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# Doing age: Methodological reflections on interviewing.

Anna Sofia Lundgren

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss how the interview method has implications for the construction of aged identities, but also how the research area conditions the positionings that are made within the interview. Drawing on a set of qualitative semi-structured interviews with persons identifying as, and having experiences of volunteering as 'class grandparents' in schools for children, this article highlights and investigates three regimes that proved central in these interviews and that affected the construction of data: the 'confessional mode', the 'use of life-scripts', and the 'theoretical identifications' affecting the interview conversations.

*Key words: interview, methodology, identity, positionings, class-grandparents*

## Introduction

If the 1960s and 1970s brought a narrative turn to the humanities and social sciences, the late 1970s and 1980s introduced a reflexive one, which served to critically scrutinise anthropological and ethnographical fieldwork and writing (Cohen, 1994; Riessman, 2002). The fact that the researcher's position, whether it be within or outside the boundary of the studied experience, will have an impact on interpretation was emphasised; for example, the way in which outsiders may fail to understand the experiences of the informants, while insiders risk taking things for granted (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996). This awareness, which is particularly central to much feminist research, contributed to the debunking of the idea of science as an objective and value-free pursuit (Reinharz, 1992; Oakley, 1998). Instead, it laid bare the context-sensitive and power-laden interaction that goes on between the researcher and respondent (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997), and revealed how the interviewer and interviewee are involved in what has been described as a mutual co-creation of data (Finlay, 2002; but see Scheurich, 1995).

Reflexivity is conventionally understood in terms of a 'bending back on itself' (Steier, 1991:2), compelling the researcher to reflect on the research process. However, this conventional definition is, according to Lynch (2000), also a simplified one. Several researchers have noted how interviews are affected by notions of the interview as a socially and culturally specific practice as well as by the personal chemistry between the interviewer and interviewee (cf. Briggs, 1986). However, research has also noted how interviews are affected by the identities that we bring into the interview context (Manderson, Bennett & Andajani-Suthahjo, 2006). Such identities are comprised of the positions and characteristics that we identify with, and they can, for example, be related to gender (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Broom, Hand & Tovey, 2009; Oakley, 1998; Reinhartz & Chase, 2002; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002), social class (Briggs, 2002; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002), race (Schuman & Converse, 1971; Dunbar, Rodriguez & Parker, 2002) and age (Wenger, 2002). Even though there are studies that report problems in relation to interviews with older people (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001; Pratt & Norris, 1994), age has, nonetheless, remained a rather under-theorised location of experience, and questions regarding the way in which age may produce intergenerational connection or conflict remain relatively unexplored (Grenier, 2007; Riach, 2009).

As an additional part of these problematical issues, there are some unproblematised notions about what constitutes the object of research on ageing. Who are older people? What constitutes 'older'? Research on ageing typically focuses on the category of 'older people', and often defines 'older' in terms of a certain number of years. This has proved to be problematic because defining 'older people' as, for example, 'all people over 65' groups together people who have very different life circumstances, and who belong to different generations (Degnen, 2007; Wenger, 2002). In order to identify and deal with the potential ageism that lurks in every project in which 'younger' persons conduct research on 'older' persons, research on old age and ageing has included an on-going discussion about how to denominate the objects of study.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The practice of referring to older people as 'the elderly' was abandoned at an early state as being too homogenising and 'setting aside a significant proportion of the population on the basis of age' (Wenger, 2002:259). Townsend, Godfrey and Denby (2006) describe different denominations that have been suggested to deal with this problem (see also Cruikshank, 2003; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Wenger, 2002).

In this paper I discuss how age positions are produced within social interaction. Even though the interviewees sometimes distanced themselves from the category of 'old old', they did identify themselves as older in a broad sense of the word – they sometimes referred to themselves as 'older people' and had been taking part in school projects where they were identified as 'class grandparents' – older people who help out in children's schools on a voluntary basis (Lundgren, 2010). In this context, they were identified as both old (from the perspective of the pupils) and relatively older (from the perspective of the teachers, who were themselves older than the pupils). All the interviewees were also older than myself. This fact seemed to play a crucial role in how we related to each other within the realm of the interview situation and it was of immense importance for the kind of material that was produced.

