

“If I Can Offer You Some Advice”: Rapport and Data Collection in Interviews Between Adults of Different Ages

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Reflexively analyzing interactions between myself (young adult woman) and 150 adult research participants, I explore how interviewees responded to the interviewer's perceived age in combination with other social identity categories. Addressing a gap in scholarship on adult-adult interview interactions, this article examines how age gradations, in combination with other axes of similarity or difference, affect researcher-interviewee rapport and data acquisition. Racial similarity, regardless of age, unlocked access to the topic of race/ethnicity. Age intersected with gender such that women within a decade of the woman interviewer's age assumed similarity and were communicative. In interviews with similarly-aged heterosexual men, awareness of sexuality inhibited answers around intimacy. With older interviewees, gender similarity bridged the age chasm with women. In contrast, age and gender difference inspired older men to act paternalistically and give unsolicited advice. Even among adults, interviewees' classification of the interviewer's age contours the interactional dynamic, impacts data acquisition, and reproduces social distinctions.

Keywords: qualitative methodology, symbolic interaction, age, interviewing, intersectionality, reflexivity, gender

A constructivist approach to interviewing maintains that “meaning is not formulated anew, but reflects ... research topics ... biographical particulars, and local ways of orienting to those topics” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:16). Interview participants “constantly [work] to *discern and designate* the recognizable and orderly parameters of experience” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:16, emphasis added). This article builds from this inclination to “discern and designate,” or classify others’ “biographical particulars” according to categories such as age, race, gender, class, and sexuality, by investigating how classification processes endemic to social interaction shape interview encounters and resulting data. The research question is: How do interviewees’

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classification of the interviewer's age in combination with race, gender, class, and sexuality affect the interview context, data collection, and the reproduction of those categories?¹

Many studies and methodological reflections tend to treat age as if it is a simple binary of youth/adult, obscuring age gradations among adults. There is a rich tradition of qualitative research conducted by adults on youth that focuses on youths' agency (Pascoe 2007; Pugh 2009; Thorne 1993), yet nevertheless broad age categories as typically theorized (e.g., youth or adult) belie diversity of ages and experiences therein. As heuristics, categories homogenize, paving the way to assume falsely that life stages such as "old age" are universal (Gubrium and Holstein 2003). By rupturing the homogenizing "adult" category and examining finer age gradations, deeper understanding of how age is embedded in interactions — and produces particular kinds of knowledge — can be achieved.

Scholars debate whether being an "insider" (sharing salient characteristics or membership roles) is the most effective way to conduct research, the assumption being that participants will share greater detail with insiders, or whether being an "outsider" is more useful since outsiders are assumed to be ignorant and require explanation (Adler and Adler 1987; Berger 2015; May 2014; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009; Twine and Warren 2000). Age as a continuous variable complicates insider/outsider debates. Breaking down the monolithic category of "adult" upends the question of whether a researcher is an "insider" or "outsider" with participants, illustrating that most researchers are "at once insiders and outsiders" (Best 2003:907). By jettisoning the overly-simplistic youth/adult dichotomy and taking seriously more granular levels of age similarity and difference, greater detail in how age functions in interactions *among adults* may be ascertained.

This article makes three arguments: First, age gradations beyond the youth/adult binary shape interactions and deserve to be a focal point in reflexive analyses. Second, the acquisition of interview data is qualified by the interviewees' classification of and response to the interviewer's positionality — the set of social categories to which the interviewer belongs. Third, while the researcher usually runs the interview and is the arbiter of data, patterns that transcripts yield, and the final written product (Berger 2015; Hoffmann 2007), interviewees leverage social power as they classify and interact with the researcher. By swiveling analytic attention to how interviewees discern, designate, and engage with the interviewer, we learn how adult respondents act on social categories and contour responses in interviews with adult researchers.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND REFLEXIVITY

Symbolic Interactionism and Intersectionality

Symbolic interactionism holds that people act toward others on the basis of meanings that arise out of social interactions (Blumer 1969). Human interaction is

comprised of a “dual process of indicating to others how to act and of interpreting the indications made by others” (Blumer 1969:10). Social identity theories contend that classification of people according to social categories occurs quickly (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and therefore shapes the process of “defining to others what to do” (Blumer 1969:10). Social categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and age are “objects,” in Herbert Blumer’s (1969:10) sense of the term (“anything that can be indicated ... or referred to”). Meanings of objects are variable, an object having different meanings for different people. Age of an interviewer is a good example: youth may be viewed as a source of bonding for two young people or a cause either of fondness or discomfort for relations between youth and the elderly. This article contributes to symbolic interactionism by analyzing how patterned reactions make age significant in “the hyphen” (Fine 1994) of relations between the interviewer and research respondents.

Blumer’s “dual process” accounts for how people assign meaning-saturated categories to others prior to deciding how to act. One can conjecture that “objects” such as identity characteristics are included in the cognitive evaluation process of “indicating to others how to act” and the corollary postulate of “interpreting the indications made by others” (Blumer 1969:10). Both components of the dual process (indication and interpretation) *presuppose* that people assign social categories to others. Erving Goffman’s (1973) notion of “giving off” impressions (those we have little control over, as opposed to verbal or manipulatable conduct) is useful to consider how physical bodies (agedness, size, phenotype) are “objects” available for interpretation. Labeling — which requires both interpretation and indication — is tantamount to imposing behavioral expectations based on group classifications (Ferguson 2000; Ochoa 2013). Thus, this dual process links cognition and behavior in a way that makes salient social categories.

