## ARTICLE

# 'Our members are growing up!': contradictions in ageing talk within a lifelong learning institute

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### Abstract

Whether encouraging successful ageing or labelling one as a stereotypical senior citizen, messages surrounding ageing pervade the daily lives of older adults. However, as a social status, age remains primarily in the background of older adults' conversations, only being drawn into the focus when one is identified as older. This paper draws on interviews with members and staff of an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) in the southeastern United States of America in order to examine the ways that they discuss age and ageing. These older adults' ageing talk often focused on navigating away from negative ideas about age and avoiding labels deemed pejorative. Humour was occasionally used in identifying age, which carried potential for reinforcing as well as subverting ageism. Yet, members highlighted positive value in being older, particularly as demonstrated through participation in age-segregated education. Overall, these findings reflect the conflicting influences of deeply embedded ageist beliefs and personal desires to age successfully among this group of white, upper-middle-class, educated older adults. Ultimately, OLLI served as a protective environment for these privileged individuals, shielding the self from stereotypes otherwise present in ageing talk.

## Introduction

Older adults encounter many negative, yet also conflicting, messages about ageing. Old age as undesirable is a widespread belief within American culture; even the potential for successful ageing underscores the downside of 'unsuccessful' ageing (Calasanti, 2016). Scripts for later life presented in mass media depict active, pleasure-seeking retirement living – images portraying successful ageing as an individual project and implicitly condemning those not living up to the ideal (McHugh, 2003; Rozanova, 2010; Liang and Luo, 2012). As a result, older adults face the 'paradox' of 'growing older while staying young', as they must work to age successfully in order to avoid the negative connotations of being old (Baars, 2012: 57).

Thus, ageing is a matter of some concern for older adults – though age is, somewhat surprisingly, not considered a central topic of everyday interactions (Sehulster,

2006). A seeming reluctance to discuss one's age or the ageing process may stem from the devalued status occupied by the old: raising the issue could have the undesired consequence of signalling that one is older. When age is discussed, older adults may feel the need to position themselves as not old or distinct from typical old people (and stereotypes of old age) based on the social context (Jones, 2006).

Contexts within which older adults feel more at ease identifying as ageing exist. Settings shared with age peers, such as age-segregated social organisations, provide one such context (Jerrome, 1992; Barrett *et al.*, 2012). These are places where meanings of ageing can be collectively constructed and negotiated in ways ensuring that group members are 'ageing successfully' – in their own and others' eyes. Yet, even in age-segregated settings, a broad age range allows for the creation of hierarchies, and those with declining health or activity levels will fall to the bottom (Hochschild, 1973).

University-affiliated not-for-credit educational programmes, such as the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI) in the United States of America (USA), thus provide an interesting location for examining ageing talk. Successful ageing is largely the focus of these programmes, as they encourage both learning and social engagement, but the environment is unique, being both age-segregated and, due to including any adults 50+ and often residing on college campuses, age-integrated. This paper draws on my qualitative data from an OLLI in the southeastern USA to consider the ways that members talk about age and the positive or negative implications of this talk. In members' interviews as well as interactions as part of the organisation more generally, status as older adults often provided a backdrop for the focal topic of conversation, even though it was not the primary focus of discussion. I highlight the positive and negative ways that age and ageing were talked about as they were brought into the foreground of conversations – when older adults identified on the basis of age, talked about being part of an age-segregated group or made jokes about ageing.

## Tensions between the self, ageism and successful ageing

Age is often used in constructing perceptions about other people and how we should relate to them – 'an age identity card' (Montepare and Zebrowitz, 1998; Craciun and Flick, 2014). Boundaries for old age are somewhat fluid, even among older adults, and categorisation as old – by self or others – depends on a variety of factors, like gender and physical health (Bytheway, 2005; Degnen, 2007). Yet, older people face pervasive cultural stereotypes, particularly that they are declining in attractiveness and less competent than younger peers, and these ageist notions are difficult to overcome, even with evidence to the contrary (Cuddy *et al.*, 2005; Kite *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, people internalise ageism across their lives, directing it towards older adults and themselves, in the form of self-stereotypes, when growing older (Levy and Banaji, 2002; Levy, 2003).

Ageist beliefs change somewhat with age as adults attempt to protect their self-concept. Although both older and younger adults associate negative characteristics with ageing, older adults see these characteristics not only as less typical of older people than do younger adults but also more descriptive of only the oldest aged

adults (Hummert, 1993). Furthermore, older adults' views towards the 'typical old person' become more positive with age (Rothermund and Brandtstädter, 2003). Negative age-based stereotypes are commonly directed towards other older adults in general but not themselves, allowing enhancement of one's own self-perception (Pinquart, 2002).