Working from the supposition that there are discourses that structure how we talk and comprehend life generally and within the context of the interview, the aim of the paper is to investigate how the research interview furnishes the practice of *doing age*, and how the method as such seems to provide resources for doing so. The paper will focus especially on three particular resources – 'the confessional mode', 'life scripts' and 'theoretical identifications' – and the way they contribute to a constitution of age identities. These three partly related resources were chosen because they proved to have a great influence on both how the narratives in the interviews were structured, and the positionings that were made within the interviews. I will argue that these resources are often implicated in the interview method.

### **Methods and theoretical starting points**

During 2007-2008, I carried out 15 interviews with women and men. These interviews were performed in order to investigate identity production among so-called 'active' older people. The participants were persons who were, or had recently been, active as class grandparents in children's schools (for a more detailed description of methodology, see Lundgren, 2010). The interviews were semi-structured and carried out in Swedish, and apart from describing the practicalities surrounding their participation as class grandparents, the interviewees were encouraged to talk about a set of themes, including their first impressions of the school, their thoughts about the advantages and problems with the practice of being class grandparents, and the meaning of age in all of this. Being quite informal in character, the interviews were flexible enough to include questions and themes that were not a part of the initial framework.

In this paper I return to the above series of interviews. In what may be called 'post-hoc reflexivity' (Gough, 2003), I re-view the interviews and some discursive regimes or resources that seemed central to the age positionings that took place in the interviews. I do this in order to deepen the understanding of how such resources contributed to the constitution of the object of research: old-age identities. In the process of re-reading the interview transcripts, I have worked from the discourse theoretical and anti-essentialist supposition that all things are meaningful and that meaning is derived from historically specific, but ultimately unstable *discourses*, or ways of understanding and describing the world (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In other words, meaning, as well as the potential of its instability, is constantly and discursively constructed through *articulations*, that is, by certain signs being connected to certain other signs, thus creating new meaning. This is accomplished for example in speech, and in this respect discourse theory makes an interesting choice of theory for the purpose of this paper because it allows for the interview to be viewed as an arena of articulations. Therefore, the analytical study of articulations becomes a central methodological strategy (Howarth, 2005). What is important in this perspective is the conviction that power does not emanate from the ones who carry out the studied articulations, but that it is the 'circulation of discourse' (Briggs 2002:914) that imbues the interview with meaning and constitutes the discursive resources that are available.

At the heart of this thinking lies a post-structural view of identity that emphasises how identities are constituted performatively (Butler, 1990; 1993). The research interview is also implicated in the construction of identities, and in this particular case the construction of age identities. What goes on in an interview is not only the telling of experiences that have already happened (the narrated events), but also a narrative event in which identities are performed and produced (cf. Bauman, 1986; Oakley, 1998). Consequently, it is possible to understand interviewing as a 'technology' in the Foucauldian

sense: the identities of the interviewer and interviewee, as well as the narrated events, are constituted through and within the interview, but the interview also ‘obscures the operation of this process beneath notions of objectivity and science’ (Briggs, 2002:913). The efforts made to deal with this predicament by way of reflexive thinking also contribute to this obscurity of the performative aspect of interviewing, as I will make clear later.

I have been particularly interested in the positionings that took place within the context of the interview and how age was used and negotiated in these positionings. Subject positions are thus understood as partly constructed through talk (Bamberg, 2004; Miller, 2011). Positionings occur constantly as part of the on-going process of interaction, and every positioning always affects the positioning of others involved in the interaction (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). For example, the participants positioned themselves as ‘older’ in the interviews, thus giving me the relative position of being ‘younger’. In order to bridge the potential gap between the participants and myself, they frequently used phrases like ‘you know’ or ‘as you will find out’, thus smoothly rendering possibly particularistic experiences universal. In order to avoid a stance where positioning comes forth as the result of conscious acts, positionings may be viewed as moves that are made possible by certain discursive conditions that were invoked in the interview conversations.

I will start out by briefly discussing these positionings in order to provide examples of how age identities were negotiated on an inter-personal level. I will then move on to present examples of the presence of the three discursive resources that specifically struck me when returning to the transcribed interviews.

### **Positionings of age identity**

When I conducted the interviews for the research project on class grandparenting, I was 35 years old and my informants were all over the age of 65. As the aim with the interviews was to find out more about the participation in class grandparent projects, age was already an implicit topic. It soon became clear that the interviewees adopted age as an important location for their own experiences and for their sense of self in the school context. However, relating to or adopting an old age identity did not always seem to be unproblematic: positioning oneself as old could be used to articulate certain skills and competences, but could also be actively thwarted at times. The ambivalence that the interviewees showed sheds light on the fact that old age and the different possible articulations of old age are by no means neutral descriptions.

