‘Old’ vs. ‘Little Girl’:
A Discursive Approach to Age Categorization and Morality

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Abstract

This article examines cultural age categorizations and age descriptions as they are put to use and drawn upon in talk. Based on an extensive corpus of interviews with men and women close to their 50th birthday, the author presents and discusses a close analysis of an interview account in which two contrasting age-categorizations are constructed by an interviewee. The analysis focuses on the discursive practices by which contradictory accounts of being both “old” and “a little girl” are constructed and accounted for, and how age categorization in talk works to manage the practical business of identity work. The author argues that adopting a discursive approach to the situated usage of categories not only shows how age talk and age descriptions are put together by participants in interaction, but also, how, by starting with participants’ accounts i.e. the active meaning-making processes of people in interaction, we can analyze how notions of age appropriateness, age norms and local moral orders of age are produced as part of everyday categorization talk. The paper builds on the broader on-going discussion on qualitative language-centered research, and concludes with a discussion on the potential payoff resulting from the cross-fertilization of discursive social psychology and life-course perspectives.
Introduction

"There is no researchable, discussable old age in the manifold of reality unless categories of language inscribe it there." (Green 1993)

In recent years, qualitative research into aging and the life span has witnessed an increasing interest in discursive approaches. The emergence of terms like ‘discursive social gerontology’, ‘sociolinguistic gerontology’ (Coupland, Coupland and Giles 1989; 1991), or ‘lifespan sociolinguistics’ (Coupland, Coupland and Nussbaum 1993) as well as the growing body of literature building on an ethnomethodologically oriented version of social constructionism (e.g. Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt 1994) indicate the variety of approaches that have language use *in situ* at the center of their analytic focus. This emergent emphasis on discourse and everyday language use seems to be “radically re-framing” conventional perspectives on age identity, stages of life, and the mundane and institutional meanings of age (Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt 1994, 183; also Gubrium and Wallace 1990; Holstein 1990). Simultaneously, discursive research into age and the lifespan continues to show how adopting a language-based approach can make a considerable contribution to qualitative gerontology as a research area (e.g. Coupland and Nussbaum 1993).

The notion of ‘discourse’ or ‘discursive perspective’ is used to refer to a variety of theoretical starting points, backgrounds, and analytical emphasis. Within social gerontology, research under the general rubric ‘discursive’, varies from a Foucauldian perspective on discourse as a disciplining, regulating and controlling power (e.g. Katz 1996), to research that builds broadly on social constructionism, and to the analytical and methodological perspectives recently developed and summarized within sociolinguistics and discursive psychology (e.g. Coupland, Coupland and Giles 1991;
Coupland and Nussbaum 1993). A common thread running through discursive research into aging is the wish to break free from the notion of age as a mere unproblematic background variable. Instead, discursive work focuses on how cultural, institutional, and situational meanings of age are worked into being in and through our everyday discursive practices and texts. Starting from this common ground, discursive research into aging can cover a wide range of topics including age identity (Coupland, Coupland and Grainger 1991; Henwood 1993; Shotter 1993; Paoletti 1998; Jolanki et al, in press), institutional discourse (Coupland and Coupland 1998; Holstein 1990; Grainger 1993; Nussbaum 1991; Ylänne-McEwen 1999), discursive production of frailty (Taylor 1992; 1994), intergenerational discourse (Coupland, Coupland and Grainger 1991) infantilisation discourse (Hockey and James 1993), identity functions of reminiscence (Buchanan and Middleton 1995; Middleton and Buchanan 1993), age stereotypes and discourse of ageism (Bodily 1994; Harwood and Giles 1992; Coupland and Coupland 1993), and the discursive and textual production of gerontological knowledge (Green 1993; Hazan 1994; Katz 1996; Raz 1995).

In the present paper, I draw upon some of this recent discursive research on age and aging, and in particular on the extensive theoretical and empirical work within discursive psychology on categorization (Billig 1985; Edwards 1991; 1997; 1998; Potter, Edwards and Wetherell 1993) and identity (Antaki, Condor and Levine 1996; Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Edwards 1997; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Shotter and Gergen 1989). I shall explore the implications of a discursive view into age categorization and age identity by looking at excerpts from a larger corpus of interview data gathered with Finnish men and women close to their 50th birthday. My
task is to produce empirically grounded observations on the communicative practices through which age identity and age categories are applied, modified, and challenged in talk, and to show the kinds of interactional business that is achieved through this definition and re-formulation. Through the analysis of one lengthy excerpt from the talk of an interviewee I call Laura, I hope to show how age categories function as flexible sense-making resources for the participants, and how age identities become locally and interactionally defined and negotiated as the interview unfolds.

Since the label ‘discourse analysis’ is applied in different ways in the social sciences, I will begin by briefly sketching the particular strand of discursive approach referred to in this paper, and by explicating what is meant by discursive psychology. Secondly, I will provide a step-by-step analysis of an excerpt from interview talk to show the intricate ways in which various and contradictory age or stage-of-life categories, such as old vs. little girl, are mobilized and invoked in-and-through talk. Thirdly, I will look more specifically at points in the interview account where the speaker can be heard as attending to the potential implications of her self-description and self-categorization. I will argue that by analyzing the situated usage of categories, we also begin to map out how descriptions and categories in interaction perform moral work, i.e. I will analyze the ways in which notions of age appropriateness and local moral orders of age are produced as part of the categorization talk. The paper concludes with a discussion on the potential payoff resulting from the cross-fertilization of discursive and life-course perspectives.
Theoretical starting points: Discursive psychology and ethnomethodology

The distinguishing features and the theoretical background of discursive psychology (Potter 1997; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Potter and Wetherell 1994; Edwards and Potter 1992; Edwards 1997) developed from sociological studies of scientific knowledge (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984), but has since been strongly influenced by the developments within ethnomethodology, conversation analysis (e.g. Garfinkel 1967; Atkinson and Heritage 1984), and rhetoric (e.g. Billig 1987). During the past 15 years central psychological concepts of remembering, categorization, attitudes, and identity have been reworked from this constructionist-discursive perspective to the extent that “discourse analysis can form the basis of a distinctive discursive psychology” (Potter, Edwards and Wetherell 1993; 384, emphasis added). The key aim in discursive research is to highlight the ways in which language constructs, limits and guides our understanding of our worlds and ourselves, and to examine and map the ways in which people actively use language in their everyday meaning construction. The focus of attention thus shifts from internal psychic or cognitive structures to the relational, interactional and cultural processes between people, i.e. to the action orientation of talk-in-interaction (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Potter, Edwards and Wetherell 1993; see also Nikander 1995; Wooffitt 1993). The strength and wealth of the research within discursive psychology is obvious as it continues to generate discussions across disciplinary boundaries (e.g. Coupland and Nussbaum 1993; Wood and Kroger 1995).

