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Ageing Identities and Women's Everyday Talk in a Hair Salon

Heinrichsmeier, Rachel, Routledge, New York, 2020, 262 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-24551-1 (hbk) ISBN: 978-0-429-28310-9 (ebk), £120 (hbk).

This research monograph is an important book in many ways. It provides an excellent example of an ethnographic study of naturally occurring talk in a social context, complemented by interviews. It effectively combines Conversation Analysis (CA), Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), and Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) to analyse audio-recorded data. Yet its significance stretches beyond studies of social interaction. In its focus on age(ing) identities, it is a welcome contribution to ageing studies and cultural gerontology, too, where studies on age identities as constructed in interaction are still rare (e.g., Coupland, 2009; Jones, 2006; Nikander, 2002). There is much to be gained in approaching ageing as culturally and interactionally constituted and this book offers many illuminating insights on how age(ing) identities are negotiated in talk and interaction. It also contributes to studies on everyday talk, small talk, and talk about ageing and appearance, demonstrating the value of such topics and elevating them from the status as 'trivial' concerns (both interactionally and theoretically). In focusing on a group of older women who are clients of an English hair-salon, in the words of the author, the aim is to analyse "how these women negotiate their way through their own and others' expectations of ageing as they construct different kinds of older – and other – identities for themselves" (p. 1).

The volume consists of an Introduction and nine chapters, the last of which is a retrospective and prospective Conclusion of the study. Following the Introduction, which sets the scene for the study, its participants, and the structure of the book, Chapter 1 provides an overview of ageing in society and in interaction. There is some useful coverage of current discourses of ageing – as inevitable decline on the one hand, or the more celebratory, but equally problematic, 'successful ageing' discourse, on the other hand. Approaching identity as something achieved – something we do – in interaction is well established in discourse studies, although aspects of identity other than age are more frequently investigated. Heinrichsmeier situates her action-oriented approach to identity primarily within CA / MCA but offers a useful review of select previous studies that have examined age identity construction in a variety of settings (typically in institutional settings) from a broader perspective. The central questions for the book are stated as (p. 13):

- When are people orientating to ageing as opposed to other identities?
- What kind of ageing and other identities are they constructing and how are they doing this?
- What other interactional projects are they pursuing?
- What role does appearance play?

In Chapter 2 we gain insight about the data and the process of its collection at the research site, 'Joellen's Hair Palace'. The sizeable data corpus, collected over nearly two years of fieldwork, comprises audio-recordings of 27 hair appointments of nine female clients aged 55–90, amounting to 20 hours of talk. In addition to the recordings, about 500 appointments in the salon were observed and in a true ethnographic fashion, detailed fieldnotes were kept. Quotes from these occasionally accompany the data transcripts in the analytic chapters. The salon owner, 'Joellen', and the nine participants were also interviewed in unstructured "ethnographic conversations", and we also see some detailed analysis of these in the book. The role of ethics, as is appropriate, is briefly covered in this chapter. I would have also

welcomed some consideration about to what extent research was conducted (or might have been conducted) *with* the participants. The role of the researcher is rightly addressed at various points in the book.

The main body of the book starts with two chapters addressing how the participants made ageing and older age lexically relevant in their talk via ageing relevant terms and expressions. The author uses the apt term “manoeuvring” to describe how “ageing or older age hovers below the surface of talk, to be brought out by either party as needed as a ready-made interpretative resource” (p. 40). This might include explicit older-age terms and expressions (“...as you get older; at my age”); mentions of chronological age; or use of comparison (p. 41). In line with the discourse and ideology of ageing as decline, explicit orientations to older age in these data are “overwhelmingly negative” (p. 40) but often “participants distance themselves from the full decline-impact (for themselves and others present) of those orientations to ageing” – so distancing themselves from being ‘fully old’. Ageing emerges as linked with inevitable physical decline, with cognitive decline, with appearance changes and so on. There were differences, however, in who initiated such talk with, for example, clients but not staff linking older age with cognitive decline. We learn how such articulations are subtly negotiated through changes in the use of pronouns (first person vs. generic you) or laughter by the participants. The topic of appearance changes with ageing was, in turn, “something of a taboo topic in hair-salon talk” (p. 63).

