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## Age and stage of life categorizations used to moralize in online social conflict

### Abstract

In much research, age is conceived of as a social fact. Using Membership Categorization Analysis as a methodological framework, this paper investigates how participants in online Facebook groups and discussion fora use age and stage of life categories as a resource to negotiate social norms and moralize on conduct in interactions that involve conflict. We show how age categories are used to link actions and identity categories and how participants use the standardized relational pair 'mother-child' as a justification to moralize. The paper argues that the fact that participants may only have highly limited visual access to co-participants and the fact that participants do not know their co-participants in advance is what makes the use of age and stage of life categorizations to moralize on the conduct of others noteworthy.

### Introduction

Ethnomethodological studies have pointed out that social order is not only locally accomplished, it is also a moral order (Button, 1991; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009). This has been explored in research within Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) that, building on the work of Harvey Sacks (Sacks, 1992), focuses on the various ways in which participants relate so-called membership categories, actions, rights and obligations (Reynolds & Fitzgerald, 2015).

This paper investigates how members in online communities, i.e. interaction that occurs without physical co-presence, moralize on online interactional conduct. It focuses on cases in which a user problematizes the conduct of a co-member, how the participants negotiate how to understand this conduct and whether it should be understood as a breach of norms. In the cases shown, this is accomplished, among other things, by invoking membership categorization devices.

Specifically, the analyses show how membership categories and devices are used to point out how the specific conduct is recognizable as a breach of norms and how the specific occurrence may still be explained, i.e. made sense of. The membership categories and devices that are used recurrently to explain a breach of norms in our data relate to age and stage of life categories. Two interactional patterns are outlined: when a social norm of conduct, according to a participant, is breached, 1) the accused is linked to an age-related membership category and is offered an explanation for the conduct and 2) the accuser is linked to an age related membership category that is used to question his/her entitlement to comment on and make judgements about norms of conduct in the specific instance. The second pattern is found when age is a criterion for group membership. Three cases of conflictual interaction from different Danish online settings are analyzed to illustrate the points mentioned above: 1) part of a comment thread following an online news story, 2) part of a thread from a health discussion forum and 3) part of a thread in a Facebook group. ata is presented below.

In some communities the management of possible breaches of norms and rules have been formalized. In a public online gamer forum, they have an entry dedicated to reporting co-members. When making a report, users simply fill out a form:

A1)

*The player's in-game name: (Heavy and teddy)*

*On which server did the episode occur: ([name])*

*What are you reporting this player for: (calling me things I don't like)*

*Links to proof (Pictures, video and other things): ([link]and the other [link])*

*Other information that may be important: (nope)*

The interaction in the thread that follows the report (not shown) includes links to the online game chat, posts from one of the accused, Heavy, and the accuser, MikeGame, as well as the moderator and will not be analyzed here, but shows that the name calling that MikeGame accuses Heavy of is that Heavy has referred to MikeGame as “a little boy”. Thus, Heavy uses a social category to tease MikeGame, as he implies that his conduct in the game is indicative of that of a little boy. Such a categorization becomes recognizable as teasing in the sense of denigrating him because values and features are associated with being a little boy in the context of playing online games. Specifically, we suggest that membership categorization that designates age and stage of life in contexts of conflict and norm-breaching negotiations is recurrently used to indicate lack of competence relative to what is expected of a full member of the online community. In the case of the online gamer community, “a little boy” might indicate someone who is “not tough enough”.

In the analyses we, as mentioned, focus specifically on instances in which some negotiation of norms emerges between participants, i.e. peers in different online communities. In the first analytical section we will see how the conduct of the person being accused is linked to devices that categorize the accused in terms of his/her (assumed) age and stage of life. Hence, contrary to the report shown above, age and stage of life categorization become resources for explaining, managing and understanding the conduct understood, by some, to be norm breaching. As we argue, these linking practices work both to point to norms of conduct and, with reference to suggested age or stage of life categorization work, account for and explain the specific conduct as well. In the second analytical section, we show how participants may build up entitlements to challenge other people's conduct using age and stage of life categorizations and other social categories associated with these, e.g. parent and child. We show that in both cases the norms and moral judgements about conduct are tied to social categories of the participants such as age and stage of life and that age and stage of life categories afford a special usability and flexibility in terms of their potentially associated features that make them a resource for managing social norms in online communities.