The discursive reworking of psychological concepts of identity and categorization are of central importance to the arguments developed in this paper. My reading of the
data has been influenced by the rich social psychological ‘identity in discourse’
discussion (Antaki, Condor and Levine 1996; Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Edwards
1997; Shotter and Gergen 1989; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995), and by recent
discursive work on categorization (Billig 1985; Edwards 1991; 1997; 1998; Potter,
Edwards and Wetherell 1993). Within these traditions, identity and categorization are
removed from the realm of cognitive processing and placed firmly into the social,
everyday arena. Discursive research, in other words:

“treats talk and texts not as representations of pre-formed cognitions, even
culturally provided ones, but as forms of social action. Categorization is
something we do, in talk, in order to accomplish social actions (persuasion,
blamings, denials, refutations, accusations, etc.). From this perspective, we
would expect language’s ‘recourses’ not to come ready-made from the process
in which people are trying their best to understand the world…but rather, or at
least additionally, to be shaped for their functions in talk, for the business of
doing situated social actions.” (Edwards 1991: 517, emphasis in the original)

Drawing upon the much longer tradition of ethnomethodology and conversation
analysis, and particularly on the notion of membership categorization (Sacks 1972;
1992), discursive psychology has produced research that shows how social categories
operate in conversational interaction, and how identities are negotiated in-and-
through talk. Membership categorization analysis as a strand of ethnomethodology
(for excellent overviews see Edwards 1995; Hester and Eglin 1997a; Hutchby and
Wooffitt 1998; Silverman 1998) directs the analytical attention to the ways in which
members use social categories in their talk, i.e. to the local instances of categorial
ordering work (Hester and Eglin 1997a).

In his early work and lectures, Sacks (1979; 1992) was particularly interested in
people’s ways of using categories in interaction. He introduced the notions of
membership categorization device and category bound activity; and, central to the
concerns of this paper, analyzed some features and uses of the *stage-of-life collection* (Sacks 1972). Membership categories, as defined by Sacks, are classifications or social types that may be used to describe persons. By way of illustration, culturally available resources for the identification and description of people might include ‘politician,’ ‘born-again Christian,’ ‘former convict,’ ‘grandmother of three,’ or ‘young black female.’ By category boundedness Sacks referred to the notion that members of a particular category are expected typically to engage in particular activities (e.g. baby-cry). In addition to activities, categories can be bound to other predicates such as rights, obligations, knowledge, attributes or competencies. Thus, for example, specific competencies or knowledge routinely become attached to professional categories like judge, teacher, or nurse. Sacks also claimed that membership categories may be grouped into collections, that he called *membership categorization devices*. The device ‘family’ includes such categories as mother, father, son, daughter etc., whereas the ‘stage-of-life device’ covers categories like ‘baby’, ‘toddler’, ‘child’, ‘adolescent’, ‘teenager’, ‘young woman’, ‘middle aged man’, and ‘old woman’.

According to Sacks, stage-of-life categories can be called “*positioned categories.*” By positioned Sacks means “that ‘B’ could be said to be higher than ‘A,’ and if ‘B’ is lower than ‘C’ then ‘A’ is lower than ‘C’ etc.” (Sacks 1992, Vol 1, 585). Due to this hierarchical construction of lifetime categories members regard the movement through them as a fact, or as ‘natural progression’ (Atkinson 1980). Thus, stage of life categorization also provides members with *a machinery for making, or attending to positive or negative moral evaluations or judgments*. A ‘child’ can for instance be praised for ‘being mature for her age’ or ‘behaving almost like a grown up’, whereas
for someone who is an ‘adult,’ ‘acting like a baby’, ‘being childish’ or ‘believing in the Easter Bunny’ can be a cause for disapproval or require special explanation. In some situations, however, a child can be judged to be ‘too mature for her years’, and an adult commended for ‘youthful appearance and vigor.’ (see Hester 1998).

Due to the hierarchical and factual nature of age as a progression through an ordered or ‘positioned’ set of categories, the discursive analysis of stage of life categories in talk forms an interesting site for examining moral meanings of age in action. Starting with situated talk, we can look into the local, and practical character of morality as it is put to use in interaction and communication. Discourse of age can, in other words, be approached as a site where different predicates including obligations, knowledge, competencies or attributes are linked to age categories, and, how as a result, local moral orders of lifespan become established and re-enforced in interaction. Starting with the notion of ‘lived morality’ (Bergmann 1998 see also Edwards 1991; Jayysi 1984; 1991; Silverman 1987) - morality as something that is constructed in and through discourse - I attempt to map out how speakers themselves orient to their age descriptions, or age claims as having a moral quality. One of the points I raise is how speakers orient to, or recognize the possibility of being heard as violating the ‘staged nature’ of lifetime categories (Atkinson 1980; Baker 1984).

**The Data: Discussions with fifty-somethings**

The excerpts discussed in this paper are taken from an 850-page corpus of conversational interviews conducted with Finnish men and women close to their 50th birthday. The interviewees were asked questions on how they viewed issues of aging
and the passing of time, in sessions that typically lasted from an hour to two hours. The interviews were semi-structured to the degree that the same set of questions formed a base from which the interview situation could unfold. The interviewer’s role varied from situation to situation, from a more active role (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), to parts where the interviewees talked in length, illustrating their experiences or opinions with numerous anecdotes uninterrupted by the interviewer. The interview data consists of talk during which age is raised as a topic of discussion by the interviewer. The talk is thick with descriptions and categorizations that actively accomplish the interactional business, of ‘being interviewed’ or ‘doing being the interviewer’. The participants’ accounts are thus specially recipient-designed for the specific context. During the interaction, interviewees display cultural common places and knowledge about age, theorize about and organize stage of life categories, and describe and characterize their own actions and characteristics relative to these. The talk is typically generated round anecdotes and stories that include descriptions of people and scenes (e.g. Polanyi 1985). Social types, categories and typical actions and characteristics of people of particular categories form the core of such accounting.