There is room in symbolic interactionism for social categories, as *preaction information*, to influence expectations and conduct. Blumer (1969:8) writes, “human beings in interacting with one another ... direct their own conduct or handle their situations in terms of what they take into account.” Categories such as age, race, gender, class, and sexuality constitute information that actors may take into account *before* interaction. Social psychologists inform us that “people normally divide people into ingroups and outgroups so that stereotyping is a normal function ... Shortcuts to category-based information processes do not require motivation to account for prejudice. Categorization suffices” (Fiske 2000:304). Cognitive “shortcuts” homogenize inhabitants within categories, a mental maneuver which also applies to interviewing.

An interview is an “interpersonal drama” rooted in a “reality [that] is an ongoing, interpretive accomplishment—a matter of practice” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:16). Recalling that interviewees are tasked with “discern[ing] and designat[ing] ... parameters of experience” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:16), interviewees classify the researcher in order to make sense of the situation and determine how to respond. Interviewees’ interactions with the researcher are thus steeped in category-based responses — outcomes of classification processes.

Intersectionality theory provides a useful framework to further consider the symbolic interactionist concept of identity characteristics as “objects.” Intersectionality refers to “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015:2). By viewing these axes of difference as mutually constitutive systems of power, intersectionality views people as sitting at a nexus where they are endowed with different levels of privilege or oppression on multiple social dimensions.

Despite a nod to age in definitions of intersectionality, the intersectionality approach has “given little attention to the structuring effect of age relations” (Zajicek et al. 2006:175). Age has been theorized thus far by using the rough categories of “youth” and “adult,” a dichotomy that obscures much variation within those expansive terms. Scholarship that accedes to age as an important vector in analysis is limited to aging and gerontology which privileges old age (Krekula 2007) or research carried out by adults who theorize their “adult” position relative to gaining access to “youth culture” (Pascoe 2007). This article fills a gap by problematizing age (Krekula 2007) in adult/adult researcher-interviewee interaction. My analysis adheres to the perspective that “not only are age relations shaped by other inequities but they also influence the very interactions of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class” (Zajicek et al. 2006:192).

In concert with symbolic interactionism’s constructivist approach, gender is a performance, a reestablishment of preexisting social meanings through speech and action. The “doing gender” approach argues that gender is a “routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (West and Zimmerman 1987:125). Highlighting interaction, gender is not a trait, variable, or role but instead “the product of social doings” (West and Zimmerman 1987:129). Similarly, racial identity fundamentally concerns shared social status, not individual characteristics like skin pigmentation: “Race is about an individual’s *relationship* to other people within the society” (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008:7, emphasis added). The word “relationship” here refers to where people’s status position sits relative to others; it also nods to how race affects perception and treatment. Class status is also performed (Bettie 2003). Behavior and style — such as clothing, accent, poise, and strut — inscribe and reveal socioeconomic status. This theoretical groundwork highlighting interaction sets the stage to show how interviewees classified me along dimensions they cared about and then exerted expectations upon me that *constituted me as someone who fit the category* they assigned me.

Although underemphasized in intersectionality, it is useful to view age as produced within social interaction (“doing age”) (Lundgren 2013). An analysis of age, utilized in conjunction with gender, race, and class, augments understanding of social processes and experiences (Gordon 2007; Taft 2007; Utrata 2011). The implications of conducting research within or across age boundaries and resulting age-based connection or conflict are ripe for exploration (Grenier 2007). By deploying a social constructionist approach that “break[s] free from the notion of age as a mere

unproblematic background variable” (Nikander 2000:4), researchers can tackle how speech and practice conjure age as significant. This article argues that attention to age in adult/adult interactions illuminates points of solidarity and distance that impact the interview dynamic and resulting data.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires that researchers “take up the knots of place and biography and ... deconstruct the dualities of power and antipower ... insider and outsider” (Macbeth 2001:38). Reflexivity, where researchers subject the research process and the researcher’s role to analysis, is intended to mitigate power imbalances and engender ethical interactions (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) in qualitative research. While protecting participants from harm is paramount, participants are “hardly inert objects available for the free play of the ethnographer’s desire. They themselves [are], in the act of being, actively interpreting and trying to make meaning of the ethnographer” (Kondo 1990:17). Participants assertively try to make sense of the researcher, meaning-making that has repercussions for how participants interact with the researcher. Kelly Chong (2008:379, *italics added*) underscores the influence of study participants’ notions about the researcher: “the participants can have quite a strong hand in defining the researcher’s role by constructing and imposing their ideas of who the researcher *is* and *should be*.” Holding people “accountable” to identity performance expectations is an interactional mechanism that props up differences and justifies hierarchies (Hollander 2013).