### **Methodology: Categorization as practices**

Much research on social media communication focuses either on theories that explain usage and assessments of its impact (Sundar, 2015), challenges and opportunities (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013), or on classification, by focusing either on content or media affordances (Herring, Stein, & Virtanen, 2013). In this paper, we build on MCA and contribute to it with participants' perspective on social media communication by studying online community members' local management of social norms in online interaction using social categories such as age and stage of life categories as resources to moralize on conduct.

MCA is an approach that is closely related, historically and methodologically, to conversation analysis (CA) (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002; Schegloff, 2007) and is informed by the analytic mentality of ethnomethodology, which is founded “in the commitment to the inspection of any given single social setting in its distinctively identifying detail and in terms of the specific ‘methods’ (to use a gloss) through

which participants produce a given setting as a sensible phenomenon – sensible, that is, to themselves, in the first place” (Watson, 2015, p. 44).

In accordance with Sacks (Sacks, 1988, 1992), MCA research has shown how participants create, organize and use membership category systems, i.e. devices (Stokoe, 2012), in interaction and how categorization work is used to locally accomplish social and moral organization and order (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009; Jayyusi, 1991). But how is it that the use of social categories is linked to moralization? Sacks (1988) argued that in social interaction, the use of categories is not (always) dependent on truth, “‘style of a person’ or a matter of free choice” (Sacks, 1988, p. 52). Rather, the appropriateness of categories as judged by co-participants is a matter of their fit in terms of relevancies that are dependent on the location in the sequential organization of interaction and the circumstances of it. Furthermore, Sacks (1988) showed how participants in ordinary social interaction may use terms that categorize actions, persons, time or place in relative, i.e. ‘vague’, terms instead of using more ‘precise’ terms that would also be available, and he noted that special conditions may permit the use of such terms. Using such relative terms (i.e. “members’ measurements” (Sacks, 1988)), allows for adaptability to different contexts and for comparison, and Sacks also suggested that the speaker can use categories to make qualified judgements about social action; in Sacks (1988, p. 60)’s words what one does is “offer the product of an educated analysis”.

Age and related categories have been described in terms of how they may be organized with related categories in so-called membership categorization devices (MCDs). When people provide their age as the number of years they have lived, they use a socially created measurement system that is considered to entail ‘precise’ categories (Sacks, 1988). People may also categorize themselves or each other according to age in terms of so-called stage of life categories such as “baby”, “child”, “teenager” and “adult” (Stokoe, 2012). These categories have a hierarchical relationship and are so-called positioned categories that categorize people relative to each other (Sacks, 1988; Stokoe, 2012). Other types of categories may be related to each other in other ways. For example, categories may form so-called standardized relational pairs that carry duties and moral obligations in relation to each other (e.g. “parent-child”, cf. e.g. Reynolds and Fitzgerald (2015)).

Categories can be said to have a special usability that, as mentioned, depends on the sequential context and the circumstances of their use. Generally, age and stage of life categories may be usable social categories in many contexts because all persons may be categorized according to these measures (even if they don’t know their age themselves). However, whether age and stage of life categories are judged to be accurate may depend on the speaker’s knowledge about the categorized person’s age and/or stage of life. In co-present social interaction, some identity categories are visually available (Watson, 2015, p. 34), and this may apply to age and stage of life categories to some extent. In online communities, participants do not have visual access to each other and may not have met in person, but they may have access to personal information about each other through written texts and photos. Nevertheless, as we show, participants in online communities make judgements about people they have never met and do not have (much) visual access to. Furthermore, these circumstances may, we argue, influence how and why age and stage of life categories work as a resource to manage norm negotiations in online communities. For example, we show how age is suggested as a possible explanation for the conduct of others and pointed to as norm breaching in several instances. Hence, in this way, participants seem to orient to the lack of visual access to information about certain social categories relating to their co-participants.

Membership categories are associated with features and are often related to rights and responsibilities of people categorized using a specific category. For example, Reynolds and Fitzgerald (2015) show how the predicate ‘caring about your children’s future’ becomes a value that is tied to being a parent, i.e. a norm

that can be expected of parents. They also show how participants employ different linking strategies between features and categories such that linking may be accomplished as an explicit 'worked up' tie ("category-tied"), constructed as a feature naturally bound to a category ("category-bound") or only implied ("category-predicated"). When participants link action to categories in one of these ways, they indicate that social norms are "category-based" (Reynolds & Fitzgerald, 2015) and may be occasioned.