The notion of membership categorization, adopted in this paper, offers an alternative to more traditional analysis of interview data (Baker 1997). Interviews, including the questions put forward by the interviewer can be analyzed as interactional events and the responses treated as accounts, rather than mere reports. This means that participants’ talk is analyzed without commitment to any ‘fact’, ‘truth’ or ‘actual experience’ of which it is an account. Instead all talk is analyzed as action-oriented (e.g. Edwards and Potter 1992, Edwards 1997). This means that the logic of accounting, i.e. the production of sets of criteria for membership in particular
categories or groups, and the ways in which activities and predicates become attached to categories form the focus of analysis.

**Invoking age categories in interview talk**

In the following I will be looking at one lengthy excerpt from an interview with a 50-year-old interviewee called Laura. As we are about to see, Laura’s narration follows a two-fold structure based on a contrastive age-categorization ‘old’ vs. ‘little girl.’ Numerous examples of contrastive use of age categories could be found in the data, but it was the particular structure of Laura’s account that made me want to explore the discursive intricacy through which being both ‘old’ and ‘a little girl’ are managed and accounted for, and to analyze how, despite such apparent contradiction, her narrative is rendered coherent. Towards the end of my analysis, I will show how the interviewee herself also attends to the contradictory and moral nature of her account, and treats parts of it as requiring further explication. This move happens when Laura claims the category ‘little girl’ and can thus be heard as going against the notion of the human life as staged progression, and against the facticity of chronological age (Atkinson 1980).

We join the interview at a point where the interviewer is introducing her research and asking what made the interviewee want to participate. The question is then followed by a lengthy exchange in which the interviewer’s turns are reduced to a minimum. I include the initial introduction and question to my analysis as an integral interactional move (Baker 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 1995) that does more than simply opens up the exchange. These first turns can be seen as cementing the roles of the interactants as ones of interviewer and interviewee. This allocation of roles started before the
actual face-to-face situation, as Laura contacted me after reading a feature on aging in a women’s magazine, that also described the research project and said that I was looking for interviewees. In the first excerpt, the interviewer opens the interaction by referring to the letter she subsequently sent to participants who were willing to be interviewed. I will introduce the longer excerpt in shorter sequences. For reasons of clarity, I have kept the transcription notation to a minimum. Pauses are marked by either a micro pause (.), or by indicating length in seconds (0.4 for example being four tenths of a second). In addition, only emphasis (by underlining), and laughter within speech (laug(h)ter) have been marked. Side arrows (→) in the margin, point to lines of analytic interest.

**Excerpt 1**
(PN: Interviewer; L: Laura)

1. PN: um (1.2) like I think (0.2) I
2. said in the letter (. ) when I sent
3. letters to those of you who
4. contacted me
5. L: mm
6. PN: I think I (. ) mentioned that I
7. was interested in what
8. people in general think or
9. feel about age and aging
10. L: yeah
11. PN: but do you remember w-what
12. initially made you (. ) reply
13. to the feature in (. ) Anna
14. L: It was mainly the fact that
15. I’m (0.4) maybe the fact that
16. this fiftieth birthday is
17. coming so (1.0) so I was like
18. (1.0) uh naturally the idea
19. itself sort of (0.2) like makes
20. you think about age
21. PN: mm
22. L: but I think there’s (. ) I’ve felt
23. that there’s a real big difference
24. ( .) in how I feel about myself at
25. work and how I feel at other times

→
What is noteworthy here is how, while introducing her interests in general terms, the researcher (PN) implicitly places Laura into the larger category of interviewees (lines 2-4: *when I sent letters to those of you who contacted me*). By this the interviewer describes the relationship between herself and Laura as one of an interviewer and an interviewee and the interview situation as a voluntary action on Laura’s part. This opening sequence thus establishes the distribution of rights (to ask questions) and obligations (to provide answers) of the interview situation. The speakers can be heard as “tacitly performing commonsense ‘membership analysis’ upon each other” (Watson and Weinberg 1982; 60), which also includes the distribution of the categories ‘interviewer’ and ‘respondent.’

The interviewer’s way of constructing both the introduction and her initial question is marked by hesitation and pauses (lines 1-2: *mm (1.0) like I think (0.2) I said*, and line 6: *I think I mentioned*) and she introduces her research in general terms as being interested in “*what people in general think or feel about age and aging*” (lines 7-9). Her initial question is formulated to reduce the accountability of the individual, and to afford her own positioning vis-à-vis the topic of aging. The question’s generalized and de-personalized mode is echoed in Laura’s reply (lines 18-20: *naturally the idea itself sort of (0.2) like makes you think about age*). This can be interpreted as doing inter-subjective marking that justifies the question put forward by the interviewer warranting it as a reasonable one, and thus as further establishing the interview situation.

The de-personalized formulation and especially Laura’s self-repair (lines 14-17: *It was mainly the fact that I’m (0.4) the fact that this fiftieth birthday is coming, and*
lines 17-18: so I was like (1.0) naturally the idea itself) can be heard as simultaneously naturalizing Laura’s account and as downgrading any notion of her having a special or personal stake (Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1997) in questions of aging. The way Laura anchors her reasons for wanting to participate in the research into events (line 16: this fiftieth birthday) rather than on herself also works to naturalize her account. Aging and turning fifty are talked about in abstract, as thing-like events that anyone would naturally be interested in talking about, not just Laura. The use of the generalized form “you” that can be heard as “anybody” is a recurrent feature of Laura’s talk and will be discussed further later.

In lines 22-25 Laura introduces a dilemma or contrast between how she feels at work and at other times. By doing this she can be heard as orienting her listener to the contrast case and to the two-fold narration that is to follow. After this Laura’s narration takes up a line of argumentation based on this contrast as she goes on to describe herself at work and outside work. Both accounts specifically illuminate and center on issues and categories of age.

