

## Age coding – on age-based practices of distinction

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### Abstract

In this article I discuss how conceptions of age create individuals' subjective experiences of old age. I introduce the concept of *age coding* and argue that it should be understood as referring to *practices of distinction that are based on and preserve representations of actions, phenomena, and characteristics as associated with and applicable to demarcated ages*. The article illustrates how age codes 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*. This broad application means that the concept should be understood as a tool for analyzing age relations generally.

Keywords: age coding, age identity, othering, subjective age, categorization, chronological age.

Some years ago I conducted a study on how locations such as age and gender interact during the life course. At that time I interviewed women older than 75 years of age (see Krekula 2006, 2007). I became interested in how the women created self-images and negotiated the boundaries

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around how they could act by referring to phenomena and characteristics as more or less appropriate at different ages. They described feeling like outsiders in contexts where they seemed to be older than what they thought was expected. Depending upon how they related to these conceptions of what is appropriate at different ages, one and the same woman could oscillate between describing herself as old and distancing herself from such an identity. The diversity and contradictions that existed within the characterizations and in how they were used drew my interest toward these processes and to the consequences they had for the women's subjective everyday experiences. I chose to use the term *age coding* to describe these assumptions about activities and phenomena as more or less appropriate at different ages. It was through studies of individuals' experiences of hierarchical relations based on age and gender that the concept of age coding emerged as a useful analytic concept. Simply expressed, I needed the concept to problematize the processes I was observing.

In earlier work I have illustrated these phenomena and offered an initial discussion of the concept (Heikkinen & Krekula 2008; Krekula 2006, 2009; Krekula & Trost 2007). In this article I articulate a theoretical understanding of the age-coding concept and exemplify how it is expressed. Among other things, I show how the concept contributes to new perspectives on age relations and to alternative ways of revealing how space and context create individuals' experiences of old age. This article is an initial contribution to a more systematic use of the concept.

The article consists of two main sections. First, the significance of the concept is discussed and I note that *when* and *why age coding becomes relevant* should be understood in relation to the co-existence of other codings. In the second part of the article, I examine how individuals use age codings and illustrate practices that can involve these distinctions.

### Age Coding – Practices of Distinction

When I refer to age coding, I refer to a specific understanding of this; namely practices of distinction that are based on and preserve representations of actions, phenomena, and characteristics as associated with and applicable to demarcated ages (see also Krekula 2009). The concept draws

attention to how situations and phenomena are presented as more or less appropriate for different age groups. These practices involve the endowment of ages and age-based groups and categories with assumed qualities. They emphasize differences between different ages while simultaneously articulating similarities within age groups.

In other words, age coding is about *practices of distinction* that are grounded in maintaining conceptions of age-based categories on the basis of different qualities. Herein lays a similarity with the concept of stereotypes. An important difference between these concepts, however, is that the age-coding concept entails a broader analytic perspective. It also encompasses the coding of *phenomena*, of situations and activities while the concept of stereotypes addresses 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 research fields that problematize the intersection between social positions it has been argued that individuals “do” engendered age. This takes place within concrete situations where factors like context and space are significant (see, e.g. Crenshaw 1994). Categories such as age and gender are not just done on a discursive level, but also in daily interactions between concrete embodied subjects. Discourses about categories are also constructed materially. For example, children are constructed as a category that is different from other categories through the introduction of institutions like schools and daycares, and through separate spaces in the form of playgrounds within parks (Winter Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). Similarly, an age-limited labor market constitutes the category of “elderly” as those who do not have access to the social arena of the workplace (Krekula 2006). In other words, social relations, vulnerability, and privileged positions are created contextually, concretely, and spatially. Analyses of how social locations are done on a subject level should therefore reveal how individual’s lived experiences are created in situ (Staunæs 2003). The age-coding concept reveals how social categories and identities are negotiated as individuals, spaces, routines, and situational manuscripts are ascribed age-based qualities. As such, it allows for a broader analysis of age relations and their interplay with other hierarchical positions.

