

Paper from the Conference “INTER: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden”, organised by the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS) in Norrköping 11-13 June 2007. Conference Proceedings published by Linköping University Electronic Press at [www.ep.liu.se/ecp/025/](http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/025/). © The Author.

## **Making Yourself Matter. Class-Grandparent Experiences**

Anna Sofia Lundgren

Ageing and Living Conditions Programme, ALC,  
Department of Culture and Media, Umeå University, Sweden  
[annasofia.lundgren@kultmed.umu.se](mailto:annasofia.lundgren@kultmed.umu.se)

This paper deals with experiences of being active as so called Class-Grandparents – elderly visiting and helping out in schools on a regular basis – and the starting point is that working as a Class-Grandparent is one way to create a space on which to exercise agency and obtain a productive position in old age. The aim of the paper is to describe and discuss how elderly persons that have been engaged as Class-Grandparents talk about their experiences – experiences that are actually described as producing an intelligible subjectivity as one of its main effects.

## Making Yourself Matter

It has been suggested that in response to circumstances where cultural recognition and cultural continuity is something that does not come by itself, individual actors will attempt to find or create spaces that lend some form of predictability to life (Biggs 1993; Phillipson & Biggs 1998). It might be added that such attempts also comprise the constitution of arenas for exercise of agency, and positions from which an individual subject may speak and be recognised. This paper deals with experiences of being active as so called Class-Grandparents – elderly visiting and helping out in schools on a regular basis – and the starting point is that working as a Class-Grandparent is one way to actually create such above-mentioned spaces. The aim of the paper is to describe how persons that have been engaged as Class-Grandparents talk about their experiences – experiences that are actually described as producing an intelligible subjectivity as one of its main effects.

All images of identities, or subject positions, can be seen as productive of social and cultural hierarchies; they have, using Foucault's terminology, power/knowledge effects. Taking a constructivist perspective on ageing implies a view on stories as being in themselves productive or performative. Every story is also viewed as dependent not just upon the experiences of the teller, but on available ways to interpret these experiences (Scott 1992). Qualitative in-depth interviews have been carried out with 5 Class-Grandparents and 2 teachers.

### *Nostalgic Notions*

There were in the interviewee's stories a certain amount of what might be called nostalgic notions; the experienced present was recurrently contrasted with a somewhat romanticised idea of the past.

If my *age* matter? Hmm... I think *people* matter in school, but yes, I do believe that it's specifically important that I am an elderly person. I can keep the moral values of past times alive. Loosing the connection to morality is the biggest threat today. Morality... yes, it was certainly better before. (Åke)

Of course, the word nostalgia was itself never mentioned, probably because it is otherwise so frequently used dismissively; being called nostalgic might even be interpreted as an insult; as an accusation of not being modern enough! Maybe it is sound to say that nostalgia and modernity do constitute an interesting constellation; nostalgia being the opposite of the go-ahead of modernity and at the same time in the midst of modernity's anxiety (e.g. Giddens 1991; Miller 1994). But the nostalgic notions expressed by the interviewees can also be said to express nostalgia *for* modernity, a reflection enunciated from a position experienced as postmodern, as fragmented and uncertain, where modernity by way of symbolic inversion comes to stand for clearness and simplicity; a sense of reviewableness and transparency.

In the interviewee's stories, nostalgia was present both as purely *restorative nostalgia*, attempting at reconstruction of a lost past or condition; and as *reflective nostalgia*, thriving algetically in the distressing longing itself, referring perhaps to existential, yearning feelings of loss and uncertainty (cf. Boym 2001). Nostalgia was used as strategy, or a mode, to express certain opinions, feelings and expressions of self.