**Work equals ‘old’**

Having introduced the idea of a contrast between how she feels at work and at other times, Laura begins by describing her job in an advertising company. In the following she begins her work account, and marks the fact that she’s going to hold the floor by saying that this “i-is (.) is due to maybe (.) several (.) several things.”

**Excerpt 2: Work = Old**

| 26. | Like here at work I really feel like I’m old and I mean that i-is (.) is due to |
| 27. | Et täällä töissä mää todella tunnen olevani niinku vanha Ja se tota se-e (.) johtuu |
| 28. | uhhuh aha |
| 29. | }
After this, Laura’s narration seems to split into anecdotes and stories, each of which can be heard as providing the listener with more detailed evidence as to why she feels old at work. ‘Feeling old’ (line 27) is treated as accountable and Laura’s narration builds a catalogue of features of her job and of the requirements she is forced to deal with. Her subsequent accounts also build on a variety of categorizations and category contrasts (e.g. Smith 1987, Hester 1998) that work to warrant the initial category entitlement of ‘feeling old at work’. In excerpt 3 below, Laura starts her account by describing the nature of advertising as “a job for the young” (line 33). After this, she goes on to provide the interviewer with a number of anecdotes and descriptions of her work to explicate this claim. The use of different persona in her descriptions is particularly interesting.

**Excerpt 3: Category contrast 1: ‘Young’ - ‘our middle-aged generation’**
(continues from excerpt 2 with lines 31-32 repeated)

31. L: but one of the main reasons
32. of course is that
33. this is a job for the young
34. and (1.4) and it’s like terribly
35. emphasized (.) like
36. from the customers side as
37. as well. Like no matter what
38. old product say well-known
39. coffee brands brands
40. like Juhamokka and
41. Pressa
42. PN: mm
43. L: that are uh (.) I mean coffee
44. is (.) mainly consumed by
45. our middle-aged
46. PN: mm
47. L: generation and they are like (0.2)
48. when you look at (0.2) sales
49. records or consumption records
50. this clearly the case. But but all
51. customers have this fear that
52. once this bunch dies then
53. their brand will die with it.

mut se on et yks pääasia on
tietysti se et tää on
niinkun nuorten ala
ja sitten (1.4) ja tota - sitä hirveesti
sillei korostetaan (.) niinkun
asiakkaittenkin puolelta tehtävissä
Et niinkun mikä tahansa vanha
tuotekin sanotaan ihan siis
kahvimerkkitkin nää tutut
kahvimerkit Juhamokka ja
Pressa
mm
niin tota jota (.) siis kahviahan
(.) käyttää eniten just tää meijän
keski-ikäisten
mm
sukupolvia ja ne on aivan siis (0.2) ku katotaan
niitä (0.2) myyntitilastojakin tai ketä
niitä kuluttajatilastosta niin ne on
on just nää. Muta mut kaikilla
asiakkailta on tää pelko, että
sitten kun tää porukka kuolee
niin sit heidän merkkinsäkin kuolee.
Laura starts by describing how the business she’s a part of is designed to cater for the needs of the young. A detailed account of advertising for coffee is given as an example of how advertising works in general. An interesting category contrast is built between ‘our middle-aged generation’ (lines 44-47) that Laura seems to position herself (and possibly the interviewer) in, and ‘them’ the customers, that, despite everything want to direct all advertising to a young audience (lines 60-61). This type of reference to age-related categories like ‘our middle-aged generation’ has in earlier research been identified as a way of age marking in talk (eg. Coupland, Coupland and Giles 1991). What is analytically interesting here though is not merely spotting markers of age in a simple, lexical sense. The analytic interest is more with the implications the choice of category formulations has in any particular context and on how the categorizations are taken up and further developed in the talk that follows.

For instance, having established the category ‘our middle-aged generation’ and contrasted it with advertising ‘as a job for the young’, Laura then goes on to pursue the contrast. In excerpt 4 she further establishes the contrast by relating what happens when one (belonging to the middle-aged generation) is “placed to do advertising for some twen (.) twenty-five-year-old”. This move is marked by “and then (0.2) when” (line 62 below).

**Excerpt 4: Category contrast 2: Laura - ‘25-30-year old customers’**

62. And then (0.2) when you are in a Ja sitten (0.2) silloin kun
63. situation where you’re placed to tämmöisessä tilanteessa kun sut
64. do advertising for some twen (.) pannaan tekemään mainontaa jollekin
   twenty-five-year-old (.) twenty-
   kaks (.) kaksivoselle (.) kaksivitonen,
Laura seems to orient to some category features of age that serve as evidence that she, as a member of the middle-aged generation, is in fact (too) old. She mobilizes the notion of age difference and sets a contrast between ‘a thirty-something brand manager’ and herself as someone almost twice his age. Note how the chronological age of both the client (the brand manager, line 67), the target group (some twenty-five-year-old, lines 65-66), and Laura (lines 75-77: well maybe not twice his age but anyway clearly 20 years older) are referred to and compared throughout the excerpt. This detailed marking and quantification of age differences functions as a warrant for Laura’s initial claim of feeling old at work (see Potter, Wetherell and Chitty 1991).

Another noteworthy detail is Laura’s use of the impersonal pronoun ‘you’. Instead of saying “when I am placed to do advertising,” Laura uses the de-personalized pronominal form ‘you’. This usage of ‘you’ can be interpreted as a distancing device that functions to underline the idea that although Laura’s account, in part, has a personal tone, she is also describing advertising and the business logic it follows in general. In other words, Laura can be heard as describing her work in terms that make it clear that anyone of Laura’s age would have to face the difficulties of “not being on
top of things” should they find themselves in the situation and the business being
described. The powerful logic of the situations is accentuated by the formulation *then you just (.) realize that* (lines 69-70).

The theme of contrast is further and sharply developed in excerpt 5, where Laura tells an anecdote of a specific situation where she is described, by her boss to a client, as some ten years younger than her age. Laura builds up a contrast between her honest self and her boss who represents the logic of the advertising business.