Chapter 4 focuses further on the discursive negotiation of ageing in salon talk. An examination of what the participants are *doing* in their talk draws on MCA to show how they may accept, modify, or resist age terms and associations. In looking at the speakers’ use of categories and category-bound activities, it transpires that they orient to a range of identities beyond older identities. The analysis, being micro-analytic, skilfully focuses on the responses and follow-up turns as either acceptances or rejections of ageing-relevant expressions and categorisations. The categorisations themselves are linked with age stereotypes and common beliefs about older age. The responses, on the other hand (e.g., by the member of staff), are motivated by the older age category-bound activity brought up, as well as their sequencing, such as displaying preference for agreement. For example, when 90-year-old Mrs Farming’s troubles-telling invokes an age-related identity of a vulnerable victim of the legal system, in a potential danger of losing her home, which “at ninety it’s not quite the place to be in that situation is it”, Joellen is primed to agree, (“no it isn’t”) both topically, in relational terms to show sympathy, and following the tag question (p. 75). In another sequence, Mrs Farming’s age-related complaint of a lack of energy, on the other hand, is resisted by Joellen with reference to a person “at ninety years of age” being “entitled to have a little bit of lack of energy” (p. 83). This supports the older participant’s identity-work, and her decline is framed more positively as an ‘entitlement’. The ageing-relevant expressions in the conversations are shown to accomplish a range of interactional goals and age is shown to function as a rich discursive resource. The analysis also offers insightful comments on preference organisation more generally.

Just like our bodies give off indices to our age, our hair and its management play a part in impression management. In chapter 5, the focus is on managing ageing hair, in particular a style that is age salient, namely the shampoo and set (S&S). It emerges that “S&S clients, regardless of chronological age or longevity of acquaintance, tend to be orientated to as unlikely to change, in a way not encountered with non-S&S clients” (p. 125). Age identity and one’s orientation to change are shown to be negotiated in these data in intricate ways. For example, the formulation of the stylist’s question in the consultation phase of the salon visit is

revealing. Asking “are we doing the usual” as opposed to “what are we doing today” presupposes a continuity of style (no change) as opposed to potential for a change of style (pp. 121-122). The clients, too, actively construct identities for themselves in the interviews as either resisting or embracing change via their styling preferences. The interactional and interview data are compared in an interesting way to highlight the flexibility of categorisation practices regarding self and other.

Negotiating stances to appearance beyond hair is dealt with in chapter 6. Here appearance-related practices and talk are seen to make older age relevant in various ways, even without the use of age-relevant terms. The participants orient to age-appropriate social norms (or age ordering) about dress (Twigg, 2013) and to what extent appearance is important to them. Their talk displays the tensions that older women, in particular, may feel about over- and under-investment in appearance (Hurd Clarke, 2011), including hair (Ward and Holland, 2011). Their individual style of attire also forms part of their identity project, as articulated by Mrs France, for example, in self-identifying as being “still a check shirt and jeans person” (p. 130) at the age of 68. Furthermore, the “very activity of problematizing appropriate attire for themselves is a category-bound activity (CBA) of older women” (p. 136). There is a good summary of the role of interviews at the end of this chapter, which includes some self-reflective commentary about the formulation of the interview questions, which itself relates to the different stances the participants sometimes took to ageing and appearance in salon interaction vs. the interviews.

The last two analytical chapters examine the stories told in the interactions (chapter 7) and the speakers’ orientation to a range of identities (chapter 8). Many of the stories are ‘busy stories’, typically constructing positive and socially engaged identities for the speakers. Although ‘busyness’ in public discourse aligns with the notion of ‘ageing well’, the participants do not orientate to being older, or ageing ‘well’ in their stories in any simple way. The stories are part of typical salon small talk more generally, commenting on recent happenings. But by presenting themselves as ‘busy’, Heinrichsmeier argues, the participants “rule out the possible attribution to them of more decremental older identities, such as withdrawn-from-the-world, inactive and depressed older women” (p. 183) and present a wide range of identifications beyond age. In line with the analytical approach of the volume, the reader is introduced to how the stories are occasioned, sequentially embedded in surrounding talk, and how their tellability is established. The staff’s responses to the stories, either ratifying or not ratifying the ‘busyness’ is also investigated. Chapter 8 presents three case studies of women aged 55, 68, and 90 to illustrate their identity work both in terms of being older women as well as “being more than ‘older women’”. These comprise identities linked to previous or current employment, continued sporting hobbies, holidaymaking, and prospective identities, for example. The data also illustrates “continued identity construction into advanced old age” (p. 211).

In the concluding chapter, the author provides some useful summary of the main findings of the study. We also return to the dominant public discourses about ageing. The data analyses demonstrate how the participants negotiate various expectations about ageing in their talk. There is occasional mention about resistance to stereotypes in the analysis, although in line with the approach taken, the analyses are more focused on sequential matters. There might have been opportunities for a critical orientation to wider discourses on ageing more explicitly along the way, too, or to comment on how these ideologies are reproduced or resisted in talk. But the concluding comments succeed in stepping back from the micro perspective to cast an eye on what the data can show us in more broader terms.

The strength of the volume is in the insightful and rich analysis of talk in interaction, with numerous data examples shared with the reader. It makes a convincing case for approaching ageing and age identity as contextual, co-constructed by participants, and as intersecting with other aspects of our identities. Its attention to detail will be fascinating for students and scholars familiar with CA-type research, although more challenging for some ageing scholars. The style of writing is reader friendly, with frequent signposting and summarising. I highly recommend the book for anyone interested in talk and (age)identity construction, women and ageing, or the application of CA / MCA / IS on talk and interaction.

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