In this paper, we follow this line of investigation by analyzing how age and stage of life categories are related to other social categories such as those of mother and child and to certain features related to knowledge and experiences. As we show, these categorization practices are used to invoke social norms as linked to the identity categories 1) to account for, i.e. explain, their occurrence while maintaining that they are inappropriate as social action and 2) to manage entitlements related to accusing others for breaching social norms.

## **Data**

The data for this article is collected from different Danish online settings. We have built up a collection of conflictual interactions in which categories within the MCD "stage of life" in different online interaction settings are used: in this paper we analyze one comment thread following an online news story, one discussion forum interaction and one extract of Facebook interaction. Data was collected in 2016 (Facebook interaction and online forum), and 2012 (newspaper comments).

In the "five guiding principles for doing MCA", Stokoe (2012, p. 280) recommend collecting data from different sorts of settings, either "purposive" or "unmotivated". The process of our data collection started out as unmotivated by noticing social conflicts in different settings, and it ended up being purposive because we noticed that age was an important category in the conflicts that we encountered (cf. Georgalou, 2015). Specifically, the case of the comment thread following an online news story was part of a larger corpus of comment threads on a newspaper site, inductively collected, and having written about arguments around the orthographic standard norm (Rathje 2016) in this data, we remembered this particular case, where age was involved in the conflict. The same method is used in the case of the discussion forum interaction that was collected for research on how participants understand and deal with experienced bodily problems (Andersen 2015), and we recalled this example as being one where age played a part in the conflict. In the case of Facebook interaction from a group where verbally assaulting each other is the purpose of the group, this data was inductively collected in order to explore aggressive language usage in greater detail, and the specific case was remembered for the inclusion of age in the social conflict. Finally, the online gaming example used above was retrieved on the basis of a Google search.

In terms of ethics, the guidelines from AoIR (the Association of Internet Researchers) draw attention to two important variables when deciding whether and how to gather and use data from the Internet (Myrendal, 2015): the sensitivity of the shared information and the openness of the medium (Markham, Buchanan, & Committee, 2012). In the case of the discussion forums, they are public, the information shared is not private and they are anonymized through the use of pseudonyms. In the case of the closed Facebook group (with over 50,000 users), it is not public, although anyone can apply for membership like we have done. We therefore contacted the participants for permission to use the example in this article, and they gave us their written consent for this purpose on the premise that their identity is not revealed. We only approached Facebook members whose data we aimed to include in publications. Unfortunately, given that the data was collected in 2016, future publications would rely on these individuals remaining contactable,

which may not always be the case. We attempted to publish a general disclaimer in the forum, but the administrators would not allow this.

In all cases, the users are identified automatically by usernames or personal names that they have signed up with on the online platforms. In order to anonymize this identity marker in this article, we have changed the names used to identify participants in the data. Furthermore, we have translated the data from Danish into English to present it to a non-native audience, and this impedes the identification of participants through online searches for the text.

## **AGE AND STAGE OF LIFE CATEGORIZATION TO EXPLAIN NORM-BREACHING CONDUCT**

In different communities, different conduct may be challenged and for various reasons. In the following post, which is from a discussion forum that is part of a Danish tabloid news media website, the participants are commenting on a news story.

As part of this discussion, one participant, Jon, questions the “laughable” nature of another participant’s (Mads’s) joke and a conflict then escalates between the participants (Posts B1-B5, omitted). Some participants side with Jon, but then Bolette provides support for Mads and reprimands Jon:

B6<sup>1</sup>) Bolette: *Mads; Yes quite funny! ;o) I think the ones going shopping were game!!!! ;o)*

*Jon; well, you can judge for yourself whether your comment was fine, there are 38 minuses and the funny one has PLUSS 30 ha ;-P*

In her post, Bolette acknowledges Mads for making a funny comment, whereas she questions the appropriateness of Jon’s action by referring to the amount of likes and dislikes his comment got, thus making the social norms of the community a relevant topic.