While carrying out the interviews, I was concerned about the fact that the interviewees seemed eager to explain *why* it was okay for them to take part in the class grandparent projects. It was not that they seemed to doubt their own importance, but rather that they were not sure what I (or some imagined other listener) would think about it. They employed discourses on ‘productive’ and ‘active’ ageing; they reiterated economic, pedagogical, and health discourses when narrating about their participation in the project. To me this seemed remarkable, because I entered the field with quite positive connotations – I did not take a critical position in this respect.

One possible explanation was that the informants were much more affected on a personal level by the discourse of old age as a period of loss and decline than I was. This discourse is sometimes articulated with a discourse about older people being costly and taxing, and therefore offers negatively charged old-age positions (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2011). Most of the interviewees positioned themselves as active. This positioning included an almost compulsory countering of the discourse of loss and decline, paradoxically revealing it to be more significant than I had first believed.

A second interpretation of the *urge to explain* concerns the positioning that took place in the context of the interview where my curiosity as a researcher may have solicited an argumentative or even defensive mode. One of the core ideas of narrative gerontology – ‘what one is in old age is not simply there for the asking but is actively produced in the telling’ (Gubrium, 2001:27) – focuses on the narrative event in which, as folklorists have pointed out (Ben-Amos & Goldstein, 1975; Bauman, 1986), the teller and the audience play as important a role as the story and the storied events themselves.

In relating to their own age, or to meanings of age in general, the interviewees often pointed out my age. The inclusion of my age into the conversation was sometimes used to unite us as adults (opposed to the pupils), and sometimes to emphasise differences between us (where they were old and

I was not). It was obvious that age was a relative category, both in the sense that we all constantly undergo ageing processes, and that its meanings are dependent on how it is articulated.

Studies have demonstrated how people position themselves in relation to their interpretations of the context (Jones, 2006). In the narrated events the school was an important context, as were different discourses on old age and society. In the narrative events, however, the interview situation constituted the prime context; it was the stage on which the research project acted out its preconceptions (Grenier, 2007) and a meeting between two persons in which positionings based potentially on age or other identities and sympathies were made. The extract below is taken from the first fifteen minutes of the interview.

ASL: What were your first impressions?

I: Well... I guess I had a hunch...

ASL: Mmm.

I: You know, it's quite... intense.

ASL: Yes. How did you feel?

I: It felt all right. Yes.

ASL: So it was okay?

I: Yes, I knew of course what I was getting into! [laughs]

ASL: Because of...?

I: Well, you know, I read the papers and watch the news, and I have grandchildren. I'm not completely up in the clouds, I'm not that old! And I like kids, I do, so things came as no surprise to me.

ASL: Yes, I'm just asking because when I wrote my thesis I visited a secondary school, and although I was at the time just about 10 years older than the pupils, my first impressions were still chaotic, both because so much had changed [since I went to school myself], and because so much was still the same! [laughs] So I was just wondering what your...

I: Oh, yes yes. For me, being an older person, there's a lot that has changed, so of course my first impressions were also a bit chaotic. It's so different today, there's no comparing. The sound level, my God!

ASL: So, what was your position in all... this?

I: Well, it's hard to say, really. I'm just an older person, helping out, being there. I often do things, like I read to them, or I teach them songs and rhymes and jingles which they like. Children need that. I think it's a positive thing that I have time for them, that I see them.

ASL: Mmm. So... But your feelings...?

I: My feelings, well, I actually was a bit surprised initially, and I felt very old...

In this extract, the interviewee starts with what I perceived at the time to be a defensive strategy by saying that she felt alright in the beginning, and that she knew what she was getting into. By emphasising how well prepared she had been, and by rather sharply correcting my possible preconceptions of her ('I'm not completely up in the clouds, I'm not *that* old!'), she seems to be countering a discourse on old age that defines 'old' as unworldly. During the very first phase of the interview, I felt that she was reacting to me, that is, to my initial questions and perhaps also to my appearance as a younger woman insinuating that she would feel strange in a school. Even though age is not the initial topic under discussion, meanings of old age are already being processed when I bring the subject more explicitly into the conversation by describing my own experiences of revisiting school. This sharing of my story, however, seems to affect the way in which the interviewee thereafter positions herself; my recognition of my experiences of 'feeling old' make her more comfortable in explicitly defining herself as 'an older person' and her first impressions as 'chaotic'. At the end of the extract, her initial story about her first impressions seems re-storied (Gubrium, 2001), and she now adopts feelings of being old, feelings that she initially distanced herself from (see also Kenyon & Randall, 1999; 2001).