**Excerpt 5: ‘Young and dynamic’ vs. ‘honestly oneself’**

80. And this maybe makes it (1.0) Ja se ehkä tekee sen että tota (1.0)
81. plus that this place has ways plus että täällä muutenkin jotenkin
82. I remember I remember Mä muistan siis hirveen hyvin
83. very well for example a muistan esimerkiks sellaisen
84. situation that took place tilanteen, joka tapahtu joskus viis
85. five years back that we had vuotta sitten Et meillä oli uus asiakas
86. a new customer (0.2) and my (0.2) tullu ja tota mun esimiehen (.)
87. boss (.) sold him this team. The myi sille niinkun tän tekevän tiimin
88. customer had (0.2) asked for Se asiakas oli (0.2) toivonut
89. a young and dynamic just tällaista nuorekasta otetta
90. approach and I was sold then ja mut myytiin silloin
91. as someone more or less ten just suurin piirtein kymmenen vuotta
→ 92. years younger than my age nuorempana, kun mä olin
93. PN: heh heh
94. L: Like he more or less E(h)t hän suurin piirtein
95. PN: introduced like here we esitteli et nämä nyt nämä
96. PN: yeah
97. L: have these thirty-five-year kolmevitoset tässä
98. PN: mm
99. L: olds here and I was forty-five ja mä olin neljävitonen silloin
100. PN: mm mm
101. L: really at the time. So it felt oikeesti. Ja se tuntu just
102. like you can’t honestly siltä, et sää et voi niinkun rehissesti
103. be yourself olla oma itses
104. (0.4) (0.4)
105. PN: Yeah Joo

Here Laura describes advertising as posing outer demands on her that are in conflict with her inner, honest self. The account is delivered in the form of personal reminiscence (lines 82-83: *I remember I remember very well*) and by using active voicing when describing the words of the boss (lines 94-98: *he more or less*
introduced like here we have these thirty-five-year-olds).¹ Both work to add rhetorical eye-witness credibility to the account. The story can almost be heard as having characters of a spoken morality play, as Laura displays and aligns herself with the need to ‘be honestly oneself,’ whereas her work environment is depicted as forcing her into the dishonesty of trying to pass for someone ten years younger. The display of honesty and the way Laura draws upon her inner feelings gives her account rhetoric persuasiveness, and the account remains unchallenged by the interviewer (cf. Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995 on ‘displays of authenticity’).

In her talk so far, Laura has mobilized several sets of age categories and used them to warrant and justify her claim of feeling old at work. In excerpt 6 Laura mobilizes yet another age-linked category, that of ‘grandmother,’ in an anecdote that further establishes advertising as forcing her towards dishonesty. Her account builds on the theme honest self vs. outer force, and further describes how, at work, Laura has to hide age-related information about herself. The category ‘normal granny’ is invoked through such category-relevant activities, as talking about your grandchildren, an activity Laura cannot engage in this ‘business for the young’.

**Excerpt 6: Category contrast 3: Laura - ‘normal granny’**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>106.</td>
<td>L:</td>
<td>For example things like I haven’t Esimerkiksi ihan sellainenkin et mää en</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107.</td>
<td></td>
<td>really talked (0.4) I think oo kauheesti puhunu (0.4) mä ajattelen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→</td>
<td>108.</td>
<td>that normally grandmothers or ett normaalisti varmaan isoäidit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>109.</td>
<td>grannies are probably real proud tai mummot on hirven ylpetä</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>110.</td>
<td>of their grandchildren but the like lapsenlapsistaan mut et just semmonen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>111.</td>
<td>(.) feeling that here you don’t et (.) semmonen tunne et sää et nyt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>112.</td>
<td>really want to (.) go on and on tällä kauheesti viitsi (.) niillä</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>113.</td>
<td>about a subject like that here revitellä kun (0.2) kun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>114.</td>
<td>cause (0.2) generally people’s (0.2) yleensä ihmisten reaktio on se kun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>115.</td>
<td>reaction to my telling that I mä kerron et mulla on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>116.</td>
<td>have grand children is to lapsenlapsia sit ne kattoo kauheen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>117.</td>
<td>look at me in shock like järkyttynenä ja sanoo että</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>118.</td>
<td>I can’t believe it(h)t ei voi olla totta(h).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>119.</td>
<td>PN: mm mm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summary then, Laura’s ways of organizing her account of her work in advertising is built on institutional work role categories (the boss, the customer, the thirty-something brand manager). The account of her job also seems shot-through with age, as she links these work categories with ‘stage-of-life’ categories and attributes. The story becomes more fine grained as she goes on, starting with a general description of advertising (excerpt 3) and ending with more personal and detailed recollections of particular instances where she has come across age specific requirements or qualities (excerpts 5 and 6). Laura’s whole account thus produces advertising as an institutional setting with its own particular age-specific characteristics and logic (c.f. Baker 1998). The complex layers and category contrasts that Laura builds on top of each other in her account hook and orient to the main idea of advertising’s age dimension, and work to warrant her initial categorization of feeling old at work. Laura’s turns are, in other words, action-oriented to perform certain activities, such as managing her rationality, authenticity, and stake (eg. Edwards 1997, Widdicombe and Woffitt 1995) within the activities and the work scene set up in the talk. The anecdotes she tells are thus not random items she happens to produce for the interviewer, but rather analyzable as links in a chain of an argumentative whole.

Before moving on in the analysis, let us look at how Laura finishes and glosses her whole work narration.

**Excerpt 7**

| 120. | L: | So (0.4) so this feels | Et (0.4) et tää tuntuu |
| 121. |   | funny but somehow I really | hululta mut mulla on todella |
| 122. |   | feel that at work one really | sellainen tunne että jotenkin |
| 123. |   | can’t quite honestly | töissä ei voi ihan rehellisesti |
| 124. |   | (.) be oneself like you should | (.) olla oma itsensä. Et sun pitäis |
| 125. |   | all the time try to be like | koko aika yrittää olla niinkun |
| 126. |   | (0.4) more perky and more | (0.4) paljon pirteempi ja paljon |
| 127. |   | (0.4) everything | (0.4) kaikkee |
| 128. | PN: | mm | mm |
| 129. |   | (0.8) | (0.8) |
| 130. | L: | that you are not | jota ei oo |
This gloss echoes her earlier evaluation (excerpt 5, lines 101-103) by repeating the idea of honesty and dishonesty, and by constructing a contrast between the outer force of the social setting of her work and her inner (honest) self. Some category-bound features and attributes (“more perky and more (0.4) everything,” lines 122-127) are mentioned. On line 130, Laura detaches herself from these attributes and can be heard to simultaneously distance herself from the category ‘young’ in the form that it becomes characterized in this institutional work setting. The excerpt also summarizes the particular occurrences described in the past tense in the story-world as a more persistent feature of Laura’s life in the present time. This notion of summary and closure is marked by “so” in the beginning of the excerpt.