The first to respond to this, Einar, turns Bolette’s action into a source of interactional trouble by requesting a clarification of the meaning of one of the words in her post:

B7) Einar: *What does PLUSS mean?*

Einar requests information about the linguistic meaning of “PLUSS”, thereby flagging up a source of trouble relating to a lack of understanding of a written word engendered by Bolette’s utterance. Thus, a specific resource – written language and, hence, spelling –used to accomplish social interaction in this forum, is singled out as a possible source of trouble, and thus written proficiency is treated as a resource for displaying competence in the forum. The next responses show that other participants do not have issues with understanding. In fact, it becomes clear that the request for information is understood as a strategy to question Bolette’s linguistic competence. First, Palads contributes with a response to Einar:

B8) Palads: *Einar, it means you are ret\*rded since you have to ask*

Palads formats his response formally as an answer to Einar’s question, however, Palads uses his response to categorize Einar as unintelligent based on his action. In doing so, he ties an action indicating lack of

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers in all examples refer to their placement in a thread.

understanding based on a spelling mistake to lack of intelligence, i.e. being “ret\*rded”. This predicate may work on two levels; lack of understanding is linked to intelligence and the action of indicating lack of understanding by referring to a spelling mistake as a response to a challenge is implied as a non-cooperative rhetorical action of sinking low. As we will elaborate on in the second analytical section, this questions Palads’ entitlement to make judgements on another person’s conduct.

Jon also contributes with a response to Einar’s question, as he does in fact provide an explanation of the meaning of the word, thus acknowledging the spelling mistake as a possible source of trouble:

*B9) Jon: It means plus, but it may be that bolete is not very old, so be nice!*

After he has provided an explanation of the meaning of a word, Jon continues with a reprimand addressed to Einar, and he provides a possible explanation for Bolette’s lack of linguistic competence: “it may be that Bolette is not very old” which, according to Jon, should be taken into account in social interaction when making judgements about the conduct of others. Thereby he, like Palads, also treats Einar’s action as not being an innocent information-seeking question and as a source of trouble. Being “not very old” may be read as “not yet being an adult”, i.e. as a category-implicative description that places Bolette on the MCD stage of life as hierarchically below the adult stage. According to this logic, written language proficiency may be expected from adults as a norm, but not from children or teenagers. Following this logic, Bolette should not be blamed if she is not an adult. Thus the norm is constructed as category-based (Reynolds & Fitzgerald, 2015). It may also be noted that this explanation is produced as a possibility (“it may be”). The fact that participants do not have access to information which may be used to identify others in terms of age allows for a participant to account for Bolette’s conduct by providing suggestions, and participants may orient to such categories as possibilities only. It should also be noted that Bolette herself does not position her action as socially or morally accountable, i.e. as requiring an excuse, an explanation or further action.

What constitutes the norm breach is negotiated, as participants single out elements from a previous post and challenge it by linking action to the competence of the person who formulated the post by using categories or category-implicative descriptions. This case shows that a category-implicative description that places a person low on the hierarchically organized MCD stage of life may work as a resource that both acknowledges specific conduct (a spelling mistake) as breaching social norms and at the same time explains, i.e. normalizes, its occurrence with reference to specific identity categories of the accused. As we saw in the example, other devices may be used as well, as in post B8, Palads ties Einar to a category that indexes intelligence based on his conduct. In contrast to stage of life and age used as a device to account for norm breaches, categorizing someone on the basis of their intelligence has other implications using the predicate “ret\*rded”, for example that such a predicate is steady and is not hierarchically organized in an MCD and therefore does not imply a natural development that occurs with the passage of time.

In the following online interaction from a public Danish health discussion forum, social norms are also treated as category-based, and in this case, action is linked to stage of life in order to potentially explain another person’s conduct as well. In the first post in the thread “metabolism pills”, which is later challenged, WR1 invites forum members to provide information or experiences with metabolism medicine:

*C1) WR1 Metabolism pills*

*I was thinking of some that are legal I have read about several who got some at the doctor’s but they are all different brands so I just wanna know if there was anyone who knew which were best and don’t damage the body*

The title of the post in example C1 indicates a topic of the post: “Metabolism pills”, and the post itself may be read as a specification of that topic, using pronouns (“some”; “which”) and an adjective (“several”) that may refer back to other people seeking pills. This strategy leaves co-participants with possible challenges in terms of how to make sense of WR1’s post. Furthermore, WR1 does not give any information about herself in terms of a presentation of medical problems that might have led her to consult the forum. This is common. WR2, however, does not ask for specific details or make helpful suggestions. Instead, WR2 makes a judgement of WR1 as a person based on her interpretation of WR1’s actions in the first post:

### C2) WR1 Metabolism pills

*If a person has received medicine from his/her doctor, it is medicine given on the basis of that person’s health condition. Prescribed medicine is always exclusively for personal use. You wish – apparently without consulting the doctor, to affect your metabolism. You are a very brave person, I think. If you think you have problems with your metabolism, you should have it checked by the doctor who can then treat it based on the results. I am actually deeply shocked that there are people who would just randomly take various drugs without knowing what damage they can do. In a different ballgame, I don’t understand that young people have the courage to buy something from strangers at a disco. They play with their lives and mobility and so do you if you take any medicine that you buy from total strangers – including some from addresses on the Internet. NN might tell you that some drug has had a positive effect on them, but that doesn’t mean that it is good for you. BUT – you can bring the message to your doctor and there ask if he has anything he could give you.*

In this case, WR1’s conduct is treated as norm breaching by WR2. More specifically, WR2 accuses WR1 for intending to buy medicine online without consulting her doctor. This accusation is based on the limited information provided by WR1 and makes assumptions (“apparently”) and generalizations (“a person”; “people”) and uses conditional formulations (Sneijder & Te Molder, 2005).

WR2 also uses membership categorization to link conduct to potential characteristics of the accused even though WR1 did not provide much personal information about herself or in any way position her conduct as socially problematic. WR2 begins by indicating her understanding of norms related to medication. WR2 then indicates an understanding that WR1’s intention with the post is to bypass this standard and is, on those grounds, assigned the quality “brave”. Hence, actions and quality of person are tied. To be brave is an attribute that often has positive connotations but used here it may work to imply that WR1 knows what she is doing (or implying) and is intentionally choosing to take a risk in order to reach a goal. Implicit intention ascription through quality attribution, as in this example, may be used to pursue accountability of the challenged person. In contexts such as political discourse, a procedural relational pairing device, in which intention-avowal is related morally and procedurally to action as a next step, is common (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 354). By using this device, a sense of public accountability may be generated if, for example, a politician admits to having some intention, but has not (yet) conducted some action which should morally and procedurally follow according to the moral pairing mechanism. The case analyzed here, may be seen as a version of this device; WR2 attributes a value to WR1 and indicates how she should act in order to live up to that category without conducting morally accountable actions.

WR2 continues to moralize on the conduct of WR1 as she makes an analogy between WR1’s presumed intentions and the actions of young people. She also attributes a quality to young people, namely that they possess, “courage”, which she also attributed to WR1 (“you are a very brave person”) based on the claim that members of this category buy drugs from strangers without knowing what they contain. Although WR2 introduced this topic not as a comparison but as “a different ballgame”, now WR2 makes the point that the

stories may be seen as analogies in the sense that the implications of the actions are similar: “they play with their lives and mobility”, i.e. their actions index risky behavior in terms of health and wellbeing. Reference is also made to the specific affordances for identification and the challenges with identifying information sources and recipients online: “*and so do you if you take any medicine that you buy from total strangers – including some from addresses on the Internet*”. WR2 ends her post by once again advising WR1 on what she can do.

Through the analogy, WR2 offers WR1 a potential membership category that she uses to make sense of what she understands to be WR1’s intention: buying medicine online without consulting a doctor. The category offered is a specific group of “young people”, namely the ones who engage in risky behaviour. It is offered through an analogy between actions constructed as category-based for this group and WR2’s descriptions of WR1’s intentions, indications of similar attributes and indications of similar implications of normatively expected (i.e. category-based) actions as well as WR1’s performed or assumed actions. Hence, this analogy may work to indicate that WR2 views WR1’s actions as possibly category-based, i.e. they may be explained with reference to social categories, and as accountable, i.e. as problematic, in this case risky and dangerous. In Sacks’ words, it may be a way of offering “an educated analysis” (1988, p. 60) in the sense that WR1’s actions are both challenged and potentially explained with reference to social categories. As in example B9, stage of life is suggested as a possibility to explain WR1’s conduct only. In fact, by offering an analogy in which a stage of life category occurs, WR2 only seems to suggest that she judges WR1 to act *like* a risky young person, not that she necessarily *is* one. As stages of life are hierarchically organized, WR2 thereby also potentially accuses WR1 of acting immaturely.

