

A Pilot Study of Birthday Cards as Vignettes: Methodological Reflections on the Elusive Everyday Ageism

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“the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of [our] enquiry do not strike [us] at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck [us]. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.” [Emphasis added] Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953: 50, §129)

Abstract

This study examines the expressions and experiences of everyday ageism among elderly retired people. Remarkably little attention has previously been paid to how elderly people themselves experience everyday ageism. The phenomenon of everyday ageism is both neglected and demanding to identify and analyse. This pilot study uses focus group interviews and birthday card vignettes in order to encourage informants to speak freely and discuss their experiences of attitudes towards ageing. The results of the pilot study show ancillary perceptions, agreements and silences that are characteristic of everyday ageism, and either directly related to the vignettes or to other everyday experiences. It is emphasised that the phenomenon at hand is multifaceted and complex. Methodological implications are discussed in order to shed light on the uncovering of signifiers and intersecting signifiers of everyday ageism. The study demonstrates a particularly useful approach in researching everyday ageism.

Key Words – everyday ageism, age-coding, birthday cards, experiences, vignettes, methodological reflections

1. Introduction

In this article we scrutinise everyday ageism as it emerges in human interaction. Ageism is “an ideology that ascribes certain attributes and abilities to people, young or old, simply because of their age” (Laws 1993, 673). Bytheway, Ward, Holland and Peace (2007, 94) further notes: “everyday ageism does not exist as single events but as a complex of cumulative practices. Specific instances acquire meaning only in relation to the accumulating total of other experiences of everyday ageism. It involves ageist practices that infiltrate everyday life and are part of what is popularly seen as ‘normal’. Analogous to everyday life, everyday ageism is heterogeneous in its manifestations but, at the same time, unified by the constant repetition of particular practices” (*cf.* Bytheway & Ward 2008). Thus, everyday ageism comes in many different forms. Some social phenomena in our everyday life are less obvious than others. As individuals we may be quite easily inclined to identify situations in which we ourselves or other people are discriminated against. However, when it comes to everyday situations that do not clearly conform to the concept of discrimination we are not inclined to the same extent to consider differential treatment as discrimination (Bytheway & Ward 2008).

We view this treatment as something self-evident, and therefore not worthwhile questioning. Neither are we prone to see ourselves as an embodiment of the suppressor. Everyday ageism is something that we do not give much attention to, or dispute. To some extent, ageism is a phenomenon that we all contribute to, and this includes the elderly people themselves. (*cf.* Levy & Banaji 2002).

Consequently, one of the major challenges in researching everyday ageism is how to tease out the experiences of everyday ageism that are not explicitly articulated. This article reports on a pilot-study where individuals in focus groups were encouraged to speak quite freely about vignettes where age is in focus ; namely, birthday cards. The specific aim in this article is to examine some manifest expressions and experiences of everyday ageism among elderly people by using birthday cards as vignettes, and, to discuss the methodological lessons that can be learned from combining focus groups and birthday cards in the research design. In short, we will engage in two concerns, the partial characterisation of everyday ageism and the tracing of it.

Several researchers have pointed out that there is a distinct lack of research in which retired people's voices have been the explicit focus. (Minichello, Browne & Kendig 2000; Stewart 2003; Nelson 2005). Research that has an explicit focus on everyday ageism is rarely carried out, and this scenario is not solely applicable to retired people. However, some literature has been published quite recently by Bytheway *et al.* (2007), Bytheway and Ward (2008) and Snellman (2009; 2011). The common denominator in these publications is that they deal with instances of everyday ageism, and its reappearing practices.

In the process of interpreting the main result the theoretical concept age coding has been applied (Heikkinen & Krekula 2008; Krekula 2009). According to Krekula, the concept *age coding* can be used as an analytical tool for analysing age relations generally. Notably, the concept enables the interpretation of the consequences of age coding in terms of i.e. discrimination (in the negative sense) and/or as strategies for achieving resources. Age coding is defined as “practices of distinction that are based on and preserve representations of actions, phenomena and characteristics as associated with and applicable to demarcated ages” (Krekula 2009: 8). The concept age coding “draws attention to how situations and phenomena are presented as more or less appropriate for different age groups” (2009: 8-9).