Laura’s second narration: “But then when I think about…”

What we have seen in the analysis so far then, is how Laura describes her work scene largely by mobilizing contrast cases between categories like ‘young’ vs. ‘our middle-aged generation’, herself vs. ‘25-30-year-old customer’, herself vs. a normal granny, and between being ‘honestly oneself’ vs. ‘being forced to be young and dynamic’. All these work to warrant her initial claim of ‘feeling old at work.’ Laura then moves on to the second part of her two-fold narration. In the beginning of the interview Laura oriented her listener to the fact that a second half was to come (I’ve felt that there’s a real big difference (. ) in how I feel about myself at work and how I feel at other times, Excerpt 1, lines 22-25). The idea that what is to follow forms a contrast to her description of her work is, in the following, made clear by a contrast marker (Shiffrin 1987) “But then again I when I (. ) if I think about what its like”.
The second part of her two-part narration describes Laura in settings outside work, when one is “o-on one’s own or let’s say with one’s friends”. Category contrasts are in use again, but this time with a different outcome. In other words, the ‘leading lady’ in the story remains the same, but the categories mobilized and the contrasts drawn follow a different, and, as we are about to see, an increasingly moral logic.

*Excerpt 8: ‘Little girl’ - ‘Turning fifty’*

Laura starts by constructing a discrepancy between life course events, turning fifty in particular, and her inner self. Here a contrast between age categories, of feeling like a ‘little girl’ (line 145) and ‘turning fifty,’ is mentioned for the first time, and Laura expresses disbelief over the passing of time (“This can’t be true, line 142-143, and “I can’t possibly be turni(h)ng fi(h)fty” lines 150-151). The idea of surprise and disbelief is enforced in the story line by the idea of sudden realization as a result of actually thinking about her age (lines 139-140).
Two observations can be made here. First of all, constructing her awareness of age as a specifically timed realization could be interpreted as Laura trying to avoid being heard as someone who is constantly preoccupied with the notion of aging or as someone for whom aging is a personal problem. Constructed in the way it is done here, age, for Laura, becomes something that she has to in fact sit down and specifically think about, and only then come to a realization of it. The other interesting feature of the excerpt, that cannot be explored in detail here, is that Laura’s account of turning fifty, and the interviewers reaction are marked by laughter (lines 151-152). The laughter could be analyzed as orienting to potential identity dangers and as Laura attending to the possible moral threat of being heard as wanting to deny her chronological age. So laughter here is specially recipient designed to offer a candidate interpretation for the way an utterance should be heard, and to mitigate the seriousness of what is being said (for analysis of laughter see Jefferson 1985).

**Morality and talking against age**

Having established that she has difficulty believing she is fifty, Laura goes on to further elaborate the alternative category ‘little girl.’ She draws a contrast between general images of the categories of “someone (0.8) really old and middle aged” and herself. By mobilizing two contrastive categories, and placing herself into the category ‘little girl’, Laura can be heard as talking against her chronological age and against notions of the human life-span as an ordered progression from childhood to adulthood. Simultaneously, Laura can also be heard as attending to the potential implications of her own description. It is at this point in the interview, that Laura’s account can be claimed to gain a moral flavor. Starting with the notion of ‘lived morality’ (Bergmann 1992; 1997; 1998, see also Silverman 1997), we can see how
age becomes locally produced and managed as a sensitive or moral issue as Laura constructs her account. According to Bergmann:

There is not first an embarrassing, delicate, morally dubious event…instead, the delicate…characteristic of an event is constituted by the very act of talking about it cautiously and discreetly. (1992: 154)

I claim then, that in the excerpt below, Laura treats invoking the category ‘little girl’ and describing category bound activities linked to it as morally accountable.

Excerpt 9: ‘Little girl’ as an alternative category

153. L: You get like this totally like 
Siinä tulee niinkun ihan sellainen aivan
crazy feeling (0.2) like then you 
semmonen niinkun hulku tunne (0.2) et sit
154. suddenly start thinking
niinkun yhtäkkii rupeet (0.2) et sit siitä
155. about what fifty is like then
et miikit sitten on viiskyt et sulla
156. you have this picture in your
on niinkun semmoinesta mielikuiva
→ 157. mind of someone (0.8) really
todella jostain semmoinesta (0.8) hyvin
158. old and middle aged and you
vanhasta ja keski-ikäisestä ja sitä ei
159. just don’t put yourself (1.2)
vaan niinkun itsään (1.2)
→ 160. like you can’t place yourself
sä et niinkun osaa sovittaa itteis
161. into that frame.
siitä raamiin.
→ 162. PN: mm
163. mm
164. L: Somehow one is (1.2) I’ve
Että jotenkin sitä on (1.2) mää
165. often (.) like thought that
oon monta kertaa (.) niinkun agelukin
166. have I ever like in a way
sitä et onks mä ikinä et mulla on
→ 167. I’ve this feeling that inside (.)
niinkun tavallaan semmoinen tunne et
168. that in a way inside one is this
sisällä (.) et tavallaan sisimmältään on
→ 169. (0.2) somehow a little girl still
semmonen (0.2) jotkin tyttö vielä
170. PN: mm
171. mm
172. L: that you haven’t necessarily
ettei oo niinkun ihan kasvanu
173. even grown to be a mature
vältämättä aikuiseksi naiseksiseen et
→ 174. woman yet (1.4) like one (0.4)
(1.4) et sitä (0.4) haluu tietyissä
175. wants to sometimes like (.)
asioso niinkun (.) heittäyty silleen
176. behave whimsically and to even
hullutella ja jotkenin (.) olla aika
177. (. ) act childishly and (2.4) and
lapsellinenkin ja (2.4) ja sit huomaa,
→ 178. then you notice that your friends
et vystävät tekee ihan samaa.
179. are doing exactly the same
sä suhtaudut (0.4) kanssaihmisten
180. like I think it’s very typical
sekin on kauheen tyypillistä
181. to you know say that we’re
etteä et sitä niinkun puhutaan et
182. going there and here with
mennään tyttöjen kanssa sinne
183. the girls and but it may
ja tänne Mut voi olla ett
→ 184. well be that seventy-year-
niin tekee seitsemäkymytvuotiaatkin
olds do the same
sanoo niin
→ 185. PN: mm
186. mm
→ 187. L: that no one says that I’m
niin et ei kukaan sano et
188. going with my (.) auntie
menen nyt noitten (.) täystäväni
189. friends some(h)we(h)re
kanssa jo(h)ne(h)kin
190. PN: heh heh
191. L: like the way you like
Et se varmaan siis se miten
192. re-relate (0.4) to people’s
sä suhtaudut (0.4) kanssaihmisten
193. age moves upwards with
ikään niin se varmaan sen oman iän
There are of course, once again, several things going on here, all of which cannot be analyzed in detail. The key contrast put forward, however, is the idea of an age frame that Laura introduces in line 162, and the category - the inner feeling of being - a ‘little girl’ (line 169). Laura draws upon several categories from the stage-of-life membership categorization device, forming a continuum between different stages of maturation: ‘little girl’, ‘mature woman’, ‘middle-aged woman’ and places herself into the category ‘little girl’. ‘Little girl’ is introduced as an alternative category to being fifty and middle-aged, and, having introduced the alternative, Laura treats her claim as requiring further explication.