Successful ageing can provide protection from being labelled as old, if one's choices to be mentally and physically active allow staying healthy and ageing well. However, this assumes one has the means to age successfully, overlooking not only diversity of ageing experiences but also the persistence of structural inequalities that limit older people's choices (Angus and Reeve, 2006). Additionally, successful ageing by individuals has little impact on societal views of ageing adults. Because successful ageing focuses on avoidance of 'usual' ageing through maintenance of physical and cognitive health, it reflects ageist and exclusionary ideologies rather than lived experiences of older adults (Dillaway and Byrnes, 2009).

How older adults are exposed to these competing messages – ageist and successful ageing – may vary by context. Age norms and the dominant age structure create a tripartite lifecourse, with learning situated among the young, work based in middle age, and retirement and leisure representing later life (Riley and Riley, 1994). Activities for older adults are often limited to age peers, a reflection of not only the marginalisation of elderly adults but also the view of age-segregation as normative (Uhlenberg and de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2006). Yet, macro-level patterns of segregating older adults, not only institutionally and spatially but also culturally, have the potential to reproduce ageism by limiting contact between the young and old and labelling the old as other (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). Some locations specifically for older adults, such as senior centres, may offer opportunities for integration across wide age ranges of older adults, but they commonly focus on providing opportunities for successful ageing that reinforce growing older as problematic (Hostetler, 2011).

### Age talk in context

Despite being a key organising feature in contemporary society – and one that shapes individuals' identities – age operates, in many ways, in the background during interactions. How social status moves from the periphery to the centre of interaction is a question investigated by Hopper and LeBaron (1998). The authors examine the process of noticing gender as part of a conversation through sexist language, references to male and female differences, or heterosexual flirting – which move gender to the focus of talk. They note that because gender is 'omnirelevant' it is always present in the background, allowing seamless entrance to the foreground of everyday conversation. Much like West and Zimmerman (1987) and West and Fenstermaker (1995) discuss gender, race and social class as performances accomplished through the process of interaction, age is interactionally constituted and may operate as an underlying theme in older adults' conversations (in combination with other social statuses, which signify difference and perpetuate inequality), only becoming the focus when made relevant to the particular conversation.

Age is present in the background for older adults, even if it is not salient in everyday situations. Older adults' age-segregated social networks allow being

shielded from negative ideas surrounding ageing in personal interactions (Ward, 1984), and age is less commonly referenced among adults living in age-segregated communities than among those in age-integrated neighbourhoods (Gfellner, 1986). Although participation in age-segregated organisations reflects cultural distinction of and segregation between the old and young (Jerrome, 1998), conversation within older adult organisations rarely focuses on age and ageing (Barrett *et al.*, 2012).

Within specific contexts, ageing may be constructed in various ways. Members of older adult organisations recognise themselves as united on the basis of age and, as a result, feel a common sense of superiority over the young (Jerrome, 1992). However, due to the large age range often found within groups of older adults, differentiation on the basis of age and related declines can create perceived hierarchies, with those considered young-old and healthy most often perceived as high status (Hochschild, 1973; McWilliams and Barrett, 2018). Age integration also carries possibilities for altering how one talks about age, with older adults who volunteer for an intergenerational programme reporting feeling young (Reisig and Fees, 2006).

While varying in salience across interactional contexts, ageism is prevalent, but implicit, in the everyday ways people talk about older adults (Gendron *et al.*, 2016). The terms used to refer to older adults have evolved over time as prior labels become seen as disparaging (Meinz *et al.*, 2006). While some terms used to refer to older adults, such as senior or 50+, generally carry positive to neutral connotations and others are viewed more negatively, accepting oneself as part of the age group being labelled results in more positive perceptions of the label (Weijters and Geuens, 2006). Older adults may discuss their age in terms of chronological age, category labels (although 'old' is typically used in reference to others, not oneself), mental or physical status, and passage of time or past experiences (Coupland *et al.*, 1991). Furthermore, older adults indirectly create assumptions about the self as 'not old' either by describing people considered old, or by constructing the self as a young person in an ageing body, a 'special older person' (Jones, 2006).

Humour can provide alternative approaches to discuss growing older, but whether ageing humour has positive or ageist implications varies. In general, ageing jokes are more negative than positive, reflecting larger cultural stereotypes (Palmore, 1971, 1986; Davies, 1977; Richman, 1977). Humour that disparages social groups is thought to create a norm of tolerating prejudice towards the group (Ford and Ferguson, 2004). Yet, humour is subjective and can serve a variety of functions, including stigmatising or uniting members of a social group (Palmore, 1986; Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2001; Lynch, 2002; Ziv, 2010). For instance, humorous birthday cards may be interpreted as providing a shared sense of ageing, framing ageing positively, distancing from ageing or trivialising ageing, with older adults more likely to view them as carrying positive meanings about age (Huyck and Duchon, 1986). Even older adults' ageing humour or, less commonly, self-deprecating jokes, are most often used in combination with narratives that create positive self-images to avoid ageist implications (Damianakis and Marziali, 2011).