2. Methods and material

How does one compile a “culturally appropriate instrument that accurately reflect[s] the community's life experiences” (Willgerodt 2003: 798) for examining the complex issue of everyday ageism in society? Generally, focus group interviews seem to be a fruitful approach in eliciting information concerning everyday issues (Hollander 2004, Warr 2005). Rewarding attempts at using focus group interviews in which elderly people themselves have participated have been made (Stewart 2003). Stewart identified important areas for applied research among retired people, such as “physical/bodily changes, sensory disabilities and deficits in environmental design, ageist attitudes, transportation and the issue of advancing technology” (2003, 84). Inasmuch as manifest themes have been shown earlier, the elusiveness within those themes is not visible in the same way.

The use of vignettes in focus groups is increasingly carried out in social research (Wilkinson 1998). This pilot study reports an attempt to combine focus groups and the use of birthday cards as vignettes as an indirect way of approaching everyday ageism. In support of our argument that birthday cards can serve as effective vignettes we refer a definition of vignettes as “short scenarios in written or pictorial form intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios” (Hill 1997, 177). The six vignette birthday cards that are used in this study were purchased in shops, bookstores and supermarkets in the same regions that the informants live. The choice of cards was based on the criterion that the cards relate to issues of age and ageing in different ways.

There were 31 informants that participated in this study and they were divided into six focus groups. 24 women and seven men participated and each group consisted of four to six people. The informants came from different settings: the majority lived at home, but some in a block of service flats for the elderly. Some of the informants knew each other, whereas others had not been previously acquainted. Three of the focus groups were carried out in Finland (Ostrobothnia region on the west coast of Finland) and three in Sweden (county of Västerbotten in northern Sweden). The informants in both regions were Swedish speaking and the two regions have a common cultural history.

The objective of this sampling procedure was not to compare the two regions and to outline differences, but to provide some assurance of cultural variation in informant background and to test whether the experiences that are discussed are tied to a specific local setting or not. Besides this criterion the informants were selected by means of convenience sampling. The informants were asked to openly discuss the birthday cards in relation to “the attitudes towards ageing”. This was an open invitation to talk about the issue without risking too much personal integrity. The informants were also asked to pose questions to each other and to ask for clarifications if needed. The idea was to get the informants to discuss their experiences, and the forum provided the informants with a platform in which they could discuss attitudes towards ageing. In the analysis that followed we were able to tease out experiences of ageism as well as expressions thereof.

In essence, subsequently we selected phrases in which expressions and experiences emerged in interaction. The quotations that we have selected are instances in which differences of opinion are evident, and which we refer to as ancillary meanings or perception. Some of the quotations can be regarded as typical (appear more than once in a similar kind of phrasing), while others appear only once and thus cannot be considered typical. In the next section we will outline the experiences, expressions and ancillary meanings that were triggered by the same vignette birthday cards. These are instances in everyday life in which meaning is associated with age and/or other relative age-markers such as young, old and elderly.

3. Birthday cards as vignettes and associations of everyday ageism

This section deals with the expressions and experiences that are directly related to the birthday cards. We argue that our method of bringing the empirical material into play pinpoints an important part of the process in which everyday ageism is accomplished. Previously, several researchers have remarked on the impact of birthday cards as a means of disseminating attitudes related to age and ageing in society (Gibson 1993, Bytheway 1995, Gaunt 1998, Palmore 1999, Bearon 2005). Previous research suggests that there is a predominantly negative attitude towards age and ageing in age-related jokes (Palmore 1971, Richman 1977, Davies 1977) and in birthday cards as well (Dillon & Spiess Jones 1981, Demos & Jache 1981, Dodson & Belk 1996). However, the impact on individuals of such humour has not been systematically researched (Demos & Jache 1981). Altogether, these previous studies imply that birthday cards can effectively be used as vignettes.