The definition of age coding I offer above also encompasses actions. From a theoretical perspective that regards identities as plural and as created in a social context, actions express individuals' identity claims (see, e.g. Burr 1995 for a social constructivist perspective; Stets & Burke 2000; Stryker & Burke 2000 on identity theory, as well as West & Zimmerman 1987 on doing gender perspective). Goffman (1959[1990]) describes the relationship between individuals' identities and actions by arguing that through their actions individuals communicate how they wish to be perceived and what reaction and which rights they expect in return. By suggesting that age coding preserves conceptions of actions as more or less appropriate at different ages, we posit that they are central to those social processes within which individuals negotiate identities. Within these processes the importance of codings emerges primarily through their ability to activate, enforce, and even limit individuals' conceptualization processes. Codings provide a framework for what Appadurai (1996: 4), calls "the work of imagination", that is, the ability to imagine one's self within multiple possible scenarios.

When individuals use codings and categorize or identify themselves with associated age categories, the endowed qualities of these categories are reproduced. Categorizing is thus central to the processes I discuss here, but should not be regarded as synonymous with age coding. The latter also encompasses additional processes such as individuals' *identification with* categories. Moreover, age coding is a broader concept than categorizing as it also involves those practices by which the qualities associated with an age are used as resources and strategies.

Thus, I present age coding as a *practice*; it is something that is done. Discussions about age are not reduced to discourses, phenomena, stereotypes or biases, but are understood as strategies and resources. In this way the age-coding concept directs attention to *action, activities, and processes*. Its analytic perspective reveals how *individuals* and *institutional routines* and *processes* create age-based life circumstances.

The term *age coding* has been used earlier. Among other ways, it has been used to refer to the operationalization of the age variable. Used in this context, the term refers to how researchers categorize study participants into age groups that can be studied and compared. These groups are also named on the basis of their ages. When the term *age coding* is used to

describe the researcher's creation of age categories, it refers to this *sorting* of individuals. In this way it describes a practice of separation. However, the application does not imply that incidences and phenomena are associated with specific ages. Therefore it is not synonymous with the overarching processes that are captured in my use of the concept of age coding. Nevertheless, these operationalizations are related to the processes discussed.

In a discussion of quantitative research methods, Hughes (1995) argues that categorization is the first step toward reproducing the idea of distinctive, different categories and, by extension, to constructing some groups as a norm and others as subordinate. When (age) categories are given a name, they become visible and can therewith be measured quantitatively. They can be ascribed qualities which may be used to explain experiences and observations. Hughes describes analysis as a process by which measures of variables are transformed into facts and knowledge. These results reveal dissimilarities that confirm constructed notions about differences between groups.

By emphasizing that codings (re)create social conceptions of age, the specific age-coding concept I use highlights that actions appearing to be trivial (e.g. a researcher's operationalizations) are not unproblematic handiworks. Even everyday practices are based upon and maintain conceptions of age categories. They are therefore critical to an understanding of how age relations are created.

The term *age coding* has also been used to denote age norms; that is, social norms regarding what is regarded appropriate at different ages (see, e.g. Riedmann 1988). Although I agree with the idea that age coding is apparent in age norms, I think that the concept should not be confused with this particular term. A definition based solely on age norms does not grasp the basic characteristics of age coding or its consequences. Although we must analyze empirical expressions of age coding to see what creates boundaries for individuals as they shape their everyday lives, we must also clarify what lies at the heart of age coding. Therefore I use the term in a different way. As I illustrate below, age coding is also used in practices other than those that are encompassed by the norms concept. A narrow definition, based exclusively on the forms age coding can take, leads to an inadequate description of those situations in which individuals use coding

as a strategy in order to access resources, to expand and justify their actions and to influence the treatment they receive.

### When Age is Ascribed Qualities

Among other ways, age codings emerge in everyday speech about not being able to do things because of one's age. This can involve both positive statements, such as being old and wise, and negative statements such as no longer being curious. Age codings can also be found in descriptions of actions or in explanations for a change in habit. They are also apparent in age-related expressions such as "mutton dressed as lamb," which is used as a derogatory description of women who do not dress themselves in accordance with what is expected for their age (see, e.g. Hockey & James 1993). Common to age codings, regardless of who codes and whether they limit individuals' opportunities or are used by them as a strategy, is the notion that age or age-related categories and groups possess inherent qualities and significance. One and the same action will therefore have different consequences depending upon the perceived age of the one carrying it out.