This research extends the existing literature by focusing on a particular age-segregated organisation, an OLLI, as a location for ageing talk that highlights the conflict between positive and negative messages surrounding ageing. OLLIs are designed to provide 'non-credit educational programs specifically developed for

seasoned adults who are aged 50 and older, university connection and university support, robust volunteer leadership and sound organisational structure, and a diverse repertoire of intellectually stimulating courses' (Bernard Osher Foundation, 2005). Underscoring this definition is a sense that successful ageing derives, at least in part, from participation in OLLI. Yet, how members perceive themselves as older adults and, as a result, talk about ageing likely varies greatly. This research expands the literature on ageing talk by exploring the positive and negative messages in older adults' identification as ageing individuals and participants in lifelong learning.

## Data and methods

To understand how older adults talk about participating in an age-segregated organisation, I analysed qualitative data from 32 in-depth interviews that were part of a larger ethnographic project examining an OLLI at a large state university in the southeastern USA. I also drew on data from 118 hours of participant observation and various programme materials to provide additional understanding of ageing talk, in formal presentations of the organisation as well as members' casual conversations. Through analysis, I found that age and ageing were features of talk concerning the organisation and its members, even in topics not directly related to OLLI's composition of older adults.

Data collection began with observations of classes and related OLLI activities, where I found that age was a key feature of the organisation but seemed to be referenced in members' discussions only occasionally. Although OLLI membership was limited to adults aged 50 and older, the courses were geared towards a general audience and topics ranged from arts and music to sciences. A few courses offered each term were designed around retirees' anticipated hobbies, such as organic gardening, genealogy or memoirs, but generally courses were advertised as abbreviated, specialised focus on topics faculty members and doctoral candidates regularly taught at the university. Comments surrounding ageing were somewhat more frequent in, for example, a memoirs class, where members were reflecting on their lives. Yet, age and ageing were also mentioned by both members and occasionally instructors across courses (comments about age also were directed towards me in a few instances, as a 'young' person who did not belong in classes and events for the organisation).

My observations encouraged me to ask members more detailed questions about the purpose of age-segregation and feelings about being members of an older adult organisation in individual interviews, in addition to inquiring about their lives more generally. I interviewed 29 members and three staff of OLLI. The interview participants ranged in age between 54 and 86; however, all but two of the interviewees were in their sixties or seventies and in good health, reflecting the active, young-old membership overall. They were all white and three-quarters were women. Most had been employed in professional fields and over half held graduate degrees. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide, with questions particularly relevant to this paper focused on how members described their later-life experiences and what they saw as the purpose of OLLI being an age-segregated organisation. In my interviews with staff, I was also interested in understanding the image that OLLI was

attempting to create with regard to lifelong learning. However, interview participants brought ageing up in their responses to questions unrelated to age and ageing as well, and data in this paper are not limited to participants' responses on questions tied to ageing. These interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. They were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also supplemented my observational and interview data with qualitative content analysis of OLLI materials created by members, distributed to members or used as advertisements. These documents provided insight into the image that OLLI presented, both internally and externally.

The data were analysed based on techniques of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006) using the qualitative analysis software program NVivo. I began with line-by-line coding of random selections of fieldnotes and interview transcriptions to determine inductively the processes occurring in each individual piece of data and generate initial codes. Based on the frequently occurring initial codes, I saw that members' discussions reflected the ongoing background presence of age in talk, which frequently became a focus through discussion of their ageing-related experiences. As a result, I reviewed the literature and followed a deductive process in developing a research question to guide my analysis. This process led me to examine the distinct meanings members gave to age and how they framed ageing in conversation through focused coding of all data. Focused codes most salient to this paper included, for example, recognising age, positive ageing, facts of ageing, relating to life or generation, ageing jokes and complaints about older people. I identified instances of these themes within the data and organised all the pieces of data associated with a given theme using NVivo. I wrote memos throughout the coding process to explore further the various themes and develop them into more concrete categories relating to a definable research question emerging from the data. Through this process, I determined the themes I was uncovering related to how older adults weigh their feelings about ageing in a society that negatively stereotypes older adults and the resulting communication of these often-contradictory feelings. As a result, I developed the following research questions:

(1) What types of ageing talk occur within OLLI?
(2) How does this ageing talk reflect positive or negative constructions of ageing?