The specific detail of Laura’s account is once again of interest here. First of all, instead of straightforwardly claiming to be a little girl, she bases her category entitlement on somewhat extensive descriptions of her ‘inner reality’, that is, on her privileged access knowledge of getting like this totally like crazy feeling (lines 153-154) and on having this feeling (line 167). Both work to make claiming the category ‘little girl’ and refusing the category ‘fifty’ more difficult to be contested. Laura seems, in other words, to be attending to the notion that a fifty-year-old speaker claiming the category ‘little girl‘ can be seen as open to potential negative moral judgments. Her utterance “I have this feeling that inside (.) that in a way inside one is this (0.2) somehow a little girl still” works to mitigate the possible hearing of it as a total and outright denial of her actual chronological age. Laura’s category entitlement is built around the notions of feelings, with the notion of inside being emphasized through repetition. The overarching application of the category ‘little girl’ is also
mitigated by the usage of ‘somehow a little girl still’ (line 169) and Laura’s account is thereby rendered difficult to rebut.

Note also, how, on lines 175-176, belonging to the category ‘little girl’ and not being a ‘mature woman’ is first accounted for by reference to such category-bound activities as behaving whimsically and acting childishy. This is followed by a 2.4 second pause, that marks some difficulty within Laura’s account (line 176). After the pause, she can be heard to be attending to notions of age-appropriate behavior such as ‘acting one’s age’ invoked in her previous turn. This is clear in the way she works to suspend the category bound implication of the activities ‘behaving whimsically’ and ‘acting childishy’, by moving, once again, to a generalized mode (lines 173-174: like one (0.4) wants to sometimes like (.) behave whimsically) and in how she anchors the activities to wanting instead of claiming to actually and all the time engage in these activities.

The potential moral threat of claiming membership in the category ‘little girl,’ of not being mature, and of acting in childish and whimsical ways is further played down through generalization (line 177: and then you notice that your friends are doing exactly the same). By referring to the standardized relational pair friend-friend, Laura is invoking same-ageness and similarity, and claims that the behavior described is common among people of her age. This is followed by another example (lines 183-184), where the idea of adopting a label ‘girl’ is described as a more generally common feature of talk, not only among Laura’s friends but possibly among seventy-year-olds as well (lines 182-184: it may well be that seventy-year-olds do the same).

The potential threat of claiming the label of a ‘little girl’ and behaving childishy at
the age of fifty is thus pushed further away through widening the range of categories of people engaging in similar behavior. In the end, this behavior becomes further normalized and generalized by an extreme case formulation "no one says that I’m going with my (.) auntie friends” (lines 186-188).  

In summary then, we can see how Laura’s account gains a particularly moral nature in this excerpt, and how Laura herself attends to the possible moral implications of what is being said and described. In other words Laura is orienting to the staged, or what Sacks (1979; 1992) called positioned, nature of lifetime categories and to the potential judgment of not meeting proper notions of progression and development or suitable behavior. Adopting the category ‘little girl’ at the chronological age of fifty means, that Laura simultaneously orients to manage the facticity of her claims (Nikander 1999) and the expectations for age-appropriateness. The design of her account, and Laura’s usage of generalization in particular, works to pre-empt any potential challenge to the moral status of the speaker. A detailed discursive analysis can thus show us how violations in category use are actually oriented to in talk and how moral orders of age are recognized in interaction (c.f. Silverman 1998).

**Discussion and summary**

This paper has focused on the discursive analysis of age categorization as a situated and on-going feature of language use. One longer narrative was chosen for a step-by-step analysis to show how the interviewee’s argumentation is built throughout a two-fold account, and how she manages conflicting accounts and categorizations of herself. My key claim has been that identity can be viewed as a *discursively achieved process* and talk as an *action-oriented social activity* through which dilemmas of
multiple and conflicting age identities becomes managed and solved. I will conclude by briefly summarizing the key findings of my analysis and by discussing the potential payoff resulting from the cross-fertilization of discursive social psychology and life-course perspectives.

**Age categories and morality in action**

The ethnomethodologically oriented discursive take on categorization starts with the notion of categories as a topic instead of as a recourse for research. Starting with ‘categories-in-talk’ or ‘lived categories’ (Latimer 1997) affords a way of mapping member’s methods of formulating social structures and of examining the ordinary methods of practical reasoning (Hester and Eglin 1997b). In the longer excerpt analyzed here, two contrasting age-categorizations: ‘old’ vs. ‘little girl’ were constructed by the interviewee, Laura. Two separate stages were set up: her work scene and her life outside work. Having set up these stages, Laura populates them with casts of characters, their activities and behavior, and provides the listener with further category contrasts, stories of incidents, circumstances, and evaluations that serve as warrants for the initial categorizations made by her. Her work narration is constructed on the discrepancy between the age-specific requirements of the workplace and Laura’s honest inner self. In the second half of Laura’s narration the inner-outer divide is between a more general image of middle age and, once again what is described as Laura’s inner feeling of age.