3.1 Ancillary perceptions of the ageist vignettes

We now turn to the ancillary perceptions that were related to the different cards used in the focus group interview. The message on the front page of one of the birthday cards used in this vignette study is: “The older you become, the more doors open for you!...”. When the card is opened the message continues “...if you know what I mean” and is followed by five open doors that lead to an “old people’s home”, a “pensioners dance”, a “pensioners organisation”, a “hearing central” and a “dental technician” (exhibit 1). The front page features a dressed up green turtle wearing a black hat, carrying a suitcase and knocking on a door with a black umbrella. The fact that the visualised focal figure is a turtle seems to imply a “go slow” attitude. A small helmet-wearing hedgehog seems to be skateboarding at high-speed as it jumps off the pavement, and an insect’s blood-stained remains can be seen on the pavement; it was evidently trampled on by the slow moving turtle. Might this imply that the turtle is overtly rude or unconscious of its actions? It is difficult to tell because the turtle seems to be smiling politely; and, could this imply that the turtle with its “go slow” attitude does not notice what is happening around it?

This is a card in which the image and the message are ascribed to the process of becoming “older”. The informants in the interviews discussed the card’s contents and its intent to make the person you congratulate happy. According to the informants in one of the groups this intent was not accomplished.

Beatrice: [...] I think that one is somewhat degrading, everything

Mia: yes incredibly offensive

Beatrice: therefore it cannot make anyone happy

Group: [overlapping talk]

Mia: that one, are any of these happy [searching among other cards], any cards that are nice here

Exhibit 1.

Other informants interpreted the card differently, and therefore represent an ancillary perception in comparison to the “degrading” and “incredibly offensive” one. They discussed the card (exhibit 1) in the following way when turning the focus back to the card after a short period of silence.

- Ann: what if we were to discuss this pensioner’s home and pensioner’s dance and hearing, I have a hearing aid and I’m pleased with that and I hear better and
- Gunilla: you are not bothered by it
- Ann: I usually say I have had lots of spare parts [laughing] I have prosthesis spectacles and a hearing aid and, I need them all [...] [laughing]
- Gunilla: but you don’t have silicone [breasts] yet [laughing]
- Group: [laughing]
- Ann: [laughing] no I don’t, I have that myself
- Group: [laughing]
- Ann: I try to get that to shrink [laughing]
- Group: [laughing]

The content of the second card (exhibit 2) that was used in the interviews is more of the poetic kind according to some informants. Ancillary perceptions surfaces about this card as well. The front page of the card says, “A happy birthday You are as young as your enthusiasm and as old as your pessimism as young as your faith and as old as your doubts” and the inside of the card continues with the words “But as long as the desire for beauty, joy and love fills you the years can never make you old”. In this card social characteristics are ascribed in relation to the relative age markers young and old. The image consists of blurred sunflowers that are not very colourful but bright in their appearance. Some of the informants discussed the card and its message in a positive manner.

- Nils: [...] you are as young as your enthusiasm, and as old as your pessimism, as young as your faith and as old as your doubts, that's not so bad, but as long as the desire for beauty joy and love fills you the years can never make you old
- Bernice: yes [relieved phrasing]
- Elsa: yes
- Bernice: hallelujah, that is really great
- Nils: [laughing] that is poetically put anyway
- Bernice: yes, is it not, we'll agree to that won't we

Exhibit 2.



Another informant, Edith, is however somewhat more thoughtful about the content of the card. Edith shared her perception of the card when one of the other informants asked her to talk about the content of the card.

- Edith: but the joy in my opinion and love in, different forms fills you then the years can never make you old
- Yvonne: hmm
- Klas: the verse inside was
- Group: [several supporters] yes
- Edith: yes, I think, I can agree to that, but then this, you are as young, as your enthusiasm, why do they put enthusiasm and pessimism against each other, yes I can't really understand that [nervous laugh], you are as young as your enthusiasm and as old as your pessimism, as young as your enthusiasm, and as old as your pessimism, this, as young as your enthusiasm and as old as your pessimism I cannot really understand, as old, are you suddenly old if you doubt something [...]

