

PAOLETTI, ISABELLA. *Being an older woman: A study in the social production of identity*. Mahweh, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998. Pp. Xiv, 94. Hb. \$36.0, pb. \$19.95.

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Until comparatively recently, the lion's share of scholarly interest in the process of aging -- and its attendant socio-cultural outcomes -- has been largely situated within the fields of social gerontology, sociology, and anthropology. Increasingly though, language scholars have turned their attention to the ways in which communication practices change across the life span (see, Nussbaum & Coupland, 1995) and are integral to the social construction of aging (e.g., Nussbaum & Coupland, 1993). Especially new is the focus on the ways that age is communicatively accomplished across differing cultural contexts, including non-Anglophone settings (e.g., Cai, Giles, & Noels, 1998; Giles, Harwood, Pierson, Clément, & Fox, 1998).

As such, this book, written from a social constructionist perspective, makes an important contribution to the field of intergenerational communication by providing an insightful description of what it means to communicatively realize the identity of an older, Italian woman. In the process, the volume offers a substantive treatment of the European Older Woman's Action Project (1991-1994), a partly Italian initiative intended to empower, stimulate, and recognize older women, while promoting contacts between older women's groups across the European Community. The women taking part in the Action Project in Perugia, Italy, were members of five Senior Citizen Centers. Prior to

the inception of this initiative, the older women had little influence on the administration of these centers despite forming the majority of their membership.

The author took an active part in the project while gathering data, and contributed to many of the videotaped discussions, providing the raw material relevant to her analysis of older women's identity production. In so doing, she gained a special understanding of the meaning of aging, not just as a biological fact, but in terms of the continual social construction and reconstruction of what it is to be an older woman.

In the introduction, the author provides a rationale for her study by arguing that men and women experience aging in very different ways. While age discrimination, in general, may be endemic, women can suffer double jeopardy in terms of ageism and sexism. Also, women live longer resulting in more health and financial problems in later life. Yet, as Paoletti suggests, older women are generally "invisible" in terms of research and social policy. Revealing how older women's identities are constructed, as well as how they are affected by institutional intervention, allows for an understanding of the processes of marginalization, and may suggest practices that could help mitigate them.

For the purposes of the study, Paoletti treats identity as a situational concept negotiated in varying contexts, and influenced by individual characteristics as well as socially- and institutionally-defined categories. The author takes an ethnomethodological approach (Garfinkel, 1967), arguing that the interactional, everyday, negotiation of identity is salient in the conversations heard in ordinary settings -- specifically, in the videotaped and audio-taped conversations of the older women participating in Action Project meetings. Transcripts and analyses of these

conversations are provided throughout the book as illustrations of how membership of certain social categories influence identity, how women define themselves as older, and the influence of institutional interventions on gender and personal identities.

While providing the opportunity to gain some unique insights into the experiences of older Italian women, one problem arising from the methodology lies in the translation of the women's dialogue. It becomes apparent that, occasionally, meaning is lost in the process, that the meaning is highly open to interpretation, and, at worst, the dialogue is singularly opaque. That said, the data provide richness and depth often missing from more quantitative work using experimental manipulations, content codings, or paper and pencil questionnaires.

Chapter two describes the influence of social membership categories on older women's identities. Paoletti discusses how limitations due to age can be recognized as salient or not, depending on the context. The women identified with being "old" when justifying their limitations but, generally, preferred to deny aging by reserving the label "old" for "others" (see also Coupland & Coupland, 1993). In terms of social comparison and distancing, the "others" who appeared to be classified as "old" were the frail or institutionalized elderly (cf. Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991). In this way, the women maintained a positive personal identity by differentiating themselves from old age categories.

Although the author describes a tendency by the women in this study to disassociate themselves from their age category, there are occasions when aging is constructed in a positive way in that some participants view their aging as developmentally-liberating. This view implicitly reflects a life span perspective that

posits gain/loss stages throughout life, and emphasizes heterogeneity in the aging experience.

Hence, in Chapter three, the author shows how women construct a positive approach to aging - when "being an older woman" comes to be seen as counting for something. As being older is defined as a special qualification for certain institutional services or interests, then denial and distancing become less prevalent. This phenomenon occurred for the women of the Action Project when their social and international activities became the focus of attention for different institutional agendas. They became an information resource and were seen as consciously constructing a positive image through their plays, poetry, and activism. Under these conditions, age is seen not as a communicative marker of decrement (as posited by, say, the communication predicament model), but of prestige. It seems that the reciprocity of interaction between institutional interests and the way older women construct their identities can lead to positive outcomes with regard to health and productive life expectations.

Of course, with respect to autonomy of action as it relates to gender and age identity, institutions may support or prohibit, help, or hinder. Thus, in Chapter four, Paoletti shows how conflicts arise between institutions affecting the Women's Action Project. The social vitality of the participants (as older women) is maintained by using appeals to one legitimizing institution (the Equal Opportunities Commission) to counter attacks from another less supportive institution (the councilors of the Senior Citizen Centers -- mostly men). Here, one is reminded of the tenets of structuration theory (e.g., Giddens, 1984) which suggests that institutional systems are continually

maintained and enacted by its members who are, in turn, empowered or constrained by the system (see Williams & Nussbaum, 2000).

The women of the Action Project were able to reconstruct the practices taking place within the Senior Citizen Centers, previously controlled by the male members and defined by the women as "male spaces." Indeed, the circularity between identity production and enactment of institutions by its members is explicitly highlighted by Paoletti when she describes the way the women were able to use communication practices to facilitate institutional change as well as identity production. This communicative process is the subject of Chapter five.

The dialogue of two women participants in two potentially confrontational institutional settings (different Senior Citizen Centers) is contrasted to show how their differing personal identities -- mirrored in their communication styles -- can influence, and are influenced by, institutional context. Not surprisingly, the woman with somewhat more assertive communication skills won the day, while the woman with less effective communication skills did not. However, Paoletti suggests that this outcome depended not only on the individual identities concerned, but also on the climate exhibited in the institutional setting. Clearly, the reciprocal relationship between personal identity, communicative practices and institutional settings is complex; one that the author might have explored in much greater depth.

Additionally, with regard to the concept of social identity (see Tajfel, 1978), there are several theoretical perspectives that address language and aging, such as the intergroup model (Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995), the communication predicament model (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986), and the stereotype activation model

(Hummert, 1994). However, while much relevant cross-disciplinary research is cited throughout the book, any reference to, or discussion of, these socio-psychological theories is unfortunately absent. This oversight represents something of a lost opportunity to make valuable theoretical connections, and thereby increase understanding of an older woman's identity and how it impacts well being.

The value of this book lies in the emphasis placed upon heterogeneity among elderly women and their ability, when empowered, to construct more positive identities and outcomes for themselves. By highlighting the role of institutional help in facilitating and reflecting positive age identities, this book will be of particular help to those charged with the care and well being of older people. In addition, this concise volume demonstrates clearly the importance of the communicative process necessary to the social construction of age, and how this may have positive or negative outcomes. Thus, it should also be of interest to social psychologists of language and those researching social identity and stigmatization.

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