Interactive or collaborative interviews, it is said, may explore topics that are perhaps normally not talked about openly (Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Laslett & Rapoport, 1975). The idea is that a more reciprocal interview conversation makes it easier for the respondent to disclose sensitive information. The same has been argued about self-disclosures on the part of the interviewer (Reinharz & Chase, 2002). To conclude from this that the information provided during a reciprocal conversation is also more 'true' is, however, not obvious, as has been thoroughly discussed (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

In the case above it is not possible to say that the interviewee's last story is more accurate or true than her first. Neither is it possible to claim the opposite: that her first story is more true and unaffected than the one she tells after my comment. Rather than treat her initial story as meaningless, and her restoried story as true (or vice versa), the interview extract indicates the way in which discourses exist. The interviewee may have changed her story because I made it possible, maybe even urged her to. However, it is equally plausible that the story was changed in order to create consensus and a sense of similarity between us. It may also be that she actually had both stories to tell: she felt prepared *and* she experienced chaos, or, she felt young *and* she felt old. The extract suggests, however, that the 'tellability' (Shuman, 2006) of these different stories is context-sensitive, which became even clearer when approximately twenty minutes after the above quote the following happened:

I: It's not easy. I have some problems with my back and the asthma is getting worse. I have asthma although I don't smoke, and that makes it difficult sometimes to...

ASL: I understand.

I: Yes. It's not like... But still, my doctor says that I should take walks anyway, and I do, but sometimes it feels too... [breathes heavily, hand on chest]

[...]

I: But now that we talk about it, the more I think, the less I know.

ASL: How do you mean?

I: I always think of myself as healthy and active... you know.

ASL: Yes, yes.

I: But now I'm sitting here boring you with medical details!

ASL: Well...

I: But I am! And I think, 'Oh my God, am I *that* old?' And then I look at you and I realise that of course I am, but when I realise that I also realise that I have not felt like this, this old, when in school!

ASL: So... in school, age is not...

I: I was just babbling on and on and forgot about the question!

In this quote the interviewee once again changes her story, but now she also offers an explanation about what had happened in the interview; she had just been 'babbling on and forgot about the question'. Since the interview was conducted with an open framework, thus allowing the interviewees to expand on issues that were important to them, I had accepted her detour into medical issues and I even encouraged her to talk about it with nods and follow-up questions. For her, this meant that she reformulated 'the question' to be about these medical issues, and she thereby lost sight of the question about her overall aged experiences of being a class grandparent. The 'new' narrated event positioned her as a person who is interested in and displays physical ailments. This position did not agree with her self-image as a healthy and active class grandparent. However, the quote also reveals how the difference in age between the interviewer and interviewee is used in order to state something about age. The presence of materialised age just seemed to be too obvious to ignore, and was subsequently used in a way that emphasised difference and motivated the interviewee's positioning as old, even though, when thinking about it, this was not an accurate description of her feelings of age in school.

It is essential to consider how the interview situation affects the possibilities for positioning oneself and for creating one's story. The examples above focus on interactional aspects of the interview, but I will now turn to the three resources mentioned above. These resources were primarily institutional in

their character, that is, they comprised ‘preferred discursive regimes’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008:257).<sup>2</sup> I will call them ‘the confessional mode’, ‘life scripts’ and ‘theoretical identifications’.

### **The confessional mode**

The interviewees sometimes entered what may be called a confessional mode, where they suggested that they revealed something that they otherwise did not talk about.<sup>3</sup> The confessional mode seemed to primarily elucidate narratives related to struggles with old-age norms, for example body norms and norms related to participation and physical activity.

I: There are a lot of norms. I admit that I sometimes feel a pressure to... Well, lose weight, be more active.

I: I’m pretty active myself and that’s important to me. And I don’t talk about this a lot. But I think there’s a lot of demands, and... I personally think that as an older person you have earned the right *not* to do anything, right!