When age coding takes place the number of years or age-based category is used as though this in and of itself conveys enough information that the audience would understand the meaning of the situation or phenomenon. This use of age gives it a symbolic nature (see, Mead 1934[1967]). Reference to age is assumed *to represent something taken for granted in every situation*. However, *what* is included depends on the specific situation. The symbolic value of age can be compared with the significance that is assigned to gender, whereby biological markers are related to conceptions of some qualities as masculine and others as feminine. As a symbol, age is expected to represent common notions of what age labels comprise. This is not always the case, however. In many instances, it is enough that the information conveyed is generally applicable such that all actors can use it to create adequate meanings in respective situations.

Age codings also involve questions related to how they are created and reproduced. Assumptions about the inherent qualities of a specific age can be maintained with the help of *sanctions* such as shaming when one deviates from age coded expectations. They can also be reproduced as they

are *institutionalized*; they are embedded and materialized in routines and practices or written into rules and legislation. An example is so-called “elderly talk,” which is described as an institutionalized speech form in nursing homes. Similar to language used with small children, it can be characterized by its rhythmic cadence, high pitch and communication of a positive mood (Culbertson & Caporeal 1983, see also, e.g. Hummert et al. 1998; Nelson 2005; Ryan et al. 1995 who use the term “patronizing communication”). Studies show that caregivers use this form of communication because they ascribe poorer cognitive capabilities to the elderly and assume that they – unlike other age categories – prefer this type of speech (Caporeal et al. 1983). When age codings are embedded in material practices, routines, and ordinances they contribute to turn that which is commonly occurring also into an imperative. To use Pickering’s words (2001), norms are maintained as conceptions of how something *is*, are transformed into how it also *should be*.

### Diversity of Social Positions – Diversity of Codings

Categories such as age, gender and class are neither stable nor homogeneous. Since individuals are located into a variety of social positions, each distinction is based on perceived similarities in some aspects and a simultaneous disregard for differences in relation to other aspects. Categories such as old/young, woman/man, Swedish/immigrant, etc. are created in relation to each other, as each others’ counterpoint and/or opposite. Each of these ignores the diversity that lies therein. Constructions of the elderly as a homogenous category conceals, for example, other distinctions like gender, class, ethnicity/race, etc. that exist within the same category. Boundaries for what is included and what is excluded are not given since the individuals’ diversity of social positions means that several categorizations/identifications are possible. As I discuss below, the consequences of this are nonetheless tangible in that they direct the distribution of both *material resources* such as work, income, treatment and care, and *symbolic resources* in the form of, for instance, respect, values, and expectations.

The multiple social positions of individuals mean that it is possible for them to identify themselves with several categories. Each of these offers a



possible source of norms and as such provides several perspectives and alternatives for action. According to Strauss (1959[1997]: 58), this multiplicity of possible ways to identify one's self can be described as "supplementary actors" that "[...] will expect gestures from him during the interaction." The existence of multiple social positions therefore means that the interaction is characterized by an ongoing exchange between identification with some selected characteristics or categories and distinguishing one's self from others. Therefore, age codings should not be understood as the only possible logic of distinction within ongoing interactions. In parallel with age coding, there can exist logics of distinction, such as gender coding, class coding, ethnicity/race coding, etc. For example, the concept of sex coding/gender coding (see, e.g. Bradley 1989) has been used to describe gender segregation processes. In empirical studies the concept has, for example, drawn attention to a gender-segregated labor market. In these cases the term describes the result of the distinction. This application does not focus on practices in the way I do when discussing age coding.

Even if terms for making distinctions are not introduced for all possible categories, the theoretical point of departure should therefore be that the existence of multiple social positions also involves a diversity of codings, which individuals can move between during interactions and use as a toolbox of possible resources to utilize in interactions. As a consequence, some logics of distinction are toned down during interactions while others are accentuated, depending upon the context.

