roles to older ages. With the help of these codings she creates a backdrop against which she can present herself as faring well, as a positive deviant from a negatively constructed category. By doing so, she can hope to gain recognition and admiration from others.

The quote above illustrates that references to ages can be used to negotiate advantages and opportunities. Hence, talk about age does not communicate given qualities but is used in relation to actions; such speech is used to achieve something. Those processes in which individuals categorize others in, and identify themselves with, specific age categories appear therefore as practices of distinction. With their help one can negotiate the resources that different categories accord access to in society. Age codings, emerge in these situations as strategies for managing a distribution of resources; they become necessary tools for attaining resources some age categories have greater access to than others.

In earlier research, an unwillingness of the elderly to describe themselves as old is discussed as a result of ageing being understood in negative terms and that the elderly do not wish to identify themselves with negative conceptions of ageing processes, but prefer to identify with groups that are regarded positively (see e.g. Kaufman & Elder 2002, Westerhof & Barrett 2005, Westerhof, Dittman-Kohli & Bode 2003, Pinquart & Sörensen 2001). Because these processes also emerge among individuals in their 40s, two additional explanatory models are proposed: a biological developmental one, that presents this as a defense against a limited amount of time remaining in one's life, as well as a psychological explanation in the form of a pull towards those self images one has created during one's adult life (Daatland 2005). As the age coding concept reveals that such practices of distinction can be related to the distribution of resources, it provides a new perspective on individuals' discursive use of age categories. The concept points out that reference to ages can constitute strategies with which one can, among other things, negotiate advantages in the form of resources.

Departing from an understanding that reference to age is used as a tool to attain something sought for, means that such statements mark where these undertakings occur in interactions. In other words, age based categorizations and identifications indicate that such references have a given aim. In such way, age codings can be analytically used as *markers.* They signal when conceptions of age categories are used strategically. By identifying how age codings are used in different situations, *what is negotiated in encounters* is revealed; that is, what the partners in an interaction attempt to achieve by relating to one's own or others' ages. Moreover, identifying how age codings are used allows us to *discern the resources* that respective age categories are accorded in the situation at hand.

When age codings limit action opportunities

Age codings can also limit individuals in interactions. This happens for example, when they are used as *age norms*. In contrast to when age codings are used as resources, codings in this case are not associated with potential gains but instead with a risk of experiencing deviance and shame.

I will illustrate age codings as norms using a quote from an 80 year old woman. She describes how during her lifetime she has had many boyfriends and in some cases even cohabitated with them. When she speaks about her current boyfriends she rejects the thought of a sexual relationship, however, saying, "I am 80 years old for heaven's sake. Of course one could imagine being interested, but no..."

Thus, her dismissal of intimate relations is made with reference to age. The self-evident way in which she relates to her age ("I am 80 years old *for heaven's sake*") indicates that she assumes that a reference to age in itself contains information enough to make it possible for me to understand why such a relationship is not possible. It indicates that she relates to a norm that says that 80 year old women should not have physical relationships with men they do not live together with. However, she does not regard such relationships as dubious for younger ages and has even had such relationships herself earlier. Accordingly, it is not the relationships as such that are problematic in her view, but rather the thought of such relationships at her age. In other words, she presents intimate relationships as an age-coded phenomenon.

When codings are expressed as age norms, the one who breaks them can be punished, for example through being shamed (see the rich research on how avoidance of shame influences how people shape their actions, e.g. Heller 1985, Izard 1991, Katz 1999, Misheva 2000,

Scheff 1990, Taylor C. 1985, Taylor G. 1985). By claiming that women at her age cannot have intimate relationships the informant above presents herself as acting in accordance with expectations. Using age coding she rejects possible criticism of her actions, i.e. breaking norms by not having an intimate relationship, something which reportedly could be the case for younger women (Berg 1999). One interpretation of the quote is therefore that the informant, with the help of age coding, strives to gain the acceptance of those around her. By acting in conformity and following age norms, individuals can thus avoid being exposed to shame in an interaction. At the same time, age norms are reproduced because the absence of actions that transgress their boundaries leaves them unchallenged.

As the quote above shows, age codings do not always result in negative consequences for the individual. They can be negative for the individual when they are taken as a basis for shaming or discrimination. However, they can also be used as strategies to expand action opportunities or to gain other advantages. While individuals can feel shame when they break with codings in the form of age norms, coding can also result in satisfaction and well-being when they contribute to confirm identity claims or to maintain resources that are sought after.

When age codings of contexts create "the Other"

As can be seen in my definition above, also *situations* and *actions* are coded. Here I will illustrate how this contributes to create age-based norms and deviance. Based on expressions about "being old" I argue here that age coding can constitute the step at which age-based norms and deviance are created.