A confessional mode has sometimes been described as desirable because of the data it may offer (Douglas, 1985). However, it has also been described as problematic. For example, Crowe has discussed how the interviewer is an ‘authority figure who solicits and passes judgement on the confession’ (1998:342). As suggested by Crowe (1998), the concept of confession implies power and the idea of the interviewer as someone *with* power, which is then exercised *over* the interviewee, subjecting him or her to the form of the interview. In line with this, I was positioned as an authority figure when I was seen as a researcher and interviewer. This relation was established and enforced within the conversation by repeated questions like, ‘Did I answer your question?’, or by the silences that sometimes occurred between one answer and the next question. Viewing such moments in the interviews reflexively, I did not seem to have a clear idea of how to meet the questions, and I sometimes positioned myself as a ‘pundit’ (Gough, 2003:114), thus taking on the role of deciding whether the question was answered satisfactorily or not, while at other times asking the interviewee to be the ‘judge’.

However, a Foucauldian view on power emphasises how power is not a property of a subject or a position, but is constantly acted out in relation to other subjects and positions. For example, my being positioned as *young* in the interviews seemed to alter the power relations because the interviewees could instruct me from a position in which they were older and more experienced. Therefore, age undermined the implicated power relations between the interviewer and interviewee, which paradoxically worked well in relation to the age-related aims of interviewing because it never resulted in a shift in who was being interviewed.

The concept of ‘confession’ implies the idea that the subject is someone who is *revealed* in the act of confessing. A focus on confession sheds light on research-ethical questions where the power imbalance may force people to share things, and thus position themselves in ways that they perhaps would rather not. In this sense, confessions made by me – sometimes as a personal response to the conversation and sometimes as a seemingly conscious rhetorical strategy in order to tease out more confessions from the interviewee (Watson, 2009; Douglas, 1985) – may also be problematic just because they mimic a personal conversation and relation and thereby downplay the formality of the situation. However, Foucault (1980) and Butler (2004) interpret the confession in terms of a constituting process, where the notion of a possible revelation suggests a reliance on the confession as a ritual engendering *the production* of truth. In this view, the self is not *revealed* but *constructed* during the act of confession. An emphasis on this aspect of the confessional mode when, for example, viewing the three quotes above, leads to the conclusion that old age is constructed through and regulated by norms and the interviewees as being sensitive to and partly subordinated to these norms.

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<sup>2</sup> A *total* separation between interactional and institutional regimes is not possible.

<sup>3</sup> As a concept ‘confession’ is problematical because it may imply guilt due to the contexts where the term has primarily been used (the church, the law). However, it simultaneously implies the possibility to be released from guilt once it is spoken. ‘Guilty’ was however not a position that any of the interviewees took up.

The confessional mode tended to tease out positionings that the interviewees otherwise countered. Upon entering a 'confessional mode' the interviewees came forth as individuals who 'confessed' that they did have some problems with age-related norms, although they had perhaps already stated that they did not. Furthermore, what was thereby displayed and perceived as 'confessions' tended not to be questioned but rather seen almost as 'truths' told in confidence. The confessional mode made it possible to display double positionings. On the one hand, the interviewees held on to a description of themselves as not being subjected to the old-age discourses of loss and decline, whereas, on the other, they could 'admit' being negatively affected by some norms when entering the confessional mode. However, it is important to point out the fact that the content of what was related in the confessional mode was often constituted as being highly 'confessionable' and even expected by many people. For example, to not live up to body norms or norms of physical activity may be deeply power-laden, but they are often quite harmless subjects to talk about as being problematic.

### **Life scripts**

'As you'll see, being old is not easy all the time'.

'You might think that something will 'happen' to you as you age, but you're the same, you'll realise that you're the same regardless of how old you get'.

The references to what I could expect to happen later on in my life ('as you'll see', 'as you'll realise'), installed a notion of a life script (Halberstam, 2005) into the interviews. This concept is commonly used to describe how people tend to have similar ways of telling and imagining their lives. For example, there are some milestones that are often present; when and where we are born, when and with whom we married, what we have done for a living, how many children we had. These are examples of milestones that often take a central part when people tell their lives. When it comes to interviewing, life scripts are sometimes inherent in the way researchers ask questions and the way interviewees talk about their lives. In this way, life scripts organise a way of thinking that reproduces itself within the method of interviewing.