In the course of interaction, the confrontation between the participants' different codings emerges as a question about perspective, wherein the actors' inner perspectives meet with the external perspectives of spectators. A spectator can categorize an individual and expect behavior that is in accordance with norms for that category. However, this does not necessarily mean that the individual herself also acts based on the identification with the same category. This discrepancy between the actors' perspectives is described theoretically in the distinction between sent and received norms (Rommetveit 1955).

Individuals' diversity of intersecting identities, with their accompanying codings, means that we should ask ourselves *when* and *why* age codings become relevant. When do we choose to *emphasize differences between*



*individuals based on age*, rather than accentuating the similarities these individuals share in other respects? I argue here that age coding can be understood as a logic of distinction that can be used in negotiating resources and the contingent actions that different categories allow for. Following from this, one theoretical assumption is that logics of distinction are utilized where they are relevant; that is, when they are useful.

Age coding therefore appears as relevant when resources and possible actions can be distributed and regulated with the help of conceptions about ages. De los Reyes (2005), in her discussion of power and discrimination, similarly suggests that coding emerges when resources and possibilities are limited and exposed to competition. She argues that an increase in the number of working women has contributed to a growth in gender coding. Moreover, notions about national characteristics in the form of “Swedishness” are more articulated in conjunction with increased globalization and mobility among individuals across continents.

Generally speaking, then, the argument points to codings being understood as practices for negotiating power relations. They can be utilized by privileged individuals and by superior groups to defend existing power relations. They can also be used by subordinated groups to challenge these relations. The existence of several possible categorizations/identifications sheds light on the key role played by codings in those processes in which individuals maintain, challenge, and negotiate age-based power relations and thereby create parameters for aging.

## Exercising Age Coding

Age-based distinctions can be involved in different processes. Below, I illustrate how these practices can be used: (1) as *age norms*; (2) to *legitimize, negotiate and regulate symbolic and material resources*; (3) as a *resource in interactions*; and (4) to create *age-based norms and deviance*.

### *Age Coding as Age Norms*

I begin by discussing how age codings appear as age norms and as such how they constitute key dimensions when individuals negotiate and create age identities. I illustrate this with quotations from qualitative data gathered through interviews with women aged 75 years or older. The

interviews with individuals as well as focus groups centered on questions of how identities change over the life course and the importance identifications with age categories have for them when they interpret their scope of action. Their discussions get to the heart of those processes by which individuals negotiate and create subjective experiences of social positions such as gender and age in relation to social discourses on the same categories. They therefore reveal aspects of how individuals “do old age” in interaction and the importance hegemonic conceptions of aging and age have for these performances (for more information see, Krekula 2006, 2007).

The quote below is taken from an interview with a woman who regards work as playing a central role in her life. She never married but had boyfriends and in some cases lived with them. When she describes her current relations with those she calls her boyfriends, she dismisses the thought of a sexual relationship, saying “I am 80 years old for heaven’s sake. Of course one could imagine being interested, but no...”

Her dismissal of intimate relations takes place with reference to age. The self-explanatory way 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 to enable me to understand why such a relationship is not appropriate. It suggests that she orients herself to a norm that says that 80-year-old women are not expected to have physical relationships with men they do not live together with. However, she does not see such relationships as questionable for younger people and has even had such relationships herself earlier. Thus, it is not the relationships that are problematic, but rather the thought of having such relationships at her age. Thus, she regards intimate relations as *an age coded phenomenon*.

By claiming that women her age cannot have intimate relations, the informant suggests that her actions are in accordance with expectations. With the help of age coding she thus rejects possible criticism of her for not engaging in intimate relationships, a criticism that is reportedly levied against young women. In interviews, younger women describe how they strive to be appropriately sexually available yet avoid acting in a manner that would result in them being classified as either loose or asexual (Berg 1999). One interpretation of the quotation above is therefore that the informant, with the aid of age coding, strives both to maintain resources in

the form of acceptance by those around her and to avoid shame (numerous researchers posit that avoidance of shame plays a role in how people shape their actions, see e.g. Heller 1985; Izard 1991; Katz 1999; Lehtinen 1998; Misheva 2000; Scheff 1990; Taylor 1985a, 1985b).