References to age and ageing arose in the everyday conversations of those involved in OLLI, though they were rarely the focal topics, and ageing was explicitly addressed in interviews with members. These moments were useful to examine as reflections of individuals' weighing of larger cultural messages about ageing with their hesitation to reproduce ageist attitudes.

## Findings

Members' contradictory feelings about being an older person surfaced in how they talked about being a member of an older adult organisation. Age was rarely a central focus of conversation, unless age distinctions or being an older person were directly identified, and references to age and ageing carried both positive and negative

connotations. For instance, ageing was present in OLLI's tagline, 'Having the time of our lives', which staff considered changing to 'Our members are growing up!' Both allude to OLLI as an age-segregated organisation, with the former identifying value in this stage of the lifecourse and the latter inferring that childhood is left behind. Yet, with these taglines as well as OLLI members' discussions more generally, the topic of ageing was largely implicit rather than explicit.

Ageing moved from the background to foreground of conversations when references were made to the group being specifically for older adults or as the topic of conversation focused on members as ageing individuals. When age or ageing were mentioned, OLLI members often framed being an older adult in self-beneficial ways, although their ageing talk reflected recognition of ageism. They also sometimes used humour to make light of being older and ageing stereotypes. In discussing their age group, they avoided terms carrying negative connotations and highlighted value in being an older person. The following findings partly reflect interviewees' responses to questions about the purposes of limiting membership in OLLI to people of a certain age; however, talk of age and ageing also arose in more general conversations about members' lives and their experiences in OLLI as well as during members' interactions in OLLI classes.

### *Navigating ageing labels*

OLLI was described in advertisements and newsletters as an organisation 'for adults ages 50 and older'. Members typically refrained from labelling their group in terms of age, aside from using this general chronological descriptor in conversation. When common terms used to refer to older people arose in conversation, their comments signalled distaste, suggesting recognition that ageing is devalued.

OLLI members saw different meanings denoted by labels applied to the organisation. It went by several different names over the years, one of which included the word 'senior'. Patricia, a previous staff member provided her thoughts about members' reactions to the organisation's name: 'People didn't want anything with the word "senior" in it; they didn't like that word. As vocabulary changes, pop words fall in and out of favour. The word 'senior' has fallen out of favour, and instead we refer to people as "mature adults".' However, many members avoided the term 'mature adults' as well, instead focusing on the chronological age group – '50 plus' – to distinguish themselves. Commenting on the name change, Sandra explained her negotiation of these labels and their impact on her self-perceptions, saying, 'If it was marketed just for elderly, retirees, I probably wouldn't be attending. If it was called a senior centre or centre for the elderly that would turn me off. Just because we're retired doesn't mean we're ready to be flushed down the toilet.' She also mentioned that at one point the programme moved across campus from the continuing education department to a building that housed an ageing research institute and public policy centre. She described her reaction: 'Personally, I was offended by the fact that they had moved into the building on campus that deals with issues of the aged and gerontology. It was like, oh, they're a bunch of old folks; stick them over here in the place that majors in old folks.' These comments reveal that members saw categorisation as older adults as problematic because they attached potentially negative connotations to ageing.

Some members stated that they found common terms surrounding ageing objectionable; others alluded to their distaste by avoidance of them. In interviews, only six participants used 'senior' or 'seniors' in referencing their age group. Helen employed this term most frequently in her interview – she referred to participating in a 'senior acting class' and said of OLLI members, 'we are seniors'. However, she demonstrates unease in describing all people over a certain age as seniors when discussing members of another club in town she joined: 'Most of them are women that are, well I'd have to say, seniors. Maybe not 70 or 80, maybe even late fifties – retired women, maybe.' Two individuals said 'elderly' when referring to OLLI members, and four others used 'elderly' when talking about other older people. For instance, Diane mentioned thinking that the stories of a Second World War veteran she met on an OLLI field trip should be video-taped 'because he's very elderly'. In contrast, Diane also highlighted how the label elderly did not apply simply on the basis of age when she explained, 'In my line dance class, there is a woman that's 86. She can tap dance circles around me. So I'm not going to say anything about that being elderly.' Avoidance of the term old occurred in a music course; the professor mentioned that Schumann's birthday was that day, adding, '200 years old – well, not old, right? 200 years young'. A man sitting towards the back of the room responded with a loud 'thank you!' The mixed use of these terms demonstrates that members thought they were only relevant in certain circumstances and should not simply be blanket labels to apply to older people. Words like senior and elderly may describe people of a certain age in popular discourse (*e.g.* senior discounts at the movies or restaurants), but members identified them as incorrect or disparaging descriptions for themselves.