A significant feature of Laura’s age-categorization, not raised in the analytic discussion so far, is the gendered nature of her self-categorization in the second part of her account (excerpts 8-10). In the account about her job, age was referred to
through simple age class categories like ‘young’ and ‘old’ or through referral to chronological age, like ‘some twenty-five-year-old’ (lines 65-66 in excerpt 4). In the second part of her narration, specifically gendered notions of the life-span were invoked by claiming to be a ‘little girl’ who hasn’t even grown to be a ‘mature woman’ yet (excerpt 9, lines 171-173). ‘Not having even grown to be a mature woman yet’ also evokes a standard categorical order of an expected progression through a set gendered stages of life.

Age, being young or old, then seems to function in quite different ways in the settings described here. On the work scene, age becomes an objective, quantifiable category, a part of the inner logic of advertising. Laura’s account of work does not easily allow invoking particularly personal or gendered age categories, in fact the work scene is set up as the opposite of such categorization (see excerpt 6). Talking about herself outside work, however, affords the usage of more personalized categorizations of age, and ‘youngness’ is invoked through gendered categories, and personal detail. The contrast between the ways in which being young or old become constructed in the two-fold narration works to add to the rhetorical strength of Laura’s account.

Another significant discursive feature of Laura’s talk is in the ways in which she moves between a personal narrative mode and a generalized mode marked by you or one. In the analysis, I pointed out how this continuous move between personal and general/universal served several different functions in Laura’s talk. First of all, a move to the general served to undermine any specific personal stake the speaker could be heard as having, and thus to fend off potential unfavorable interpretations (excerpts 2 and 5). General descriptions were also used as a normalizing or
generalizing device, especially in parts of the interaction, where the speaker was attending to cultural or moral norms for age appropriate behavior (excerpt 9).

Thirdly, moving between personal and general accounts also tells us something about the interview situation itself. The interviewees, in this study, were approached as members of a certain age group. Age was then made into the topic of talk, and the interview situation became a site for displaying cultural knowledge and logic about the subject matter (Baker 1997), and the descriptions and stories were specially recipient designed to an audience (see Sacks 1992, Vol 1, 580; Polanyi 1985). One central goal of the interviewees’ descriptive practices in any interview situation is to produce themselves as ‘responsible’ and ‘sensible’ persons (see Silverman 1997). This does not mean, however, that the discursive features analyzed here could somehow be seen as distinctively characteristic of ‘interview talk.’ It seems highly implausible that people would have a separate set of communicative competencies set aside for interview use (cf. Widdicome and Woffitt 1995). Instead similar usage of generalization, and contrast structures are undoubtedly also a feature of everyday talk.

The analysis also focused on how moral notions about age or age-appropriate behavior were mobilized. As part of Laura’s account of her work (excerpts 1-7), moral evaluation was displayed through storytelling and through setting up contrast structures between categories. In part Laura’s work account gained features of a morality play, as advertising was described as imposing specific demands on Laura and consequently making her abandon her ‘honest self’ at work. In the second part of Laura’s narration (excerpts 8-9), the morality of her claims was made topical when invoking certain age categories or category-bound activities. The analysis showed
how positioning oneself outside maturity, and describing oneself as behaving childishly consequently raised the need to generalize or mitigate the descriptions made and the need to ward off potential moral readings (excerpt 9). Analyzing interview material through the use of membership categorization analysis proved to offer one way of analyzing morality of age in action, and of viewing the interview as a site where local moral orders of age become produced in and through interaction.

**Discursive psychology and life-course perspectives**

The theoretical approach and the vocabulary of discursive psychology discussed in this paper provide new analytic perspectives into former concepts and topics within the field of qualitative aging research. Starting with people’s accounts, the discursive perspective sensitizes us to the ways in which speakers themselves orient to issues of age and aging, and provides tools for the analysis of people’s active and situated meaning-making processes. Instead of reading data through a ready-made theoretical and analytical template that forces our observations into already existing coding frames and categories chosen by the researcher, discursive analysis starts off with *participants’ orientations and formulations*. This may, in itself, help to bring forward the variability within the description and conceptualization of aging (Dannefer 1988).

The analysis in this paper offers new ways of approaching and thinking about at least three existing research topics within the field of aging research: age-appropriateness, age norms and ‘denial of age.’ From the discursive perspective, age norms, or notions of age-appropriate behavior cease to be understood as situated ‘outside’ interaction and as simply guiding, causing, or explaining certain types of behaviors. Instead, the analysis focuses on how participants themselves attend and orient to the existence of
potential age-specific expectations or evaluations, on how people actively challenge or re-define notions of age-appropriateness in interaction, or justify certain age-specific activities or qualities. Similarly, from a discursive perspective the notion of ‘denial of age’ ceases to be conceptualized as a perceptual-cognitive reality of the speaker. Rather the analysis of discourse starts to distinguish the kinds of *social interactive work* performed through refusing an age category within the specific interactional context at hand, and starts to show how age denial is ‘done’ in talk, and how it can sometimes require extra moral accounting, or considerations.

Instead of forcing social phenomena like aging into research categories at the outset, a discursive approach then means concentrating on how people ‘*do age*’. This can tell us about the ways in which age categories are actively produced, and reproduced through everyday practices, in naturally occurring interaction as well as interview talk. Membership categorization analysis can also help to place categorizational practices of gerontology alongside those of ‘lay’ members, and to show how academic reasoning functions as a professionalized version of membership categorization (see Hester and Eglin 1997b). Analyzing everyday, professional, as well as academic accounts of age, and stage-of-life categories as they are put to use in talk and texts, tells us about participants’ sense-making processes, and about the cultural knowledge and moral logic that informs those processes.

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References:


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1 Finnish language does not have gender specific pronouns like he-she. Translating this part of Laura’s talk into English, I have therefore needed to ‘choose’ a gender for Laura’s boss.

2 According to Pomerantz extreme case formulation are one way of legitimizing claims, one common usage being “to propose that some behaviour is not wrong, or is right, by virtue of its status as frequently occurring or commonly done” (1986, 220).