Age coding emerges in the example above as a *category-related norm*. Norms are not strictly social expectations that are maintained with the help of sanctions, but are also integral to “doing identities.” Following this, to say that age coding can constitute age norms also emphasizes that they are central aspects when individuals stage and negotiate age-based identities.

The quotation above reveals two parallel processes involved in negotiations about identity. On the one hand, the informant identifies with an age category; on the other hand, she places this category in relation to notions about what is appropriate for the specific phenomenon, in this case intimate relations. These processes, in which one first identifies with a category and then regards the world from a common perspective and acts in accordance with the norms one interprets as appropriate for the category, are what is referred to as social identities (see, e.g. Hogg et al. 1995; Tajfel 1982, see also Mead 1934[1967]). When the woman quoted acts on the basis of what she feels is appropriate for 80-year-old women, this is then a means of “doing age” for her. When she rejects intimate relations through her concrete actions or uses this as an argument when speaking to me, this is one way for her to carry out her position as an 80-year-old woman. In this case staging of her position as an elderly woman contributes to maintaining the perception of the categories as stable and essential. In this case, the category “elderly women” is created by boundaries around possible relations are drawn.

### *Age Coding as Legitimization, Negotiation, and Regulation of Resources*

Age coding can be used by groups and individuals at all levels to procure resources. By referring to age coding as a means of legitimizing a division of resources, I primarily wish to shed light on how *conceptions of differences between ages are embedded in institutional practices and in rules and routines*. By revealing how power relations are materialized in institutional arrangements, analysis of how asymmetrical relations are maintained is

broadened. Focus is shifted from individuals' intended actions to also include how relations are maintained as codings are embedded in institutional practices.

The most obvious example of how age coding is used to distribute social resources is how we, in Sweden, at the age of 65 (Svensk författningssamling 1998 [Swedish civil code]) can begin to take advantage of retirement benefits or be rejected from the labor force, depending upon how we choose to view the situation. Another example of how age codings legitimize the distribution of resources can be seen in the Swedish housing debate. Tornstam (2008: 38) provides a critical examination of the debate within the housing sector, a debate that suggests that it is problematic that the elderly continue to live in their homes as this is argued to prevent younger people from coming into possession of them. The following quote is extracted by him from a leading national periodical for housing organizations:

A large portion of the country's pensioners still live in their own homes far into their old age. In step with the growing housing shortage, society's need for these pensioners to move is also on the rise. The question is how?

In the quote a division is created between "society" and "pensioners." Because "the pensioners" comprise individuals older than the official retirement age of 65, what they are excluded from here – "society" – are those who are younger than 65. In this context, then, the terms "pensioners" and "society" represent age-based categories for the qualities of "older than 65" and "younger than 65." Without justification the quote presents the needs of younger people for housing as unquestionably involving "the pensioners," i.e. those who are older than 65 years of age, leaving their single family homes. The action of living in a home is therewith constructed as reasonable for those who are younger than 65. Consequently, single family homes are presented as something less intended for persons older than 65. The logic illustrates how phenomena like housing choices and homes can be coded for demarcated ages. Irrespective of whether the implicit point of departure in the quote is that the age group 65+ is assumed to be weak and in need of sheltered housing, or other assumptions about age categories, these codings have consequences. In this case a debate regarding how housing resources

should be distributed, whereby younger people's needs are given precedence, follows.

Within the Swedish laws that regulate support for people with major and lasting disabilities, some benefits appear in different guises depending upon the individual's age. The exact same physical and/or mental status can constitute grounds for granting personal assistance if the application is submitted before turning 65 years old, while after this time it is classified as normal in relation to aging and results in the applicant being awarded home support instead; that is, publicly organized support that in practice is largely carried out in the home. Studies show that these two forms for intervention have different premises for supporting the individual's freedom and independence. In contrast to home support, personal assistance provides more opportunity to have control over the type and form of support received, more continuity with respect to the caregiver, less dependence upon family members, and better opportunities for the individual to participate in activities and in social settings (Hugemark & Wahlström 2004). Consequently, the 65<sup>th</sup> birthday is a fixed breaking point with respect to judging physical disabilities and support that is granted, and therewith for the rights and everyday opportunities individuals are bestowed with. For people younger than 65 years old, the need to participate in society is taken as a given point of departure to qualify for a personal assistant, while the same is not true for those older than 65 years. Participation in society is consequently coded in these law texts and practices as related to individuals younger than 65. Physical and/or mental changes are further coded as natural for those who are older than 65 years old but as a disability for younger age groups. The consequences of these codings are different forms of support and therewith different opportunities to participate in society depending upon age.