In the third card, shown in exhibit 3, the text on the front-page states: "Have you ever noticed that when you become older people make fun of it. But when you become really old you are congratulated". The inside of the card reads: "So... CONGRATULATIONS!" This birthday card carries characteristics that can be ascribed to the relative age-markers old and older. The card's image features a woman who seems to be quite young sitting at a bar disk holding a cocktail drink. A pin reading "BIRTHDAY GIRL" is attached to her chest. This card did not provoke many direct responses and ancillary perceptions cannot be shown.

However, what several of the informants did note was that the choice of the word “fun” in the card was incorrect. Bernice described it by saying, “...but I think that, that you are absolutely correct it is the adjective that is wrong [...] fun, it should be, precisely, not interested somewhat down[grading?], does not listen that much”. Another of the few direct responses came from Beatrice who participated in a different group saying:

[short silence] yes this, in my opinion is a truth, what it says here, have you ever noticed that when you get older people make fun of it, maybe it is the younger generations that, and in that case you have to have the courage to [say stop], if your children, say if someone, a new programme, software programme or something, how stupid can you get, yes but then you have to say I am not stupid, notice that I know a lot of things you do not, but would you like to teach me this, therefore you must, you cannot lose your self-esteem in a way and, you have to be aware of the resources you have, of course you do not have the same resources as a, newly graduated, Master of Engineering, you do not have that kind of resources but you have other resources that you need to value, but in this case I think this thing concerning attitudes [...]

Exhibit 3.



This quote explicitly shows that everyday ageism sometimes emerges in interaction with family members. Technology related issues also reappear in several of the groups. The following card (exhibit 4) is an example of what seems to be a relatively simple birthday card, but will, once more, turn out to be perceived in ancillary ways.

The only text written on the card are the very blurred words “Happy” and “Birthday”, which are written in gold lettering. The number 75 is printed in gold on the front cover and a couple of red roses can be seen. On the inside of the card, a bouquet of red roses wrapped in paper can be seen and there are music notes on the paper. The card’s message is not explicitly ascribed meaning; however, as we will see, the number 75 and the image did trigger a process and was ascribed an age-relevant meaning. Some of the informants did not like this kind of card at all, while others did. A few members of one of the interviewed groups began the interview by focusing on the card with the number 75 written on it.

- Gun: this 75 I do not usually [choose] when I send, 75 is fine but sometimes, I do not like it when the number appears on the card
- Ursula: me neither
- Group: [laughing]
- Ursula: it is strange [...] it is because I think if I send it to someone on their 70th or 75th birthday, I do not want to write, I think it sounds so old
- Gun: only on your birthday or something like that
- Yvonne: I also avoid sending cards with numbers
- Ursula: yes, that is relieving to hear [...]

Exhibit 4.



Everyday actions, which are carried out by several informants, emerges in interaction informed solely by a number; a sign of everyday ageism in one of its purest forms. However, other informants experienced this card solely in a positive way. One of the participants suggested that they start with the “least controversial” card. The participants in the groups turned their attention to the card after a short democratic discussion in which all the informants had their say about which card to start with. There seemed to be an agreement that the card in exhibit 4 was the least controversial. Bernice, who held the card in the sequence below, stated that the card did not “...express any feelings...” and then said:

- Bernice: in my opinion this is, yes it is a really nice birthday card, in my opinion it does not contain any prejudice at all
- Nils: no
- Bernice: it does not matter if it says 75 or 25

Nils: no
 Bernice: no, no, it is, it is, it says happy birthday, and that is what it is
 Elsa: yes
 Karl: one can agree [...]