Members seldom identified as older adults or discussed their individual ages, unless pertinent to the conversation. Age was talked about as unrelated to the typical thoughts of OLLI members. Virginia described how she believed age differences were not necessarily noticed within OLLI:

> I don't think any of us are really aware that I'm much older than they [are] except when I write something, and – well, once in a while – they'll say, 'Ask [Virginia].' If it's something about World War II, you know. But I go to lunch with two or three of them. Just the few of us become friends. Because I feel so much younger than my age and … I just don't feel older than them.

At 86, Virginia was the oldest interviewee, and her responses indicated a perception that ageing successfully shielded her from being identified as older, even though the knowledge provided by her age status became somewhat helpful in a history class.

However, age differences were not completely unnoticed by those involved with OLLI. Sharon, a staff member, explained that when her mother passed away, 'I had been here about a year, and I suddenly had so many mothers because this age group … I'm a part of this age group but there are members of this OLLI age group who are old enough to be my mother.' Cynthia, also explained:

> I feel like I'm probably one of the youngest there. But I also kind of have felt like I'm probably young to be retired because a lot of people wait till 60 or 62 or whatever. But I mean it didn't … bother me so much. It did come across my mind and stuff, but I do think I'm probably the youngest in the class I'm taking. And some

people are older-older, you know. Like there is one man that's kind of feeble walking in and stuff like that. But not everybody…

In a similar situation, as I waited for a spring semester showcase (where instructors introduce their courses before registration) to begin, Karen, a staff member, walked over and mentioned that a friend of hers might come sit with me. She then added how she could not believe she had a friend taking OLLI classes, but she guessed they were both over 50. These comments distinguishing within the group by age were more common by staff and younger members who felt distanced from the oldest members.

Age distinctions were more common between OLLI members and much younger people. In a couple of larger classes that I observed, members who noticed me before class or during the break exclaimed, 'You're too young to be here!' In a similar vein, following the birth of a young staff member's baby, a picture of the child was posted on the mother's office door with a thought bubble reading, 'I can't wait to be 50, so I can join OLLI.' Both of these situations provide some indication of value in being older, at least in terms of granting participation in OLLI. Yet, when discussing her distaste for how students dressed on campus, Marilyn said, 'Probably my statement says more about me than it does about the students. I'm a dinosaur.' Her identification of young people as different alludes to stereotypical beliefs surrounding ageing.

Ageing talk within OLLI reflects that older adults realised the possible impacts of age labels becoming affixed to groups for older people. When age categorisations were used in conversation, members clearly distinguished their group as not being simply for old people. They avoided labelling OLLI members as possessing the negative characteristics ageing stereotypes might imply, attempting to find labels or means of group identification that more closely aligned with how they felt about themselves. Although age differentiation within the group was generally overlooked, age status seemed relevant for younger participants and staff, alluding to a need to distance the self from the old-old (Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). Yet, age differentiation remained part of how OLLI members thought of themselves in comparison to younger people, particularly students.

### Joking about ageing

Humorous comments formed a small but theoretically significant portion of ageing talk, particularly because they often included age labels otherwise avoided. Statements made tongue-in-cheek allowed members to frame comments about ageing less seriously, ultimately keeping ageing talk in the background. Ageing humour used by members also frequently focused on more negative aspects of being older. The strategy of humorously alluding to downsides of ageing allowed acknowledging their collective fears, even if members felt uncertain about stating them outright. However, the implications of ageing humour were somewhat unclear, as evidence shows interpretations of both reinforcing and subverting stereotypes of ageing.

Humour allowed recognising one's status as an older person while also poking fun at stereotypes associated with that status. In particular, members' comments about fading memory maintained a lighthearted attitude towards growing older. For instance, when talking about her favourite OLLI experiences, Shirley said:

'Went on a trip to, where did we go? I can't remember – you're asking an older person here.' A woman I spoke with before a history class noticed me putting on a nametag and pointed to hers, adding, 'These are so we remember who we are.' Comments like these highlighted memory loss as a potential negative aspect of growing older but made light of it in doing so.

Humorous comments about ageing were not always overtly negative reflections of growing older. Members also used them to playfully reference the age group more generally. Commenting on OLLI, Donald said, 'It's a wonderful, positive experience, and it keeps us old trouble-makers off the streets, so we're not out there causing trouble.' References to trouble-makers were quite common when discussing older adults. A man I sat by in class one day repeated this idea, explaining, 'I call it babysitting for seniors; it helps keep us out of trouble.' To a certain extent, these comments reflected an appreciation for a distraction from trouble-making, perhaps reflecting these men wanted to claim the ability to still make trouble, yet avoid having to actually do so. But trouble-maker was not necessarily a term applied to all older adults. Linda described some of the oldest members in this way: 'We got two or three members that are well into their nineties. You know they come rolling up the street with their walkers and their canes. They're right there in class causing trouble.' Labelling older adults as trouble-makers who need to be monitored can be seen as casting them as children, yet it also could be understood as an expression of agency.