### *Age Coding as a Resource in Interactions*

Age coding can also be used as a resource in interactions, as a strategy. In these cases notions regarding age are used in order to gain access to various advantages. Herein lays also a similarity with age coding as a means to legitimize the distribution of resources. By specifically referring to age coding as a resource in interactions, I draw attention to the fact that it is *carried out through interactions between individuals*. One such example is

the Swedish expression “*med ålderns rätt*” (the entitlements of age), which can be used, for example, by an elderly person who would like to jump a queue or receive support for their argument in a discussion.

Groups and organizations can even take advantage of age codings to reinforce their position. One example is lobby organizations for the elderly that encourage their members to bring their walkers and walking sticks to public meetings to gain public sympathy (see, Grenier & Hanley 2007). In other words, preconceived notions of the elderly as weak give them an advantage. Similar processes can even be observed in work places. Professional knowledge that is gained through experience can be valued on par with or as even greater than formal education (see, e.g. Ericson 2009). If knowledge and wisdom in such contexts is coded as associated with old age, this can contribute to elderly persons being expected to be in possession of these experiences to a greater extent than younger colleagues and as a result status will be assigned on the basis of seniority.

A more general example of this application of age coding can be seen in negotiations about identity, in which age coding emerges as *identity strategies*. I will illustrate the latter with the help of statements that relate to identity processes in which individuals do not identify with their age equals, but regard themselves as exemptions from an imagined category “the elderly.” These processes have been empirically described in divisions between chronological age and so-called subjective age (see, e.g. Barak 1987; Kaufman & Elder 2002; Uotinen 1998; Westerhof & Barrett 2005; Westerhof et al. 2003).

The quote I use is drawn from the same empirical material I refer to above. The informant in question is 78 years old and is working full time. This is possible because she runs her own business. She describes herself as happy, fortunate, and full of ideas for the future. When she characterizes herself in the present she describes herself as an “elderly woman” but comments upon this in the following way:

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 finds it difficult to identify with this category.

When she wishes to communicate that she herself is a person who strives after achieving so much, she does so by describing herself as “younger than” her middle-aged daughter-in-law. That is, she describes characteristics such as being active and moving forward with age-related terms. In this way the informant age codes can-do spirit and high ambitions as belonging to middle-age and younger people, while declining physical capacity and limited social roles are coded to older ages. Above, I illustrated age coding of *activities* such as housing choices and of *phenomena* such as intimate relationships. Here it is the *characteristics* such as can-do spirit and being ambitious that are coded.

In the example above, the informant describes herself as possessing *characteristics* that she codes as youthful. At the same time she describes elderly women in general in a way that deviates from this description. They are characterized with qualities that she codes according to the actual chronological age. That is, she makes *two simultaneous age codings*; one with which she claims her own identity, and a second that is used to construct the category of “old women.” With the aid of these double age codings, she presents herself as a deviation from the category elderly women and therefore creates a category that does not include her. Even if she does not identify with the characteristics she codes as related to women her age, she does not use this as a point from which to question the categorization as such. That is, the common chronological age together with her experiences of old age are not used to negotiate what has been assigned to the category of elderly women generally. This would have meant using a single age coding, but one that was consistent with those qualities she claims for her own. This would have involved, for example, her coding high ambitions as related to elderly women.

Here age coding of elderly women is used generally as a backdrop against which the informant positions herself as faring better than her peers. This can be compared with Merton’s (1967) theory of reference groups that describes how an individual’s dissatisfaction in a given situation depends upon which group one compares oneself with. By



using simultaneous and – with respect to content – different age codings in this case, the informant appears to be a positive deviant from a negatively constructed category. On this basis she can expect to reap rewards in the form of recognition and admiration from others. The subjective age she creates by describing herself as younger than both her age peers and her middle-aged daughter-in-law can appear therefore as an identity strategy. With the help of this strategy she can lay claim to identities she values positively, which may result in well-being when she perceives affirmation from others.