Perceptions of a person’s ascriptive characteristics bear on how that person is treated. The racial background of the researcher, be it symmetrical or asymmetrical to respondents, can unlock access or blind the researcher to pertinent data (May 2014; Twine and Warren 2000; Zavella 1993). Concerning gender, some attributes—listening, affect, docility, and deference—are commonly viewed as feminine, whereas men use interruptions to assert authority and relegate women to listeners (West and Zimmerman 1983). These gendered relations spill over into interviewing when a woman interviews a man: by “listen[ing] attentively [and] occasionally nodding [her] head in a supportive gesture [she does] the ‘work women do’ in conversations with men” (Arendell 1997:356). Interviews embed sexual subtleties too. Although sexuality is less theorized in qualitative research, it permeates interview and field work settings (Mazzei and O’Brien 2009; McClure 2007).

Even as scholars recognize the importance of greater transparency in research, the literature on reflexivity remains underdeveloped with respect to age in adult-adult exchanges. For those engaged in reflexivity, most researchers focus on one or two axes of difference, typically race or gender. This article probes the “relations between” researcher and respondent (“working the hyphen” [Fine 1994]) to better comprehend the relationship between age-positionality and interaction. Heeding the call for “radical reflexivity that interrogates the varied points of difference that intersect in our own lives and those we study” (Best 2007:9), this article considers multiple

dimensions of difference simultaneously and highlights how age structures interactions among adults.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on methodological reflections deriving from two interview-based research projects. Both projects concerned race (Mexican Americans for the first study and Latinos for the second study), migration, and family. In the first project, from 2004 to 2005, I conducted sixty-seven interviews with twenty-nine three-generation Mexican American families in California (eight youth under age twenty-one excluded here). The research investigated how racial/ethnic identity is transmitted or transformed across multiple generations in a family. In the second project, during 2010, I conducted 109 interviews with forty-nine couples in California and Kansas where at least one partner self-identified as Latino/a (I interviewed both partners in most cases) and a subset of their children (eighteen youth under age twenty-one excluded here). In both research projects, I recruited through professional organizations that serve the Latino community, high schools, Catholic churches, and professional contacts. Compiling the data after restricting age to twenty-one years and older, this article is based on interviews with 150 adults ranging in age from twenty-one to eighty-eight years old. Seventy-seven participants are women and seventy-three are men. Of the 150 adults, 129 claimed a Latino/a or mixed Latino/a identity, 15 identified as non-Hispanic white, and 6 identified as non-Latino/a minority (Asian, Native American, or African American). All participants but one self-identified gay man referred to heterosexual tendencies. Interviews were conducted in a place chosen by the interviewee, usually their home, workplace, or a coffee shop. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and three hours, most taking approximately one and a half hours. I conducted most of the interviews one-on-one. All names are pseudonyms.

I employed in-depth, semi-structured life history interviews. The first project was devoted to racial/ethnic identity, cultural practices, and experiences in the family and other social institutions. The second project concerned how and why people choose their lifetime partners and the consequences of racial endogamy and exogamy on cultural practice and understandings of race. As I aimed to get detail about life experiences and emotions, interviews were an appropriate method for they procure meanings, details, and storytelling, and allow for follow-up questions (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Weiss 1994).

I wrote field notes after every interview, capturing a physical description of the respondent, nonverbal responses, details of their home and neighborhood, our interview dynamic, and my reaction to the interview (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). The self-reflexive components of the field notes helped me see that the interviewer-interviewee dynamic was patterned. In reviewing my field notes, it became clear that similarities and differences along the lines of age, race, gender, class, and sexuality shaped the interaction and type of data revealed. As I did not

outright ask respondents which social categories they assessed me to belong to, I must rely on discourse and nonverbal cues to ascertain interviewees' classifications of me. In effort to support my analysis, I use quotations that best illustrate how interpretations of me (and my interpretations of respondents) affected the interview dynamic. I used qualitative data analysis software (Dedoose) and coded all data comprehensively. I coded when and how interviewees referred to me directly, the tone of the interview, my own reactions, and off-tape conversation pertinent to how interviewees attempted to learn more about me, responded to me, asked a favor of me, or offered advice. Field notes and verbatim interview transcripts are the basis of the findings section, which explores the interview dynamic and its implication for data collection.

FINDINGS: A LATE TWENTIES/EARLY THIRTIES HETEROSEXUAL LATINA WOMAN INTERVIEWER IN THE FIELD

In my predominately Latino sample, age intersects with gender to render patterns in interactions, interview challenges, and resulting data. Recalling that the interviewer was a woman in her late twenties/early thirties, when age and gender of interviewer and interviewee matched, young women interviewees assumed comradery which led them to be forthcoming. When age matched but gender varied (interviewees were young men), heteronormativity infiltrated the interviews such that awareness of sexuality constricted data around intimacy. Thus, despite age similarity, gender and heteronormative assumptions bear on interview tone and quality. In terms of interviewing across age gaps, older people were inclined to *teach me* from their life experience that was decades longer than mine. Yet, gender fractured how older men and women interacted with me. When interviewing older women, gender solidarity crosscut age such that our gender alignment bridged age difference. By contrast, older men interviewees exhibited paternalism with me by offering unsolicited advice, particularly around marriage and family. When additional differences beyond age and gender widened the social chasm between me and interviewees (such as class, education, or literacy), interviewees offered less information.