Additionally, there are some alternative ways of relating to and using this vignette card. One informant began by stating that she did not usually send cards with numbers. The informant modified these kinds of cards. She filled the card in with a message she wanted to mediate since "...it is open to the one that gives it to exactly formulate". Another suggested card modification was that it would be acceptable to send if you put money in it. If some of the informants were to receive a card like this they would "expect to find money inside" or "a gift card for something". The card in its original design was not satisfactory; it needed to be re-designed in order to become satisfactory. New satisfactory meaning emerges with the help of a number. However, that which is taken for granted in society is pretty much that retired people are self-sufficient, or that retired people want to be self-sufficient. This raises an unanswered question of how informants actually would react if they received a birthday card containing money instead of a joke.

The message in the fifth vignette card (exhibit 5, not cleared for use by copyright holder) declared "The STATE SEX-INSTITUTE has just left this CHART to HELP people of your age". The inside of the card features a pie chart diagram in which the slices "remember it", "dream about it", "talk about it", "think about it" and finally "do it" can be seen. The card is quite colourful and fuzzy with clearly identifiable female and male gender symbols. This is a card in which characteristics have been ascribed to "age", and also teases out ancillary perceptions among the informants. Some of the informants' interpretations of the sex card were exceptionally negative.

Veronica: [...] what one would think [receive card]
 Cecilia: yes
 Monica: would think what kind of human being
 Cecilia: what kind of idiot sent that [laughing heartily]
 Stig: [laughing] are they playing with me
 Veronica: the state sex institute has sent this to help people in your age, dream of it talk about it think of it remember it, do it the tiniest
 Monica: yes
 Veronica: that is nothing that can be determined regarding us old people
 Cecilia: [laughing]
 Veronica: I would be insulted, no I do not want that one, one does not want to be reminded [short silence]
 Cecilia: yes I almost think that one is very offensive
 Veronica: not directly taboo
 Researcher: no [?] [short silence]
 Veronica: but it feels somewhat insulting, in my opinion
 Group: [agreement among the women] yes [short silence]

The informants of another group, who had returned to the subject of the interview after commenting on a disturbing noise outside, had a somewhat more nuanced and positive standpoint. In comparison to the informants who discussed exhibit 5 as "offensive" and "insulting", the following empirical information is a representation of ancillary perception.

Gunilla: that one was the most dangerous of them all
 Group: [laughing]
 Ann: [laughing] it is like saying that it is something from the past [laughing]
 Group: [laughing]
 Gunilla: [laughing] no, not at all
 Group: [laughing]
 Ann: [laughing] well, some things are [laughing]
 Gunilla: some things, but not all

- Ann: yes, but it is a great card anyhow that one [laughing]
 Gunilla: because life is more spiritual than physical
 Disa: but you wouldn't want to give this to anyone on their birthday [laughing]
 Gunilla: want to and want to, you can't
 Disa: yes, no
 Gunilla: [laughing] it is like the act itself [laughing]
 Disa: they could start yelling at you speaking on the telephone
 Ann: it depends who you give it to, I think I have [laughing] who I could give it to
 Elin: no, listen girls and boys, listen girls and boys I am going to tell you this is nothing to laugh at
 Ann: no
 Elin: it is the most important thing in life, in this

The front page of the final card (exhibit 6, not cleared for use by copyright holder) shows an animal, seemingly a bear of some kind, lifting weights, and this image is accompanied by the text "It is great being young, healthy and virile!!!" The image on the inside of the card infers that the animal has fallen over due to the burden of the heavy weights and the following text accompanies the image: "...can you remember???" CONGRATULATIONS!" The background is a light blue colour, the animal reddish and the text is black. The characteristics of the card are ascribed to the relative age-marker 'young' in this card. One male informant said that he would have no difficulties sending this card to one of his male friends since he found the card "more positive". A female informant in another group also interpreted the card in positive terms.