In the final example noted above, age coding constitutes *a resource or strategy* that can be used in interactions to procure advantages. There is an important difference between age coding in this case and the previously illustrated example that showed age coding in the form of age norms. When coding has the character of a resource in interactions it is not associated with sanctions, e.g. in the form of shame, but instead with potential gains.

The simultaneous presence of multiple age codings reveals that neither the identity claims of individuals, nor constructions of age categories are given or static. Constructions of age categories should instead be understood as the result of *deploying a particular age coding rather than other possible codings*. Similarly, the staging of an age identity is based on specific age codings while also overlooking others. The concept of age coding shows that it is useful not to take categories and identity claims for granted. Instead, they can be taken as a point of departure for analysis with the aid of questions about how age codings maintain categories/identity claims. Moreover, they reveal those resources, possible actions, and power relations that are negotiated with the help of coding.

### *When Age Coding is Used to Create Age-based Norms and Deviance*

Above, I discuss how age codings can be used by individuals as well as how they can be embedded in formal texts. Here I provide an example of how they can also be entwined in processes in which age-based norms and deviance are created. Based on statements about “being old” I here argue that age coding constitutes the *step at which norms and deviance are created based on age*. More specifically, I note that this takes place through (1)

*dividing individuals into age categories; (2) respective age categories being assigned different qualities; and (3) the situation/activity being coded as more appropriate for some age groups than for others.*

One example of these processes is found in excerpts from an interview with an 87-year-old woman who reports that she feels young when she is in her gymnastics group, but old when she participates in cultural contexts. The latter are activities she has been involved in for most of her life. For her the experience of being old is negative and she describes her own self-image as old as something created in her encounters 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.

The quote illustrates how experiences of being old depend upon the situation. That is, they are not static. Her age identity is based in this case on her perception of herself as older than she thinks one is expected to be in this context. She describes herself as "old" because she experiences that she *deviates from the age coding of the situation*.

When other individuals, i.e. partners in interactions, use age coding, this involves categorizations that weave together apparent markers of difference between the actors with age codings of the actual situation. In the quote above, the informant perceives how her interaction partners code the activities as associated with younger ages (than her own). Even these categorizations, which are made by the counterpart in the interaction, are characterized by ambivalence. The observers, like actors, have multiple positions and they categorize on the basis of each of these and within the framework of the situational script. In Strauss' (1959[1997]: 50) words:

Classifications are not "in" the object; an object gets classified from some perspective. The same object will be differently classified from different perspectives; and categories into which it can be placed are inexhaustible. Different groups of men have characteristic perspectives and so neither name objects identically nor possess exactly equivalent systems of classification.

However, the categorization the informant perceives in the quote above is not only a categorization in the form of cognitive economics, i.e. the facilitation of information processing. It also positions the two counterparts

in the interaction in relation to one another. Using Pickering's (2001) distinction between categories and stereotypes, it can be argued that in the process above, not only does a categorization take place, but the informant also experiences being ascribed a position as "the Other" and that the other actors usurp the position of the norm. Like Strauss above, Pickering claims that categories are pliable and thus not a decisive aspect of individuals' processing of information; they "[...]; should not be regarded as *the* elemental structure of thought..." (Pickering 2001: 3, italics in original). As with categories, stereotypes strive to create order in life, but in contrast to categories they disregard dynamism.