This findings section comprises two subsections. The first subsection uses Blumer's "dual process" as theoretical scaffolding. I show how interviewees "interpreted" me and then "indicated" to me "how to act" through their speech and action that refracted their assessment of me (Blumer 1969:10). The second subsection discusses the implications of classifications for rapport and data collection.

Interviewees Classifying the Interviewer: Marital Expectations, Faux (Grand)Daughter Status, and Awareness of Sexuality

People "define a person to himself" [sic] (Blumer 1969:12) through category assignment, tailored interactions, and accountability for behavior befitting those classifications. I was constituted as a young adult heterosexual Latina woman, these

statuses taking on significance when people attached meanings to them (Omi and Winant 1994). Expectations around heterosexual marriage for a Latina woman in her late twenties or early thirties affected how older men responded to me, my unmarried status fomenting unsolicited advice. Accustomed to seeing marriage occurring earlier, older men respondents enforced a gendered, racialized, and age-oriented expectation that a Mexican American woman should be married by thirty. For example, during our after-interview conversation, eighty-four-year-old Juan Ramos asked if I was married. He sounded shocked when I stated “no.” He retorted, “What?! No?! But you are so pretty!” Juan was confounded when I asserted my unmarried status — a statement which felt like a confession due to the norm violation my marital status was making in his eyes.

Juan beseeched me to return for a visit; I left unsure if this was an uncalculated invitation or a plot to get me in the company of his twenty-eight-year-old (my age at the time) grandson, Moises, whom I had interviewed earlier. After our interview, Moises looked at me and chuckled. I asked why he was amused and he said, “Well, I was going to ask you when I can see you again.” He bowed and shook his head in mild embarrassment. Shrugging his shoulders he said, “I don’t know, that’s just what you say to a woman.” Given his sudden timidity after this verbal flub, I surmised that he found me attractive, “casting me as a potential sex object” (Warren and Rasmussen 1977:350) and wanted to go out on a date. This desire is best understood as an outgrowth of the interview dynamic wherein I inquired about him and attentively listened, interviewing mimicking a date-like scenario (Arendell 1997). When the interviewer is a woman in a cross-sex interview, gender expectations are accentuated: as the interviewee, the man is the chief speaker and the woman is expected to be sensitive, elicit emotion from the man, and respond to him interestedly (Arendell 1997). Moises played out this seduction script with a woman he typecast as in his league in terms of age, heterosexuality, and racial endogamy.

Sixty-six-year-old Lee Morelos also enforced intersecting age, race, gender, and sexuality norms by endeavoring to remedy my marital status. Unlike Juan, Lee was not surprised by my unmarried status because he was a businessman accustomed to seeing women delay marriage to pursue education or a profession. In true “doing gender” style whereby “participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987:127), Lee paternalistically offered what he viewed as age-appropriate gender-constructing (and gender-constricting) advice. Lee was “doing age” (Lundgren 2013) in his performance of a wise senior well-positioned to dole out advice. Lee asked near the end of the interview, “Have you ever been married?” I said “no.” Lee remarked, “Well, in my day, people got married young ... Now it seems like if a woman wants a career she puts off having a husband and having children. What has been your experience?” Upon providing a brief answer that flagged higher education and not yet finding a love match, Lee offered unsolicited counsel:

If I can offer you some advice: stay choosy. You also don’t want to marry someone who is not as educated as you. You don’t want him to always have that sense of

insecurity with you. So you shouldn't marry a farmhand — not that they're not good people — but he wouldn't be able to understand you and you are going to need that. So don't marry down ... You want someone who is at your level and can be there with you and understand you. Plus you just don't want to put that insecurity in someone and have that be an issue ... have him feel like he's not enough for you.

I nodded, listening. He summarized, "So it's good to be choosy, but don't be too choosy!" Leveraging his age, marital status, and gender advantage over me, Lee dispensed paternalistic advice. Lee cautioned me against partnering with someone below my educational station because I might intimidate or emasculate him and an unhappy union would ensue. Subordinated by age to receive this advice, I was told to stay within certain gender bounds for the good of my future relationship.

The plot thickened with Lee. As I was leaving his house, he boisterously laughed, "What you need is a big Anglo man!" As Lee turned to enter the house, he lobbed a comment over his shoulder: "What you need is Lance — my son." Lee's recommendation that I find an "Anglo" man followed by his suggestion that I date his Mexican American son blurs the boundary between white and Mexican American by highlighting Mexican American class ascendancy. In so doing he positioned his college-educated Mexican American business-owner son as on par with my class status. Lee was very much an "organizer of the meaning" that he conveyed (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:19): he "indicated," in Blumer's sense of the term, my much younger age to endow him with authority to play matchmaker. By interpreting me as a daughter (or daughter-in-law), Lee imagined (or wished for) my future and in this act produced age and gender distinctions.