Related to images as trouble-makers, some humorous comments centred on how being older allowed behaving as they pleased. In discussing why he 'thought the world of' one of the staff members, Raymond added, 'And she knows how to respond to us old people, and she can shut down stupid stuff that we might get involved in.' This comment reflected his belief that older people would sometimes act without thinking simply because they felt age provided some degree of freedom. Similarly, Linda reflected on a freedom of ageing when she described going up to talk to the president of another university:

> I said 'You don't know me' – one of the really good things about being old is you really don't care. You just walk up to anybody and say anything. So I said, 'Well, I had a glass of wine, I'm going to go talk to this guy.'

Their quips demonstrated an ability to violate minor social norms without concern for consequences.

In larger discussions of age, ageing jokes were relatively rare. When used, they allowed members to make light of ageist attitudes and stereotypes, while also bonding over ageing issues or fears they might be facing. In this way, tongue-in-cheek mentions could provide the opportunity for members to share in a common experience, which could foster feelings of group solidarity. However, in drawing attention to these issues, humour had the potential for reinforcing ageist ideas and attaching them to members of the organisation. Descriptions of older adults as making trouble or breaking social norms resonate in some ways with images of later life as a second childhood (Arluke and Levin, 1984). While this image is somewhat consistent with successful ageing in painting older adults as fun and adventurous, it also carries potential ageist implications by labelling them as dependent and

irresponsible. Yet, the effect of these comments depends on an individual's interpretation, as making trouble and violating social norms could be considered an exercise of power by older adults, reflecting subversion of ageist attitudes. Comments alluding to trouble-making within the classroom setting also reflected the ability to exercise agency but appreciation of constraints imposed by rules of decorum. Ageing humour provided a way for older adults to talk about ageing without being serious, but it reflected the dilemma of navigating multiple stereotypes of ageing.

### Limiting by age

Many members highly regarded being together with others their own age in the context of OLLI. Although 50 was identified as the minimum age for joining, neither members or staff claimed that they would enforce such a policy if someone a few years younger wanted to join. However, members saw age-segregation as useful for a variety of reasons, as reflected in their positive age-talk.

Within the organisation, age provided wisdom and experience that members deemed lacking in an age-integrated context. Helen explained, 'You bring more to the table now because you have more experiences, and you maybe have more to offer.' Jenny also referenced wisdom acquired with age by saying:

> Just the sophistication level, the experience level of having a lot of people who have seen a lot, done a lot. I think they have more chance for bringing value by adding to conversation – someone who is at our level of life, rather than the younger group.

Instead of focusing on age, these members discussed ability to contribute to OLLI because they have a lifetime of learning. Gloria saw this level of experience bringing value to their talents in the classroom:

> The professors I think have, some of them, a little bit of difficulty realising the differences in adult learning. Some of the writing teachers have been quite shocked by our writing abilities because they're used to teaching undergrad, and writing abilities are really different than by the time you reach our age, and you've been writing all this time. You're at a different level. And the first teachers we had were just sort of blown away by what we could do. And now I think they're learning how to warn some of the professors that come in that these really aren't 20-year-olds. These really are people who are 60 and 70 years old. They can write about different experiences and use different languages because they're older and they've had the experience.

Members saw a need for professors to reorient their approach to teaching because of the level of experience and understanding they had. Norma added further insight when discussing a history graduate student:

> He's teaching college students, and then he's teaching all these elderly people, and he's in the middle of all of this, 26 or something. It's got to be hard. Once in a while he would say a few things that we knew were fine for his age group and

probably also for the youngsters, but we thought … oh we ought to tell him, maybe he doesn't realise this is all really old stuff and we were all there at the time when these things were happening. So, his outlook on some things is a little different.

Age norms also played a significant role in how OLLI members describe age-segregation of the group. Linda explained that age-segregation was not strictly enforced, but almost a natural occurrence:

> No one checks ID at the door. It's just, because the vast majority of our members are that certain age group, our offerings are aimed at them. So, it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I think there's a place in the spectrum of society for things that are – I don't know if I'd use the word segregated – but it's kind of what it is. You know there's a place for something that's just for folks of a certain age. It doesn't bother me that we're for older people but maybe that's because I am one. It never bothered me when I was in my work life and I saw that this was going on.

In a way, Linda's description of OLLI provides a more neutral perspective on age-segregation compared to preceding comments that highlight positive value in being older. Age-talk of this sort seemed to recognise how deeply institutionalised differentiation on the basis of age is in contemporary society.