Pickering's distinction between categories and stereotypes provides a valuable contribution to problematizing the flexibility of categories in that it shows how we as the observer can choose to see many positions. In the quote above, the informant can, for example, be categorized as a woman, as Swedish, as an art lover, etc. Depending upon the categorization and which positions are brought forth, similarities and differences between actors will be accentuated. However, through age coding the possibility of traversing between similarities as well as differences is lost and the perspective in the interaction is locked into one or the other. Put another way, with the aid of stereotypes and the taken-for-granted nature of what constitutes age, focus is directed to differences based on age, while possible similarities based on other aspects are toned down. As is apparent in the quote above, this stereotyping not only involves narrowly assigned features. Because the situation at hand is also age coded, this results in the informant feeling deviant because of her age. To perceive that one is ascribed 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)

Even if stereotypes and categories are twin concepts, othering, as Pickering posits, is more sharply defined than stereotypes since it reveals the relational, how We and Them are created as each other's anomaly. Stereotypes focus on the stereotypified and in this way overlook that these processes are based on comparisons, on how the one is perceived as

the other's opposite. The concept "the Other" has the advantage of also bringing attention to those who stereotype and therewith assume a position as subject while simultaneously assigning the Other a role as the deviant. Unveiling how these age codings can be entwined in processes of othering reveals the importance a situation's premises have upon individuals' subjective experiences of age. The concept of age coding reveals that subjective experiences of old age, for example, can be understood as created within a field of power. Someone commandeers the power to define the relationship and the situational manuscript, deeming him or herself as the subject and perceiving the counterpart as "the Other."

### Closing Remarks

In this article I have discussed the concept of age coding and illustrated processes in which codings can play a part. I have shown that age coding can be used by individuals regardless of their age and that they can be written into formal texts and regulations. An important difference between these processes is that age codings, when they are involved in interactions, can be used to negotiate outcomes. However, once they are written into regulatory documents they cease to be an element of negotiations. Rather, they contribute to *maintaining normative assumptions* about age and hierarchical age relations. Overall the argument emphasizes age codings as practices. Although my use of the concept age coding has been presented in studies of how lived experiences of old age are created, the concept should be understood as a tool for *analyzing age relations generally*.

A major point in my argument has been that notions about the given qualities of different ages do not result only in negative consequences for the individual. The consequences of age codings can, as illustrated above, be negative for individuals when they are used as a basis for discrimination. In other contexts practices of distinction provide tools to be used as a strategy by individuals to expand their possible actions or to retain entitlements. While individuals can feel like outsiders and experience shame as a result of being ascribed a position as the Other, they can also experience satisfaction and well-being when age codings contribute to affirming identify claims or to retaining desired resources. Decisive for

what meanings assumptions about age will have is who is in a position to define the actual situation. This points to the necessity of clarifying the levels of analysis we are operating on as we discuss the consequences of varied conceptions of different ages. Reductionist perceptions of aging at a societal level, is not necessarily the only available discourse on age when individuals create meaning in their everyday lives. Nor do generally positive descriptions of aging necessarily mean the absence of limitations. The multiplicity of processes in which age coding is involved instead directs attention to how existing perceptions of age and aging can shift in nature when they are deployed at the individual level; they are transformed, utilized, and exploited. To declare the presence of stereotypes about the elderly or an age norm at the societal level is not the same as saying that this is important for individuals as they negotiate their courses of action and orient themselves in the world (Krekula 2006).

Above, I have illustrated practices in which age coding plays a part. This sheds light on the different research approaches that emerge depending upon whether age is assigned inherent qualities and is accepted as a satisfactory explanation for the state of things or is taken as a point of departure for analysis, i.e. whether the point of departure is the presence of age codings. When age is used as a satisfactory explanation for living conditions, explanations for the circumstances of aging are placed upon the individual. This involves a simultaneous toning down of how social frameworks shape what aging means. It masks the potential for change that exists, the possibilities of creating new parameters for aging. To say, "I am not curious because I am 80-years old" does not show the same potential for change as when one says, "There is no public transportation available near my home that will take me to new arenas where I can be curious." When the explanation for the circumstances of aging is placed on the level of the individual, change and problems are presented as individual concerns rather than as social problems. The concept of age coding redirects attention from the individual to the context in which he/she finds him/herself.

In describing the different practices in which age coding is deployed, I have, among other things, identified the key role that age coding has in identity processes, in the processes in which subjectivity is created. As I have argued, age codings can both maintain and challenge age-based

power relations. As an analytic concept, it can therefore contribute to revealing those practices that challenge age-based counter-normative practices, an area that is little discussed.

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