Beyond advice-giving, my younger age (and race and gender) encouraged older Latino men to treat me paternalistically in public settings where I recruited participants. Latino men in their 50s or older who were active in Hispanic Chambers of Commerce were helpful by introducing me to their friends and work associates. Some even called me the endearment of "*mija*" that is usually reserved for younger female family members. This verbal practice of calling me the diminutive "*mija*" animates age distinctions and racial solidarity, revealing "[study] participants' sense-making processes and ... cultural knowledge" (Nikander 2000:32). Some older men put their arm around my shoulder and paraded me around social networking events. I understood this arm-around-my-shoulder move as a gesture of warmth and authority — a signal that older men could make in the name of (grand)fatherliness but that could be interpreted as a come-on if performed by a man closer to my age. No younger men ever attempted this hug-while-walk with me. Decades-older men "discerned" our age gap to mean I was available to be "designated" as a fictive daughter or granddaughter (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:16). This symbolic closeness facilitated by a wide age gulf between adults was helpful in recruiting interviewees, though I did nothing to foster this role other than be friendly and thankful. Older men's benevolence in the form of ushering me around networking events benefitted them as well for being a gatekeeper showcased their clout in their professional community.

Interactions shifted when the age gap between me and interviewees narrowed. With a shrunken age gap, the paternalism that characterized older men interviewees was shed and replaced by sexual undertones in interviews with younger men, as seen with Moises. With Michael Jiménez, who was nine years older than me, sexual awareness emerged in two ways. First, Michael guarded his own sexual reputation as a married man. Second, he selected a meeting site where he thought *I* would be comfortable. After a relaxed, lengthy interview at a coffee shop, Michael commented with a laugh that he chose a neutral location for our interview because he did not want to invite me over to his house when his wife and son were on vacation. This comment was a “reminder cue” (Norris 2011), a vocalization that highlights salient identities; he did not want an unfamiliar woman in his house to cause the neighbors to suspect him of impropriety. My age contributed to the concern of indecency because sexual attraction is popularly considered the domain of young adults (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). Rare as it was for interviewees to admit that sexuality may be part of the interview dynamic, this concession shows that participants’ choices of interview location are “strategies through which [they] bring their own contextualization to the encounter, ‘framing’ the interview in accordance with their perceptions” (Herzog 2005:35). Gaining insight into the “dual process” of symbolic interaction, his interpretation of me plus a culture of heteronormativity prompted him to “indicate” publicly his commitment to professional decorum through his location selection.

Again responding to his interpretation of the “objects” of my age, gender, and sexuality, Michael expressed concern for my safety and well-being. He did not suggest his office as a meeting place because it is located in an industrial zone and he did not want me to “be driving around this old abandoned area thinking, ‘where is this guy taking me to?!’” He did not want to alarm me. As a professional courtesy, I meet respondents at a location of their choosing yet Michael volunteered to drive thirty minutes to meet me downtown, an act of chivalry that he would not likely do for a male interviewer. Similarly, Michael may not have been so sensitive to issues of sexuality if I were an older woman, age structuring sexuality such that sexuality of older women is often ignored (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). “Impression management” is the effort people put into presenting and defining themselves in front of others (Goffman 1973). Michael engaged in impression management relative to me, his spouse, and his neighbors. He was careful not to cast himself as lascivious or adulterous by meeting at his home when his family was absent or as menacing by meeting in a run-down industrial area.

One can ask how I engaged in impression management as well. After all, it is in my interest to get along with respondents for the sake of data collection. A researcher can “strategically negotiate” or “deploy” the meanings of one’s characteristics (Mazzei and O’Brien 2009:359–360). This tactic includes minimizing an aspect of one’s social identity or group membership for the sake of rapport and access (such as an adult woman studying teenage boys, e.g., Pascoe 2007). Contrary to this idea, I did not consciously manipulate my persona. I was pleasant and attentive but did not shift my

personality or attempt to activate or deactivate any of my social or physical features for the sake of rapport. I simply aimed to be professional and interested.

How Classifications Matter in Interactive Data Collection

Reading “Objects” of Connection: Race Ever-Present

Like age, race is an “object” that can shape social relations. While the focus of this article is age, given the research topic of race, it is important to note that all Latino/a interviewees responded positively to our racial correspondence. One Latina woman signed off her email (my email to her was composed in English) with “*buena suerte y adelante mujer!*” [good luck and keep going, woman!]. Another Latina called me “*Jessiquita*,” a sign of affection, upon meeting me. A Latino young man explained how my racial identity directly corresponded to his willingness to share opinions around race (May 2014): “The only reason why I asked you earlier if you had any Hispanic descent in you is because if you didn’t this interview would have been shortened dramatically because I would have thought that is really insane.” Interviewees’ affirmative reactions to me studying my own “in-group” suggest that my insider status provided them comfort with me, the “hyphen” of the relations between us stabilized due to racial similarity which unlocked access to depths of data.