An example of these processes emerges in the quote below from an 87 year old woman. The woman reveals that she feels young when she is with her exercise group but old when she

participates in art courses, despite the fact that she has spent much time engaged in the latter throughout most of her life. For her, the experience of feeling old is negative and she describes how her self-image as old is created in the encounter with others;

> [...] yes, everyone regards me as too old for everything. One almost doesn't dare take courses because they look at 'that old person who is here' and such.

In this case her age identity is based on the perception of her being older than what she thinks one is expected to be in this context. She describes herself as "old" because she experiences breaking with the age coding of the situation.

When age codings are used to categorize participants in an interaction, markers of difference are woven together with codings of the specific situation. In the quote above, the informant perceives how the younger course participants, in part on the basis of physical markers, categorize themselves and the informant as being of different ages. This categorizing constitutes not only an ascription of narrow qualities. It also involves the two parties being posed in relationship to one another. At the same time, the art course is coded as appropriate for younger ages than the informant's. As a consequence of this, she feels she is a deviant because of her age. Using Pickerings (2001) discussion of othering, we can argue that the informant experiences being ascribed a position as "the Other" and that the younger actors appropriate the position of the norm as their own. To find one's self in a position as the other has been described as being:

> […] imprisoned in an identity that harms you. You are both silenced and spoken for. You are seen but not recognised. You are defined but denied an identity you can call

your own. Your identity is split, broken, dispersed into its abjected images, its alienated

representations. (Pickering 2001:77–78)

In discussions about othering processes, Pickering (ibid.) emphasizes that categories, like

stereotypes, are used as a cognitive economy, that is, to create order in life. Categories,

however, are fluid and therefore are not a definitive aspect of individuals' processing of

information; they "[…] ; should not be regarded as *the* elemental structure of

thought.."(2001:3, italicized in the original). Pickering's reference denotes how we as

observers can choose between the many positions we see when we categorize others. In the

quote above, for example, the informant could be categorized as a woman, as older, as

Swedish, as interested in art, and so forth. Depending upon the categorization and on which

locations are brought forth, similarities or differences between actors are emphasized.

Through age coding, however, the possibility of alternating between *seeing both* similarities

and differences is lost. With age coding, focus is directed towards difference with respect to

ages while possible similarities in other regards are toned down.

Pickering (2001) also claims that the othering concept is sharper than stereotypes as it reveals

the relational, how We and Them are created as one another's difference. While stereotypes

focus on the stereotypified, the concept of othering casts light also on those who do the

stereotyping and assume a position as the subject at the same time as they cast the other as

their deviant. Similarly, Schwalby (2008) argues that inquality should be understood as an

accomplishment, it occurs because of the ways people think and react. Categories such as

class and gender, he argues, are processes; they are relational and are the result f how people

categorize their selves and others and how they treat one another on the basis of this.

The argument above indicates that subjective experiences of old age are created within a power field where someone defines the situation with the help of age codings, ascribes to him/herself the position as subject and presents their counterpart as "the Other".

Concluding remarks

I have illustrated that conceptions of age can be used as both resources as well as to limit individuals in interactions. I have argued that age coding is a logic of distinction that can be used in negotiations over, among other things, resources and action opportunities. Decisive for what consequences codings will have, e.g. in the form of resources, is who has the right to define the specific situation and how this advantage is maintained. Overall, the argument points out that age codings are practices that negotiate age based relations. They can be employed by privileged individuals and groups to defend existing power relations and used by those who are subordinated to challenge existing relations. As a result, one cannot take for granted age discourses. Belittling conceptions of ageing at a social level do not necessarily mean that this is the only available discourse on ages when individuals negotiate age relations and create meaning in everyday life. Neither do generally positive notions of ageing necessarily mean the absence of limitations for older individuals. References to ages in an interaction can therefore be used analytically as *markers*, as I have further argued. They indicate that a negotiation is taking place over the relations between age categories and the resources these are assumed to give access to.

The age coding concept reveals how age relations are negotiated in interactions and that all those who are involved in an interaction participate in creating, challenging and maintaining these relations. It indicates that age relations must be problematized from the perspective of the presence of *ambivalence, movement* and *activity.* The concept thereby challenges the

notion that age relations are static. It raises, instead, questions about *what* in the actual situation enables someone to assume a position as the subject and ascribe the position as "the other" to someone else, and about *what* is negotiated as this takes place. The concept gives room therewith to analyze also *how* power relations based on age are maintained, created and challenged. Such analyses are important, not least of which when the ambition is to do away with discrimination.

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