You're not supposed to say that everything was better before, are you, but I sometimes wonder if it wasn't. I mean, when I was young we looked after one another, and in school... you wouldn't dare speak those words that you hear from the youth of today. There was more respect in the old days. I don't know if my presence and the experience that I bring to school can make that happen again, but I think that it's important to

remember how it was because there were some good things and *it breaks my heart* that they are not remembered. I think of that a lot, about the feelings of security that I think we've lost, although going back is perhaps not exactly... no that's not what I want. (Astrid)

Looking at the above quote, it is possible to recognise the way the interviewee is distancing her own self from a position as someone who glorifies the past, probably due to the negative connections associated with this position, and at the same time she reiterates the view that it actually was. The past – and the qualities that she is connecting to this past – is concretely described in two sentences: “we looked after one another” and “There was more respect”. These qualities are not subjected to any restorative zeal, even though she hints to this by formulating an uncertainty as to whether her presence might make a difference. This careful way of formulating herself is again distancing her from a scorned retrogressive position. What is important, she says, is to *remember* how it was; the oblivion that she means pervades the present is breaking her heart. The choice of the metaphorical expression “it breaks my heart” together with the revealing of the fact that she often thinks of this loss of *something* might be said to display a reflective nostalgia. Here she denies that going back is an option. That is not what she wants. At this point she looked sad. It was almost as if she was mourning this loss of something that she could not pin down, and that can never recur.

By not being specific as to what “look after” and “respect” really mean she manages to use the expressions as empty signifiers; signifiers defined with a vague signified that mean different things to different people and as a consequence manage to attract and include persons that would define the terms, and their potential political implications, in opposite ways. The nostalgic character of the expression also romanticises what is said. A memory might invoke troublesome recollections, but the nostalgia is recharging them and giving them an air of positive effulgence.

What is also happening as Astrid as an elderly woman recounts her experiences in this way is the articulation that connects her dictum with her self and her age: the performance is performative, a performative that works on (at least) two levels. Firstly, by repeating the nostalgic genre and the idea of a supposedly “better past”, she consolidates this idea, thus reproducing the possibility and intelligibility of a notion where the social development is one of deterioration. Secondly, by thinking of this repeating in terms of performativity we also have to recognise that what happens in such a speech act where the past is nostalgically emphasised on behalf of the present, is the simultaneous constitution of the speaking subject. Perhaps it is even justifiable to say that the nostalgic notion precedes the speaking subject; if a statement is successful it is not because the subject has successfully carried out his or her intention, but because what is said echoes prior statements and accumulates their force of authority (cf. Butler 1997).

Of course, the awareness of the nostalgic discourse makes it possible for Astrid as a subject to use it strategically in order to achieve something, but in the light of the theoretical thoughts outlined above it is also important to consider the aspects of subject-production that are taking place, because there are aspects of the simultaneous constitution of the speaker's subjectivity that are central to the understanding of how meaning of old age is constituted and experienced.

Of course nostalgia does not at all have to be connected to older people. It is a feeling or a state of mind available for all ages. There is however a strong discourse connecting nostalgic feelings with old age, a connection that often results in the belief that old people are less modern. This definition as less modern makes the speaker performing a nostalgic speech act bereaved of political power and significance, and the speech act itself risks becoming marginalised.

If we view the above quote as representation – which of course it is – it is possible to see how nostalgia works as a two-edged sword. It seems to be an emotional antidote to politics, as Boym (2001) has pointed out, but – perhaps therefore? – remains an effective political tool. The very poetics of nostalgic expressions – as long as they are not explicitly called *nostalgic* and thus deemed retrogressive – reaches out to a lot of people by not being specific and by appealing to the feelings of the listeners, and not primarily to their intellect. The references to “how it was” also positions the speaker as a person with the experiences of, and knowledge about, this period of time, a position that renders the speaker authority *as* an elderly person. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to refer to the anthropological debates on reflexive writing, where the writing of poetic and messy texts is sometimes thought of as using evoked emotion as a method for establishing claims to authority: by making the strange *seem* familiar and, paradoxically, by breaking down the hierarchical barrier between writer and reader (cf. Denzin 1997).

One dominant discourse on old age emphasises bereavement and loss on the fields of reproduction and production as people retire from work (production) and hold a more marginal place in reproduction interpreted as well as family responsibilities as material consumption (all of these of course being strongly influenced by gender, social class and ethnic belongings).