Interviewees’ Perceptions of Age/Gender/Sexuality: From Teachable Moments to Sexuality Shut-Downs

With age, period, and cohort impossible to disentangle, my relative youth provided an opening for older interviewees to instruct me on historical periods they had lived through that I had not. Sixty-five-year-old Claude Solis asked me suddenly, “So, are you a radical?!” I stalled saying, “That’s a good question,” wanting to be seen as someone who could understand a number of perspectives. The implications for data gathering are that Claude used political orientation, racial identity, and our age difference to create an “insider moment” (May 2014) with me, wherein “interests converge and [interlocutors] are able to share in ... interactions that yield important insights” (May 2014:124). Given that “racial identity influences the age-inflected process of rapport building” (Taft 2007:204), racial matching and my younger age gave Claude license to educate me on a moment in history that I had not experienced firsthand:

A friend of mine told me I should join the Brown Berets [militant arm of the Chicano Movement]. I told him, “If I join the Brown Berets, I have to quit my job, right.” Because that was a movement at the time So to me, that [would make me] another wetback, another Mexican unemployed. *I support them by being an employed Chicano.*

Claude freely critiqued the Chicano Movement because, at thirty years his junior, I was in a position to be taught about history that he had lived through but I had not. Claude had confirmed immediately prior to this quotation that the publication

goal of my study was a book. He responded, “Hopefully the book will show that the Latino is diversified in a way of thinking and not just ... the old ... *machismo* [patriarchal] way.” Claude recognizing in-group patriarchy with a younger Latina woman interviewer is a way to acknowledge that, even as we are both adults, his much older age provides him a vista of historical experience from which to assure me that “we’ve grown” and that culture changes over time (see also Vasquez 2014).

A heteronormative assumption of my age/gender/sexuality positionality overshadowed my exchanges with men married to Latina women. Taboos around discussing sex with strangers, combined with my proximate age, racial, and gender status to these men’s wives, circumscribed discussion of sexuality. When I asked forty-four-year-old Oscar Cota, “In terms of dating, what sorts of qualities were you looking for?” he replied, “Can I really say that on here? [laughs] No, I’m not going to go there.” An added layer of complexity may be that as a *married* man, acknowledging earlier ages when validation of one’s masculinity was achieved through “compulsive heterosexuality” (Pascoe 2007) — including “getting girls” and sex talk — is in tension with his current commitment to monogamous marriage. I addressed the stumbling block of our cross-sex dynamic: “It’s probably hard to have a woman interview you.” He began to admit, “Well ...” After a long pause, Oscar answered by emphasizing a racialized sexual appetite that attached varying sexual meanings to different groups of women: “You always wanted to go with the white girls because you knew they were easier ... I always saw myself maybe dating white girls, but I ... knew that I would marry a Mexican woman.” Drawing on race, gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity, Oscar points out how *his own age* structured his interest level in certain types of women. Research indicates that a “winnowing” process takes place in transitions from dating to cohabiting to marital unions wherein each stage is characterized by increasing selectivity on factors such as race, education, and religion (Blackwell and Lichter 2004; Vasquez 2015; Vasquez-Tokos 2017). Oscar’s initial reserve in conversing with me may have been because — since I may be read as white due to light skin tone or Latina due to dark hair and Hispanic surname — he risked offending, sexualizing, and trivializing me by confessing his racialized conceptions of both white and Mexican-origin women.

My demographic similarity to thirty-one-year-old Shawn Downing’s half-Mexican American and half-Caucasian wife inhibited his admission of details. His reaction to me provides useful data. Shawn’s “first love” was a Latina which prompted him to consider Latina women especially attractive. I asked Shawn what made Latina women appealing to him. He answered, “Physically I was attracted to Latinas more ... There might have been a mystique about their culture that I just found attractive ... I, I, I knew that ... I would be getting with a girl that uh ... I’ll stop ... ’cause I wasn’t really quite sure where I was going with that ... What was the question again?” In this midst of his explanation, Shawn stumbles (his repetition of “I”) and declines to say more, asking to be re-directed. This verbal stutter gives him time to reconsider and he stops his reductionist thinking mid-stream. It is impossible to prove that my presence as a heterosexual Latina interviewer close to his wife’s

age provoked Shawn's pause and redirection. Yet it is possible that he became aware of his audience and ceased, not wanting to insult me or reveal himself to be reliant on racist and sexist generalizations.

Women near my age entrusted me with more biographical details about sexuality, including sexual assault, than did men. Thirty-six-year-old Raven Salazar discussed her marital problems with her husband, Vincent Venegas, who was treading the line between flirtation and infidelity. Angry at her working long hours, Raven explained that Vincent vied for attention through furtive salacious conduct with other women and directly asking her for sexual pleasure. She described that difficult time in their marriage:

I did so much [paid work and volunteer work] ... Something had to be sacrificed and that was my marriage ... I would be emailing at two o'clock in the morning. He'd be standing naked with his penis in my ... there wanting attention. I'd be like, "C'mon. Let me just finish." He'd be like, "Are you serious?" ... Just wait.

Describing a conflict in graphic detail requires trust with the interviewer. Raven likely perceived a bond in our shared age, race, gender, sexuality, and professional status that facilitated her disclosure of marital tension.

Older interviewees perceived my youth as an opening to cultivate teachable moments where they educate me about historical periods unknowable to me except second-hand. Women in my age group divulged more personal details around sexuality than did men. While I achieved less in-depth *spoken* data from men in my age group concerning sexuality, their stutters, pauses, and nonverbal reactions suggest that discomfort stunted some men's responses.