[...] as I was saying this, I think this is great, this card, it is very fine, and this in addition, there are so many joyful memories we discuss my husband and I [laughing] do you remember when we went there, yes I remember you had that and that dress [laughing]

Similarly to the card in exhibit 3, this card does not trigger that many direct responses. One of the reasons for this might be that one of the informants said that the card expressed "age projection". One of the informants said that "...they forgot something it should read rich as well". Another informant in the same group related to the card by suggesting that it implies "an underlying question if you would want to live your life-journey all over again". A more exhaustive example, which is interpreted as an ancillary perception, came from the informants of a group discussing the contents of the card in a somewhat more diversified manner. Their perceptions of the card's content seems to be more negative.

- Cecilia: [...] this is correct isn't it
 Stig: that is very correct
 Veronica: it is about being virile
 [short silence]
 Cecilia: can you remember
 Veronica: I do not think that one is correct either
 Stig: it is great being young, healthy and virile
 Cecilia: yes but you forgot what it says on the other side
 Stig &
 Cecilia: can you remember
 Monica: hmm
 [short silence]
 Veronica: I don't know I do not really get that one either
 Monica: it suggests that you are so old that you, don't remember being young and, that you are becoming, dementia in a way

Interestingly, the perceptions of the same card that can be clearly categorised as ancillary came from different groups. As the informants within a particular group tended to arrive at a common understanding of a card, it was not easy for the views that did not adhere to the interacted meaning to maintain the focus of attention. In order to direct attention towards other clearly ancillary perceptions there is a need to look for information between groups, that is, if we are to illustrate diametrically opposed perceptions. In other words, the ancillary perceptions were uttered in different groups. This in a way gives us an idea about the views of everyday ageism and the ways in which these are interacted in situations of everyday life.

These ancillary perceptions, that were triggered by the same vignette are also distinct indications of the complexity of ageism (Tornstam 2006).

3.2 Agreement and silences

What we are faced with is a variety of ways of perceiving the images and messages in the birthday cards. It seems that the informants interpreted the contents of a card in a variety of ways and sometimes in a manner that we did not expect. Repeatedly the informants in the different groups negotiated their way to an interacted meaning of the cards' message. It did seem to be important for them to identify some kind of common understanding within a specific group, but obviously there was some space for individual deviation as long as the group agreed on something. The informants sometimes discussed the issue of agreement explicitly.

Holger: we seem to be in agreement
 Group: [laughing]
 Mia: [laughing] yes, these cards, we were meant to, take a standpoint and we agree
 Holger: it is a good idea this
 Mia: yes, it is really good because this is just, blaha blaha in a way
 Holger: hmm [agreement]
 Mia: they should not make these for any generation
 Beatrice [?]: no
 Mia: and definitely not to us [laughing] who are so sensi[tive]
 Ariel: who see through it all
 Mia: who see through it all, in my opinion

As can be seen in a number of the quotations that have been presented and the interview situation, it seems as if individual voices that differed too much from the interacted understanding were stopped. At times, the informants stopped speaking and there was a period of silence, which seems to suggest that the interacted understanding was unchallenged. However, we would like to argue that silence does challenge the common understanding, but it is not responded to in the further discussion. Instead silence triggers other silences, in the same way as a discussion triggers other discussions. Silence is interacted. There are different types of silences in the interviews, and one type is when the informants catch their breath and then continue to discuss the same topic. However, the contents of the following quotation provide an example in which silence does challenge.

Edith: some, well [short silence], yes but then it says congratulations inside anyway, and I mean if one sends that to someone who is 50 then you are somewhat, you are being a little sneaky, haha [ironic laugh] your turning, your turning 30
 Ursula: [laughing]
 Klas: yes if they read the text
 Edith: yes if one reads the text on it, but that exactly, to send it to a young, young girl that would not be a hinder
 [silence, followed by change of subject]

Of course, there is a need to take all kinds of voices as well as the role of silences into consideration when teasing out the expressions and experiences of everyday ageism. In Hyam's words, "the attention given to 'voices' in group discussions (dis)misses meaning-ful silences thereby limiting its political potential" (2004: 105). In other words, even though most of the participants are very active in the current study it is also likely that silences, and/or the interview context in itself, have stopped informants from expressing what they really feel. Problematic silences might have limited the degree to which individual thoughts, feelings and experiences have emerged. Previous research using focus group interviews show that informants continue to reflect over the issues that were taken up even after the interview is completed, sometimes over a long period of time and to a considerable extent (Hollander 2005). A follow-up interview might have shed more light on these problematic and interesting issues, and especially so considering the ancillary perceptions.