None of the interviewees took this kind of bereavement, and the victimised position potentially resulting from it, as their starting-point. Rather they all positioned themselves as modern agents; as free individuals, being in authority and freely choosing their ways of life. This can be understood as a consequence of the individualism of modern times, where the position as a victim certainly might give some benefits, but where a position of active agency is much more rewarding.

### *Understanding Old Age*

When old age is discussed nowadays the need for more differentiated terms is often mentioned. “Young-old” and “old-old”; the “go-go” and the “no-go”, or the “welllderly” and the “illlderly”, are all denominations suggested to point out the difficulties of colliding persons with very different physical abilities and social circumstances into one category.

It is important to recognise how there is a powerful moral charge to these dichotomies. Not seldom is a “failure” in performing a healthy and active lifestyle seen as an individual short-coming, that actually risks defining the identity of the “failing” subject.

Another way to conceptualise old age today is by using the word “ageless”. Some older people seem to construct lifestyles that oppose the stereotypes of what old age is; so called snowbirds spending their winters in warmer areas is one example, which also visualises how the choice of an ageless identity is conditioned by for example economic assets. The interviewees could all be said to occupy ageless positions as they resisted the more narrow cultural definitions implicit in the processes that assign to older persons more sedentary, passive qualities and positions. Instead, they all supported a more productive view on ageing, a view that is most certainly a very strong norm/discourse in itself. At the same time they all positioned themselves *as elderly*; it was the fact that they were old that guaranteed them access to the quality that was most often emphasised: experience.

The use of the active verbal form “position” here points to how the capability of thinking politics and identity today depends on a theory, and a vocabulary, of the subject as a decentralised agent. At first, such a vocabulary of a decentralised, detotalised subject seems to contrast the agency evoked by the interviewees. Agency thus needs to be redefined as the possibility to repeat with a difference, viewing construction and decentrality not as opposed to agency, but as the necessary scene of agency (Butler 1990; 1992).

If as a consequence the practice of being a Class-Grandparent and the repetition/retelling of arguments and experiences that took place in the interviews, are viewed as constituent scenes of agency, then what about nostalgia? What positions did nostalgia make possible? How did nostalgia make agency and the possibility to present oneself as a political subject obtainable? How did it make age matter in this process?

Implementing the idea of “important knowledge” (something that was supposedly practiced before, but is now about to be forgotten) made the interviewees important as mediators of this knowledge. This is of course a rather modern feature. It reveals a belief in the existence of true knowledge and stable subjects, and it emphasises the importance of knowing one’s origins. Keeping this knowledge alive was described as being up to themselves, the alternative being a decay into postmodern uncertainty. Using reflective nostalgia when describing this “important knowledge” made it possible to stop and dwell in the consensus of the nostalgic feeling, thus avoiding to go into exactly what this knowledge consisted of.

Maybe it is also possible to see how nostalgia is taking part in an identity-politics pursued while occupying the position *as* an older person – *not* “ageless” (cf. Phillipson & Biggs 1998)? Nostalgia could here be said to make this position possible as long as nostalgia was conducted in a specific way. It was necessary that the nostalgic feeling was something that was on offer (an offering of shared feelings and mutual understandings) or was used strategically to lend authority to the speaker. If nostalgia became instead an adjective, describing and defining the subject, it risked becoming a threat to the position as an older person.

## References

- Biggs, S (1993). *Understanding Ageing*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Boym, S (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Butler, J (1990). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Butler, J (1992). “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism”. In J Butler and J Scott (eds) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J (1997). *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Denzin, N K (1997). *Interpretive Ethnography. Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. London: Sage.
- Giddens, A (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Miller, D (1994). *Modernity – An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.
- Phillipson, C & Biggs, S (1998). “Modernity and Identity: Themes and Perspectives in the Study of Older Adults”. In *Journal of Aging and Identity*, Vol. 3, No. 1.
- Scott, J W (1992). “Experience”. In J Butler & J W Scott (eds) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York: Routledge.