Carol also stated, 'I don't think we would tell somebody they couldn't come if they were too young. But, it's a group for elders.' Gerald added, 'There are certain things that would appeal more to an older group than it would a younger group. I don't know how many 25-year-olds would enjoy the class we're taking.' Not only appeal, but also constraints of time impacted who members expected could participate. Barbara pointed out:

> I realise when I invite people to get involved in OLLI, they can't really do it if they're still working. First of all, almost always, most of our stuff is during the day. That's because a lot of people can't drive at night; as you get older, you have a night vision problem, so it's practical.

Ultimately, because OLLI was designed for older adults, it was thought to be distinct from programming that would specifically target younger people. Kathleen provided a more detailed explanation:

> We're not legally supposed to define it as an age. But because we are of that age, it helps somebody who is new to the area; somebody who is 25, a soccer mom at home with three kids is not going to say, 'oh yeah that's the group for me' if she reads that. It just helps define who we are. But if she decided she wanted to come and join there would be no legal way for us to kick her off. I don't think there's any barrier that they would have to coming in other than they don't feel like they fit in because they're not the same age.

Age-segregation was viewed as both a cause of limiting OLLI membership and as the result of unique qualifications of OLLI members.

Limiting OLLI membership made sense to members due to recognition of themselves as older adults, but members also noted appreciating occasional interaction with younger adults. In certain circumstances, members talked about wanting to be with age peers. As Doris commented, 'I think it is probably less intimidating for some of us that have been away from school for a long time to not be thrown in with the real young.' However, Diane described a slightly different perspective when she explained, 'It's nice to have people [your age] that you can have a conversation with and they'll understand what you're talking about. It varies – you need a mix up. You can't always be with the same age people.' Donald expanded on the value of both age-segregation and integration:

> The more homogeneous, the less rich the experience is. The more heterogeneous the group is, the richer the experience. But it's good for folks to feel comfortable with whoever they're around, and so older folks feel comfortable around older folks, but don't want everybody to be as old as they are. That's an advantage, and disadvantage, to me. I like being around young students, but there's a point where our common interests run out.

Members described wanting to take advantage of the value in learning with their own age group, but they also said they did not want to only be in situations where they were completely segregated on the basis of age. OLLI met these needs because it provided age-segregated learning on a college campus. Margaret said, 'as president I would like to see us do more intergenerational things', and she provided the example of tutoring 'as a gift back to the university'. Yet, she also added, 'I like the age thing. It is what it is, and it works.' Joyce explained how she enjoyed being with her age group but wanted to be able to interact with younger adults:

> I love being around young people, and I never want to live in a retirement community – I've been in those places with my parents, and I saw things I didn't like about it. There were good things about them, and there were things that I think aren't so good, but I like being around young people. I think it helps to keep a person thinking younger. OLLI is both of those things. Because we're affiliated with the university, we get to be around young people, and, then on the other hand, we get to be around people of our own age with the same types of life experiences. We're the Vietnam generation; we all went through that together. We all went through the hippie generation together. Well, at least most of us did, I suppose. We know the Beatles – they're our friends. So, to me it's the best of both worlds. We get to be around young people on campus, and we get to come together as – with our peers.

Members' talk demonstrates that while they typically shied away from categorising age, they expressed interest in sharing educational opportunities with people of a certain age. This motivation was reflected in prior research exploring the centrality of lifelong learner to OLLI members' identities and feelings which distinguished them from both younger learners and older adults in less academic pursuits (McWilliams and Barrett, 2018). Restricting OLLI on the basis of age provided

value to classes because everyone brought a lifetime of learning and experience to the classroom, which was seen as a positive feature of being older. Yet, limiting OLLI to those 50 and over also reflected a larger persistence of age stratification in contemporary culture (Riley, 1971). The inherent result of age stratification is the persistence of ageism, and, subsequently, continued segregation (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2006). Members discussed not wanting to limit their interactions completely to older adults, and they enjoyed being able to have intergenerational interactions outside OLLI classes. Their desire to interact outside their age group may reflect a sense that by keeping in touch with the young, one is able to think more easily about the self as not old, reflecting a desire to separate from the negative implications of ageing. Maintaining age-segregated learning within an age-integrated environment provided the best of both worlds – richer educational experiences and interaction across age cohorts that were unique to the OLLI experience.

## Discussion

Ageing functioned as a consistent background feature in older adults' talk within OLLI that could be drawn to the forefront through discussions of age labels, humour surrounding ageing or identification as part of an older adult organisation. This paper identifies how ageing was manifested in OLLI members' talk and how it reflected positive and negative feelings about being older. Overall, members' ageing talk demonstrates the pervasiveness of ageist stereotypes. Older adults in this organisation shared desires to shield themselves from widespread beliefs of dependency and decline. The unique social features of this organisation – as an age-segregated educational programme with classes held primarily on a university campus – provided members with the ability to embrace many of the positive aspects of ageing in their talk, while strategically avoiding the negative.