Finally, we would like to draw attention to one of the previous quotations in which Ariel claims that they "...see through it all". In a sense the informants engage in counter-hegemonic activity by identifying a meaning beyond the ancillary perceptions. This might be a hint of an approach in which the informants make the claim to counteract everyday ageism in the implicit ways it occurs.

Subsequently, we would like to point out that if attitudes in birthday cards actually are negative (as is most certainly the case regarding several cards, and also shown in previous research) the everyday process does not stop at this point. The attitude in the card is reacted to by subjects who state that they do not appreciate it, provide examples of how they would like it to be, and say how they would like to change it. In the following section we will turn to discussing the methodological remarks and the signifiers of everyday ageism.

4. Methodological reflections

4.1 Signifiers of everyday ageism

As shown above, various kinds of experiences are ascribed to the different vignette birthday cards and age markers, which we this far have chosen to call them. During the interviews the informants also bring up many other instances in which everyday ageism apparently plays a crucial role. However, due to the scope of this article, we cannot do justice to all of these explicitly. The informants provide examples of many different situations and several different areas of society in which everyday ageism seems to be of special importance. To mention a few examples they bring up: the labour market, relations within their own family, technology issues such as the internet, digital cameras, digital boxes and so on. These issues are informative of how everyday ageism is remarkably relevant in many situations.

The most interesting aspect of these situations is that they are all articulated through certain terms. There is an underlying pattern that is common for nearly everything that the informants discuss. The commonness of everyday ageism hides behind its signifiers.

When the informants negotiate their everyday experiences that are inspired by the vignette birthday cards it is particularly common that they ascribe events to some kind of signifier. There are a great many examples of events being ascribed to the following signifiers: “year”, “time”, “month”, “old”, “young”, “age” and so on. Consequently, what happens in the process in which everyday ageism comes into being is that individuals articulate experiences with the help of different types of signifiers (*cf.* Nikander 2009). Recounting the contribution made by Krekula (2009) this can be described as a process of age coding. Krekula writes that “among other ways, age codings emerge in everyday speech” (2009, 12). That is, events are ascribed to signifiers that include some attribute of “time” as a fundamental element; and given meaning. In other words, in the doing of everyday ageism we are faced with the ascription of meaning to age, to time or other signifiers. Referring again to the definition of everyday ageism by Bytheway *et al.* (2007) and the “constant repetition of particular practices”, these reappearing signifiers – or the distinct age codes – are fundamental in our everyday practices. For instance, one of the female informants expresses the following:

I broke my knees anyhow, in [date], and that, how *old* are you [question from health personnel], 72, yes it is osteoarthritis, immediately [emphasis added]

In this quote we clearly see that “age” (as a number) is mentioned as well as another type of signifier; “old”. Thus, everyday ageism is accomplished in many different and repetitive ways. Experiences are not merely ascribed to “age” *per se* or to a specific number, but are also ascribed to other signifiers such as “young” or “old”. Furthermore, whereas the signifier “age” seems to be relatively neutral, other signifiers come equipped with other – sometimes clearly negative – connotations, as in the quote above. Consequently, these signifiers both signify and conceal everyday ageism. By noticing these signifiers, and the conceptions that are ascribed to them we can learn important lessons about the ways in which everyday ageism is accomplished. We can learn about the consequences that follow in the accomplishment of the phenomenon.