Rapport and Data Acquisition: Falling into and Overcoming Gaps

One interactive effort that can overcome perceived differences is to develop rapport (De Santis 1980). Good rapport between interviewer and interviewees can facilitate data collection. Rapport-building was most seamless among those with whom I shared multiple social statuses. Conversely, cultivating rapport was most difficult with interviewees with whom I ostensibly shared little. My blunders with elderly interviewees very different than myself had repercussions for the procurement of data.

My field notes on my interview with eighty-four year old José Lopez are blunt:

I messed up this interview by not remembering that Grandpa Lopez is illiterate. His family had explained my project to him and he had consented to participate. I went over to his home, accompanied by his son [whom I had interviewed], so that his presence might ease the introduction. I came armed with my consent form and biographical data sheet as usual and, unfortunately, since I didn't recall ... his illiteracy ... pulled out the consent form for him to sign. "I don't read too good and don't really write," he says. Whoops. I feel like I should have just tucked away the consent form, but instead, abiding by [Center for Protection of Human Subjects requirements], I explained the form and asked for his initials. A bad start to the interview.

I regret not simply asking for verbal consent which Institutional Review Boards (IRB) charged with overseeing projects involving humans allow for some populations. Embarrassingly, I made the gaffe because of my classist assumptions: most of the people I interact with on a daily basis are literate. I was socially distant from José: I was a young woman approximately sixty years his junior who was in higher education. By comparison, José was in his eighties, had a second grade education and had performed agricultural and construction labor his entire life. This clash of intellectual labor and manual labor, literate and illiterate, young and old illustrates that "being an insider because of one's race does not mute or erase other social locations which serve to deny access, create misunderstanding, or bias interviews with those from the same racial background" (Gallagher 2000:69). My misstep and our multiple differences amounted to reticence: the interview concluded in thirty minutes.

My age was again relevant with seventy-seven-year-old Ramona Vargas, but in this case our gender and race similarity overcame our age gap and class/education difference. Our differences were apparent from the very beginning when I asked permission to use my tape recorder. Ramona frowned skeptically at the device. Once I told her that the recorder would help me remember our conversation so I could accurately write about it, she consented. This exchange marked me as young, educated, and technology-savvy; three things she was not. Our interview continued without hiccups, though I exerted ample energy to ensure I asked questions delicately and listened attentively. I sensed what linguistics reveals: that older and younger people exercise different ways of speaking that may challenge communication between age groups (Grenier 2007). My age and class/education gap with Ramona almost stopped me from asking a crucial question for fear of alienating her with my word choice. I wanted to ask my "gender" question. I was nervous that saying the word "gender" would be off-putting for a woman who may not be familiar with the term. Tentative but confident that I had shown interest in her opinions and welfare, I took the plunge. I tried to minimize our possible terminology gulf by defining my term, asking her, "Do you think that your gender — the fact of being a woman — has influenced your life?" Her answer was priceless: "I wish I had been born a man, not a woman." She explained the advantages that men have and women do not. In the end, my age and education had been off-putting *to me*. I incorrectly estimated how she might interpret our differences. The "objects" of my social identity that I feared would be unsettling were not the ones she cared about and that ultimately fostered ease. Prior topics highlighting our common gender and race such as her abusive late husband, racial discrimination, and a moment of code-switching where I translated a Spanish word into English for her buoyed her confidence with me. Our gender and racial connections became a bridge across our decades-wide age difference and my "gender question" became an opportunity for an older Mexican American woman to educate a younger one about sexism and racism.

In contrast to José and Ramona, participants with whom I shared numerous social statuses — college-educated heterosexual Latina women in their twenties through forties — read me as similar to them in demographics and experiences which

facilitated rapport. As with all respondents, I shared some biographical information with Celeste Collins when asked, making the interview more reciprocal. Celeste commented about how “interesting” it was to consider all the questions that I asked. I thanked her for answering personal questions, to which she replied, “Well, you asked in a very pleasant manner and are easy to talk to. But, you are right, these are not things that we talk about with neighbors or just anybody.” As I could qualify as “just anybody” (I was unknown to her until her sister referred her to me), it was almost strange that I did not. This speaks to her discernment of me as similar as well as cultivated rapport that contributed to a fruitful interview. Absent stark demographic differences, our encounter was liberated from category-based responses (Fiske 2000) that straightjacket exchanges. Heuristics like category-based responses can short-circuit communication because they rely on prefabricated meanings rather than allow for judgements to be unhinged from groups. Moreover, the recruitment technique of snowball sampling wherein I ask interviewees to recommend family members, friends, or associates who would qualify for the study smooths interaction. The fact that Celeste’s sister had already completed an interview with me and served as a referral also enabled ease. An interviewer who comes recommended has a head start on rapport-building, beginning interviews with preapproval that expedites connection.

As individuals “take account of the actions of one another as they form their own action” (Blumer 1969:10), a symbolic interactionist plus intersectionality perspective suggests that interviewees classify and interpret the interviewer prior to (and while) building a bond of confidence. The foregoing evidence adds that the “hyphen” of relations between researcher and respondent is thickened by multiple similarities. The greater the social identity overlap, the more interviewees appear to share about their lives. Race, age, and gender similarity facilitated disclosure of personal information and yet researchers sharing social statuses with research participants should not assume automatic affinity (Gallagher 2000; Zavella 1993) but foster a positive working relationship with all participants. Rapport, enabled by sincerity and interest, can help develop “insider moments” (May 2014) and smooth communication.