Avoiding the use of common terms for older adults provided one means by which OLLI members could escape being labelled as old. The organisation was a 'lifelong learning institute' for 'adults 50+', thus providing a chronological designation, but perhaps no connotations of value. Members generally identified distaste in applying any of the other labels for older adults to themselves – contrary to findings by Weijters and Geuens (2006) that 'senior' was viewed largely positively in a Belgian sample. Yet, avoiding these terms can result in a patronising use of 'young' instead of 'old'. Gibson (2000) identifies the inherent absurdity of referring to older people, enjoying their later lives, as young. He further argues that the issue lies not with the age labels themselves, but the stereotypes and ageist implications that have become associated with these common terms. Additional research on the meaning ascribed to different age labels by older, and younger, adults is needed.

Members' discussions of age distinctions provided further insight on their feelings about being older. Younger members differentiated themselves from older members, as one of the unique features of OLLI is the wide range of ages found among members, even though it is technically an age-segregated organisation. Lack of a true starting point for old age, aside from the point at which one's body or abilities are deemed as being in a state of obvious decline, create a strong sense of separation between the young-old and the old-old (or the third age from the fourth age), thus giving younger members greater power in labelling those who are older (Degnen, 2007; Gilleard and Higgs, 2010). Social comparisons

establishing the self as not old shield one from age stereotypes – at least for the time being (Rothermund and Brandtstädter, 2003). However, members were generally also willing to identify as distinct from those who were much younger, and future research should consider the multi-dimensional nature of labelling as old – when one becomes older than some but still younger than others.

Part of the willingness to separate the old from the young reflected the value OLLI members saw in age-segregation within their classes. Ageing was framed as accumulation of wisdom, according greater worth to later life (Lin *et al.*, 2004). While their age group provided intelligence that younger adults did not possess, members did discuss not wanting to segregate themselves by age completely. Interaction with youth was refreshing and enjoyable for members, and it also enabled avoiding feelings of actually being old, providing the possibility that cross-age comparisons may allow identification with younger counterparts, positively influencing self-perceptions (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015). Future research would benefit from more thorough examination of the impacts of different forms of age-segregation and integration on older adults' perceptions of their ageing selves.

When OLLI members made negative comments about ageing, they often presented these comments tongue-in-cheek, demonstrating a sense of humour about ageing. Sharing common ageing experiences through jokes could serve as a coping mechanism to unite members. However, joking about older adults as trouble-makers, one of the most common references, carried several possible interpretations. Trouble-makers could be perceived as children who need to be controlled, maintaining ageist beliefs about dependency in later life. Alternatively, trouble-makers who feel free to violate social norms without repercussions create an assumption that they hold power and ultimately are able to subvert negative stereotypes. A third reading could also suggest trouble-making allowed members to express feelings of agency, while avoiding actually needing to demonstrate it and running the risk of exposing themselves as an ageing adult. While humour carries positive benefits in later life (Solomon, 1996; Berk, 2001), understandings of ageing humour need to be studied in more detail. Ageing humour was infrequently encountered in the setting I studied, but the way in which it was used provides support for tolerance of – or at least immunity to – negative stereotypes through ageist jokes (Ford and Ferguson, 2004). Data that more closely examine how older adults interpret others' ageing humour will provide greater insight into the effects that these jokes have on their personal feelings about ageing.

Ageing talk, which simultaneously accepts one's age and rejects what it means, is likely not particular only to this group of older adults but especially useful for making sense of how OLLI members resist ageism. Compared with many older adults, OLLI members are younger and better off socio-economically (Alfageme, 2007; Simone and Cesena, 2010), facilitating greater choice and wellbeing, as well as an ability to challenge ageist stereotypes, at least with regard to the self. As with 'doing difference', age is an 'ongoing, methodical, and situated accomplishment' (West and Fenstermaker, 1995: 30), as well as another structure used to transmit social inequality. However, age seems to be one inequality we are somewhat comfortable with – both admitting its existence and accepting its perpetuation. As Jönson (2013) explained, old age remains the marginalised group we all know we will eventually join, but we can construct our later lives as qualitatively different,

distancing ourselves from previous notions of older adults. Age carries greater flexibility for OLLI members, in that they are not always clearly part of the minority group, and other forms of privilege – race, class or gender – can provide protection from ageism. This analysis theorises ageing talk as a process whereby differences in age are interactionally constituted so that the speaker can claim to be younger (either chronologically or based on traits/ability) from the older *other* even while identifying the self as an older person. Ageing talk was thus particularly useful for OLLI members, who recognised the stereotypes attached to being labelled as older but also felt age – when combined with their levels of education, social class status and membership in OLLI – allowed distinguishing the self as ageing well.

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