Life scripts were structuring the narratives in the interviews, but they were also used to imply differences and similarities between the interviewer and interviewee. Even though we were possibly very different, our differences could be minimised by first explaining them as differences that only had to do with age, and then by subsuming them into the life script in a way that made it clear that such differences lay beyond personal differences; they were made into differences that had to do with 'the passing of time', as one woman expressed it. This was accomplished by seemingly trivial phrases like 'We are all on the road walk, me too and you too' (about a friend who had just died), 'just you wait' (as a comment to a physical frailty I had not experienced) and 'been there, done that' (as a response to something I revealed about myself). Even though the majority of these kinds of comments were accompanied by laughter, what is interesting is their effect on engendering ideas of common life lines and life scripts that formed age-based 'processes of differentiation' (Riach, 2009:365), and that simultaneously created a sense of similarity and even mutual understanding. Age was brought to the fore as something that prevented my understanding, but I was also always enrolled within the time frame of a supposed life script, and was thus expected to gain this insight once I became older.

The notion of a life script, or life line, was also present when the interviewees talked about their participation as class grandparents in school. One woman devoted a large part of the interview to talking about strategies for 'staying young', although, as she put it, 'my youth days have passed', thus using an expression that inferred the life line. She mentioned physical exercise, anti-wrinkle skin cream, green tea and so on as tricks to prevent the effects of ageing. When the same interviewee talked about her voluntary participation as a class grandparent later on in the interview, a slightly different understanding was put forward. The practice of class grandparenting was certainly described in terms of a conservation strategy – a way to 'stay young'. However, her main argument for justifying the class grandparent practice was articulated through the supposed experience of older people. It was the inner qualities that were highlighted as the things that make a class grandparent important; experience was what separated her from the teachers and trainees and the others who worked at the school. She



argued that children need to see and get to know older people, not just because they are expected to lack such contacts, but because older people have something special to offer. When telling me about her class grandparent practice she uses the figure of the life line and allows it to explain the differences between children and older people. The idea of authenticity – that a specific interior should be related to a specific exterior – was the key to this way of thinking; to be credible as a class grandparent you have to accept and express your chronological age, and it was by acting her age that she justified her presence among the children. Instead of the desire that her exterior should reflect her inner youthfulness – something that needs body work and that she talked a lot about earlier in the interview – the focus was on the idea that the body should reflect the experience. This articulation between old age and experience allowed a new older person positioning to be taken up. Suddenly, it became possible to describe wrinkles as a sign of this experience and of the maturity that was supposed to come with it, rather than as a sign of the absence of youth. Maturity was here articulated with a certain phase in the life line. To be mature was thought of as requiring a move away from the position ‘child’. Maturity also implied a kind of stability or at least a movement towards stability (cf. Halberstam, 2005). One woman argued that:

It's important in school that you are your age. You can be however you like, but I think it's silly when old ladies try to be like teenagers. ... It's no good, I think, when old ladies... dye their hair and have the same clothes as their grandchildren.

The fact that the inappropriate clothes are described as *grandchildren's* clothes, suggests that there is not only a time line, but also a genealogical line, which is often, but not necessarily, heterosexually coded as ‘a straight line’.<sup>4</sup> Even though there have been some decisive shifts in heterosexual norms in recent years, according to Ahmed (2006), life scripts, and the life lines they constitute, are still subject to such norms; the cultural imageries about the typical life seem to require that the subject is included in heterosexual systems. Working from such a supposition, what interests Ahmed (2006:83) is not so much how sex, gender and sexual orientation can get ‘out of line’, which of course they can and do, but how practices are kept and maintained ‘in line’. The interview constitutes one arena on which such maintenance work was performed, and not only in relation to privileged notions of gender and sexuality, but also to a variety of possible identifications. In the interviews, the interviewees and I worked together to construct a range of supposedly proper objects: proper old age behaviour, proper resistances against old age norms, proper relations between generations and so on and so forth. The presence of life scripts, which the interviewees alternately followed and negotiated, and our collective use of time lines that extended our potential beings, made the under-communication of differences easier and conditioned the conversation.

### **Theoretical identifications**

Another element that seemed to be of some importance in the interview conversation was related to theory. Theories are stories in themselves, write Kenyon and Randall (1999:2). They are also often privileged stories that raise questions about who is doing the writing (Grenier, 2007). My theoretical thinking was post-structuralist, and, while it would not be accurate to claim that the participants' perspectives on the world were fundamentally different by necessity, we had at least different vocabularies. I disputed certain things that they took for granted (and vice versa), and some of my initial questions had to be reformulated or dismissed completely. What was more distressing, though, was the feeling that my theoretical perspective somehow affected their narratives and produced identities differently.