CONCLUSION

This article makes three arguments at the nexus of symbolic interactionism, qualitative methodology, and intersectionality. First, attending to age relations within adult/adult interactions reveals patterned exchanges that lay bare the influence of age connections and disconnections. By examining researcher-participant interactions in the “hyphen” of relations between them (Fine 1994), we witness how age is an “object,” in the sense of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), that is indicated, interpreted, and responded to in a way that sets up normative expectations of how “to do age” in combination with other aspects of identity (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Lundgren 2013; Zajicek et al. 2006). Age gradations structure interactions, figure into solidarities or chasms, and deserve to be integrated into interactional analysis.

Second, by placing symbolic interactionism, interviewing, and intersectionality in conversation with one another, we discover that interviewees are actively “discerning and designating” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) the interviewer according to categories, including age. Subsequent to this classification process, interviewees determine how to interact with the researcher and what type of data to reveal. Aspects of identity, like age, are not free-floating but become enlivened in interactions that link categorical memberships to status hierarchies (Schippers 2008). In classifying the interviewer, interviewees participate in symbolic interaction whereby age alignments and misalignments generate patterned interview dynamics, solidarity, difference, and data. As qualitative methodology depends upon social exchanges for its product, it is incumbent upon researchers to account for how the data are marked by status parities and inequalities. Broadening the analysis of age relations to include adult-adult interaction confirms that age shapes rapport and data acquisition even when the balance of power is not as starkly uneven as when adults study children.

Finally, this article underscores that not only are interviewees “organizers of the meanings they convey” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:19) but that their speech and action entrench social categories such as age, race, gender, class, and sexuality. Zeroing in on how age gradations among adults structure interaction—an area overshadowed in intersectionality scholarship due to the dominance of gender, race, and class (Calasanti and Slevin 2006)—this research demonstrates that age is an important vector of analysis that contributes to evaluations and expectations of others. Seeing age as an “object” that is “indicated” in interactions opens the door to “category-based responses” (Fiske 2000) that shape treatment by others which, in turn, instantiate social categories and resulting bonds or boundaries.

Respondents interacted with me—an unmarried, mixed-race Latina/white, heterosexual, Ph.D.-earning woman in her late twenties to early thirties—differently depending on how they interpreted my social location. Race was operative in the interview dynamic; as I (partially) shared a racial heritage with the vast majority of interviewees, this similarity was frequently met with enthusiastic solidarity. Age and gender intersected to stimulate rapport and data that systematically varied. Younger women believed we shared a common experience which resulted in rich interview data. Viewing me as an empathetic listener with shared experience, this position unlocked detail. In contrast to this deep sharing, men approximately my age punted on questions around intimacy, retreating into silence, laughter, or abbreviated answers. These younger heterosexual men’s awkward advances, verbal slips, or caution all unveil awareness of sexuality. Perceiving our age gap as elevating them to teacher status, older interviewees struck an instructional tone. Assuming prior experience with sexism and gender norms, older women opened up to enlighten the younger interviewer about earlier times. In contradistinction, some older men used their authority in age and gender to counsel me on the type of man to marry, enforcing the very same gender expectations women intuited I was familiar with. Other older men interviewees shut down if social status gaps accumulated to an uncomfortable distance.

Take-home advice based on this research is for the researcher to cultivate rapport based on points of similarity. Where none exist, openness and sincere interest are foundational to a fruitful dynamic, as researchers are conveyers of meaning just like interviewees. Qualitative researchers routinely work in teams or employ local assistants whose knowledge of native cultures aid data interpretation (Roth 2012). Working with differently-aged team members sets up age gradations as strategic points of comparison. Researchers and respondents could be age-matched in attempt to equalize age power dimensions (similar to race-matching, typically employed when racial issues are investigated [Lacayo 2016]). Or the same respondent could be interviewed by two differently-aged researchers such that results could be analyzed with attention to how interviewer age may influence responses.

Age has thus far been principally studied relative to gerontology, aging, or adults studying children or adolescents (Best 2007; Calasanti and Slevin 2006). This article contributes to thinking on symbolic interactionism, intersectionality, and reflexivity by demonstrating the utility of incorporating age gradations among adults into analysis. Interactions among adults should not be disregarded as uninteresting because presumably — and incorrectly — the power dimension of age equalizes after reaching adulthood. Instead, as this article demonstrates, age in the “hyphens” of relations between researcher and participant (Fine 1994) is a portal through which to view cross-age solidarity or social distance as well as assumed likeness among the similarly-aged. Age refines interaction, influences rapport, and sways procurement of data. With age as a significant “object” in interactions, interviewees interpret and act according to perceptions of sameness and difference in ways that animate age alongside other social categories and redouble the meaning of group classifications.

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NOTE

1. A video abstract is available at <https://tinyurl.com/lessmr3/>

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