4.2 Intersecting signifiers

The informants also related to other orders in everyday life that create social divisions. Gender and the juxtaposition of age signifiers were explicitly referred to by some of the informants. One aspect that was interacted in all of the groups that participated was gendered issues. In one of the groups the fear of crime and sexual abuse was discussed. According to one of the informants, we need to be concerned over, “us pensioners and women especially we can, be, exposed to things”. However, what these “things” are is not explicitly stated. This is one of the instances in which the intersection of age and gender comes into being (Krekula 2007); an instance in which the words “pensioners” and “women” take the role of intersecting signifiers. According to another informant, gender is more important in some instances. no you cannot go and sit in a beer garden in this town and have a beer if you are a lonely lady, then I think the police will come.

However, having a beer if you are an older man seems rather feasible according to this informant. Even though the following event is relatively dissimilar to the previous event, gender as the cause of social division seems to be applicable to men as well according to one of the male informants. One of the recently retired male respondents say:

what odd devilish grandfather that goes out kerb-crawling to the tap house, so no no, I do not think so, no I would not like them saying that, grandfather has become senile he is out kerb-crawling at the pub

In other words, to some extent we are repeatedly dealing with the interplay of signifiers and their interpretations and the ways in which meaning surfaces in these interpretations. Sometimes the interpretations interrelate explicitly with gender.

4.3 A fruitful design in eliciting everyday ageism

As we have pointed out, everyday ageism is a phenomenon that is challenging to tease out. However, benefitting from the combination of focus groups and birthday card vignettes we have been able to grasp expressions and experiences of everyday ageism.

Obviously, but hardly surprising once observed, we are dealing with a highly multifaceted social phenomenon (*cf.* Tornstam 2006, Krekula 2009). Broadly speaking, focus groups in which birthday cards are used as vignettes encourage the informants to unravel the imagined “outside” interaction of sending and receiving a card; share their perceived meaning of the written messages and the illustrated images, share the *in situ* (Krekula 2009, Staunæs 2003) interaction between themselves; describe many previous events in which everyday ageism has a role, and finally, leave out important aspects by choosing – or daring – not to articulate (silences). Clearly, we cannot do justice to all of these, but what we can do is to exemplify everyday ageism, determine how it can be identified and come to terms with how to tease it out. As a customised method the use of focus groups that concentrate on birthday card vignettes has been effective in identifying the internalised phenomenon of everyday ageism. This indirect approach has proved to be a valuable and fruitful way of researching everyday ageism.

The informants provided some imperative evidence that the design of the pilot study does open up the issues of everyday ageism. One of the informants comments that “it’s those things you do not otherwise think of that have come up” and another informant said that “this becomes more and more interesting when you start thinking about it”.

5. Discussion

What we hope to have shown in this article is, firstly, that the informants are very eager to engage in interaction on the topics raised by way of the birthday card vignettes. Sometimes the informants agree on what these artefacts mean, while at other times the informants are quite ambivalent. We have shown that ancillary perceptions do, not surprisingly, exist, but that if we are to observe diametrically opposed perceptions we need to look for those perceptions between different groups, because within each group informants tend to strive for conformity. People tend to agree for the sake of simplicity. We have briefly touched on the interesting issue of silence in combining focus groups and birthday card vignettes in order to highlight everyday ageism. We have also established that we have found important evidence for the existence of such a phenomenon, but we cannot determine the kind of role silence has had in excluding fundamental information.

Secondly, we have discussed the methodological implications that follow from this pilot study. We have shown that everyday ageism can be identified by signifiers such as old, young, time and so on, which have led us to conclude that the phenomenon is made evident in many different ways. In understanding everyday ageism we have accentuated the importance of acknowledging the role of intersecting signifiers, such as gender. Everyday ageism does not exist in isolation and cannot be understood if the other socially dividing orders are not recognised as well (Krekula 2007, Snellman 2009). Finally, we have argued that the usage of focus groups that focus on birthday card vignettes – or perhaps ageist artefacts – is a fruitful approach when teasing out everyday ageism.

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