In viewing identity as a process and the interviews as on-going constructions, I often questioned the interviewees' stories in order for the interviewees to elaborate on their thoughts. However, it soon became clear to me that I did not put the same pressure on everyone, but placed more pressure on the ones with whom I did not agree. I noticed that I tended to accept stories in which the interviewees

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<sup>4</sup> The name ‘class grandparent’ is interesting. It subsumed the pupils and the class grandparents in a life line built on a genealogical approach that emphasises kinship, even though the class grandparent practice did not require that the participants had children or grandchildren.

presented reflexive narratives and subjectivities while I questioned the ones that did not. In this way I took part – as does every researcher – in the same hegemonic struggle as did the informants. When asked to elaborate, the interviewees mostly changed their stories rather than expanded on their views.

I: You know, there are norms about how to behave and...

ASL: Yes, yes, absolutely.

I: But nowadays, I don't think there are as many norms.

ASL: Aren't there? How do you mean?

The quotes above are taken from two different interviews. It is apparent that even though the second interviewee is neither unilaterally contradicted nor seriously challenged, she is nonetheless asked to expand on her view in a way that the first interviewee is not. This was a feature related to ethical implications and a problem that continued into the analyses and writing. I did not describe all of the interviewees on their own terms; instead, I took part indirectly in the struggle to understand the meaning of old age and the class grandparent practice by inscribing all the stories with my own theoretical framework in order to show how the use of a plurality of discourses constitutes identities. The interviewees that held this view on identity had their view confirmed by me, while those with other views did not. In some cases, for example, when one interviewee talked about how she thought 'older women should dress' in order to be 'age-appropriate', her views on ageing could actually be described as 'ageist' from my perspective.

When I realised this, I considered whether a way out of the dilemma could be to choose a theoretical vocabulary that emphasised the activity of the interviewees. I decided that placing the focus on activity would return some of the agency that I felt I had deprived (some of) the interviewees of.

Instead, the result was, in my view, a transfer of responsibility. Placing the focus on the activity of the interviewees seemed in part to under-communicate the conditions that created this activity, as if discourses were features that people are always aware of and can choose freely between. Concepts that are used to emphasise agency easily impose a humanistic discourse (Butler, 1990; Jones, 1997) in which our everyday grammar evokes a subject that is seemingly unaffected by discourse. Having reading a short analytic description about something she had said in an interview, one interviewee e-mailed me. She thanked me for sending her an extract prior to publication, but she was also somewhat anxious. She thought that I had missed important details. What I called 'her strategies' in the analysis were not at all 'her strategies', she wrote. They were the strategies that were 'available to her'.

Of course, there is the possibility that had I written the descriptions from a more hard-core post-structuralist perspective, someone else would have written to me, asking me not to underestimate his or her capacity to understand the situation and to act consciously in relation to it. Despite this obvious possibility, I still had the nagging feeling that such an e-mail would not be written. The critique from the woman who e-mailed me was very verbal. It also seemed very theoretically informed, which possibly had to do with her professional background as a teacher. I found myself reflecting over the likely possibility that the interviewee's theoretical worldview, as well as his or her level of education, could enable but also just as well hinder a critique of the researcher. This kind of reflection over what hinders critique would find support by considering the sometimes complex and difficult theoretical language that post-structural perspectives often bring about.

My argument here is that there is something more to theoretical perspectives than them just being ways for the researcher to understand the empirical material. Agreements and disagreements on the ontological status of things are central to the interview *method*; they affect who is given the challenging follow-up questions and who is not, they help the interviewer and interviewee to bond or not to do so, and they may affect who initiates a discussion over the interpretations with the researcher. Furthermore, the choices of theoretical understanding may not be completely random. If it is the case that some theoretical competences go together with certain experiences of education and social class positions, then it is worthwhile reflecting over the consequences.

## Completing remarks

The interview method has been described by Briggs (2002:911) as a complex interaction that depends on ‘the dynamics of the interview, the social spheres constructed by the responses, and the academic or other domains (theoretical and empirical) that give rise to the project’. Briggs argues that rather than viewing such complexities as contaminations as most qualitative researchers using the method do nowadays, they should be seen as constituting an important source of insights in relation to interview processes and the phenomena that are documented and constituted by these processes. The open interview is always, and necessarily, subject to discourse, where one has to do with the ideals (conscious or not) that help to constitute research. Sjöstedt-Landén (2011) has described how the researcher constantly constitutes the researcher self by living up to, and identifying with, the norms of how fieldwork should be conducted. Such identifications influence not only the choice of method, but also the carrying out of the method, and on the positionings that are made during fieldwork.

Even though the methodological aim of the research project on class grandparents was to construct interviews where the participants could feel free to elaborate on their experiences, it was obvious that this did not always happen. After listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts it was clear that both the interviewer and interviewees were subjected to some central regimes. In this article, I have chosen to look closer at three discursive conditions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008:257) that I found to be central resources in the interviews. I have called these ‘the confessional mode’, ‘life scripts’ and ‘theoretical identifications’. These resources could possibly prove important in any interview, but it seemed as if the research area that focuses on age identities influenced the way the regimes were engendering positionings throughout the interview (cf. Broom, Kelly & Tovey, 2009). Without being explicated during the interviews, the resources were present and structured the positions taken and the things said.

The awareness of what could be called a *confessional mode* may convey important cultural norms. However, confessions may also materialise a detour to comprehensible and well-known norms in the sense that talking about these norms, and enthusiastically admitting that one does not live up to them, makes it easier to bond. In the interviews it was obvious that age-related identities were both used and produced as an effect of such confessions.

It is no news that in narrating our lives we tend to follow structuring *life scripts*. Even when interviewers try to avoid pushing their conversation partners into repeating established life scripts by using open interview questions or themes in order to allow for different stories, they may just choose to repeat them anyway. In the interviews referred to in this paper the time line inherent in most life scripts was used not only to structure the interviewee’s stories but also to communicate differences as well as similarities between interviewer and interviewee. The explanation of experiential differences as simple differences of positions on the time line of life reinforced the cultural expectations that are connected to different ages.

The *theoretical ontology* underpinning the research questions can easily work to affect the researcher’s feelings of recognition. The theoretical starting points of the project often prompt the questions that are asked, but they are also likely to affect the responses given to the answers, and this may be specifically so in conversation-like interviews. Working from the theoretical supposition that identities are continuously constituted and norm-sensitive, old age identities that admitted such a stance were indirectly approved of, while interviewees who explicitly vindicated opposite views were challenged with follow-up questions. Within the context of the interview such challenges also resulted in different positionings. These were however not stable. Sometimes my challenging of the interviewee meant that I became positioned as a pushy researcher. At other times it meant that I was positioned as someone young and unaware.

Problematising age and pointing to the contingent foundations of all (aged) identities authorises specific kinds of foundations, namely, constructionist foundations. As Butler (1995:39) has put it: ‘the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses.’ In the interviews described in this paper it was clear that the construction of certain kinds of identities (norm-sensitive identities, complex and self-reflexive identities) were already given primacy in the interview setting. Some voices and thus identities were positioned as more ‘proper’ than others.

Writing ‘against proper objects’, Butler (1994) draws attention to the imposition of norms that is present when trying to become ‘a proper woman’ (or other ‘proper’ subject positions), and how the struggle for signs of ‘properness’ is central to our everyday practices. However, she also sheds light on how notions of properness are central in the constitution of methodological distinctions between disciplines. As a Swedish ethnologist, I deal with ‘people’, ‘culture’ and (often) ‘everyday practices’, and as a researcher within the broad field of ‘ageing studies’, the notion of ‘people’ is often reduced to people of a certain age, or to notions of old age and ageing. As if these limitations of what constitutes a ‘proper object’ within studies of ageing are not enough, this paper tries to make visible how notions of properness are present in the interview, thus conditioning what is possible to say and do, and contributing to the (always on-going) establishment of foundations that authorise the field of ageing studies as well as of certain ways of telling old age. Even though they did this in different ways, the participants all struggled with and related to their understandings of what it means to be old and their experiences of social norms on the matter. They also related to the age-marked notions of the research project and to a few detected resources that affected the ways age was performed within the interview. In this sense the interviews were in fact constitutive of age.

The rereading of the interview transcripts revealed a continuous oscillation between a constitution of difference on the one hand and an eagerness to tone down these differences on the other. On one level, the three detected resources seemed to offer opposing positions for the interviewer and interviewee, whereas on another level they seemed to furnish the interview with tools that constituted empathy and likeness. The interview is a semi-enclosed space where the desire for consensus and the constitution of a joint normality has been described as a prerequisite for the method as such and a central aspect of how knowledge is produced through it. The resulting emphatic mode is however not only ‘a good thing’ (Watson, 2009). As in all processes where a “we” is established and confirmed, the empathy and understanding between the interviewer and interviewee simultaneously exclude the possibility of positioning oneself differently.

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