Some days after WR2’s response, WR1 responds to WR2 in a post indicating that WR2 misunderstood her:

### C3) WR1 Metabolism pills

*To WR2 There is something you totally misunderstood I will contact my doctor and get them from her but there are just so many different ones on the market that I wanted to know whether there was anyone with experience of some that worked because then I would ask her if I could also take those. I know there is a risk from just buying something online and taking it and I would never do that.... I am 24 and know what is dangerous and what is safe. It was certainly never my intention to play with my life at all.*

In example C3, WR1 indicates an understanding that WR2 has misunderstood WR1’s intentions, and she specifies her plans. WR1 also specifically deals with the categorizations of her by WR1. She does that by indicating her knowledge about buying drugs online – “there is a risk”, thus confirming WR2’s understanding of that action as indexing risky behaviour, i.e. “courage”, whereas she denies belonging to the group of people who would act in this way. She also deals with the MCD stage of life that WR2 offered as a potential category through analogy; she indicates her chronological age “I am 24”, i.e. a ‘precise’ term rather than the stage of life category “young people” and links her age to knowledge by adding to this information “and know what is dangerous and what is safe”. By implication, therefore, knowledge is linked to age. By indicating these facts and claims and linking them, she rejects the categorization of her as belonging to the group of young “courageous” people who take unnecessary risks regarding their health, but she does not attempt to refute that there is a link between age and risky behaviour. Thus, the category-based norms suggested by WR2 are not refuted, but WR1 uses facts to deny that she belongs to the category suggested.

## **AGE AND STAGE OF LIFE CATEGORIZATION TO MANAGE ENTITLEMENTS TO ACCUSE OTHERS OF NORM-BREACHING CONDUCT**

The online communities that we investigate are organized by peers, and some of them, as we saw in example 1, have special rights and obligations in terms of sanctioning users for their online behaviour. This means that participants may generally assume equality between the community members in terms of rights and responsibilities, contrary to institutional interaction (such as political discourse between journalists and politicians (Housley, 2002) and doctor-patient interaction (Ten Have, 1991)), and the participants' actions cannot be assumed to be recognizable as indicative of some social or institutional identity category before the categories and the links between the categories and the conduct have been established in interaction, unless established by the online community. The aim of the first analytical section is to show how age and stage of life categories work as a device to link the claimed norm-breaching conduct to the people who conducted the action in ways that maintain an understanding of the conduct as norm-breaching and offer an explanation for the lack of competence of the accused implied by this.

An assumption of equal rights and responsibilities between online community members and often limited knowledge about the other members relating, for example, limited available visual information (Watson, 2015, p. 34) also mean that all community members may contribute to the negotiations of the norms of the community on equal terms, and that someone who accuses others of breaching norms of conduct may be held accountable for that action themselves.

In example B from a discussion forum on a news media website analyzed above, one participant's action was, for example, linked to his (lack of) intelligence by calling him "ret\*rded" after he had pointed out a lack of linguistic competence in terms of spelling in another participant's post. Hence, his entitlement to point to norm breaches in other participants' posts was questioned by linking his own conduct to membership categories.

In some cases, age and stage of life devices are used for that purpose as well. Specifically, we have discovered this practice in two online communities in which age is a defining criterion. Below we present one of these cases, which stems from a closed Facebook group for teenagers<sup>2</sup>.

In this case, it is not a particular action that is pointed out as a breach of norms. Rather Nanna, who has gotten one of the forum administrators, Peter, to identify himself, tags him and problematizes the tone of the community as such and expresses astonishment about the practices that she has witnessed. In the post below, D7, she makes the case that such derogatory behaviour may be harmful to its victims. Hence, Nanna problematizes what to her seems to be the norm of the forum as such and addressing the administrator she urges the community to reflect on the consequences of the behaviour. As in cases B and C, behaviour is linked to age and stage of life, in this case not to a person, but to a group of people, all the members of the forum, and she also uses age and stage of life devices to distance herself from the group as well as to account for why she problematizes the practices of the group:

*D7) Nanna:*

*Peter okay. It's just the general tone here. Wow!!!!!!!!!!!! Is it really how it is? If so, I'm happy that I'm 10 years older! I never had to put up with that! It I know it sounds a bit old fashioned, but don't you think that*

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<sup>2</sup> In this group, "roasting", i.e. verbally assaulting each other, is the norm and the purpose of the group. At the time of data collection, the group had about 50,000 members and had been debated in the media because of the aggressiveness of the interaction. People with a Facebook profile could apply for membership, and the group administrators would decide on the application based on the information available in the profile.

*you MIGHT actually be partly responsible for people, say, committing suicide? And before some smartass starts saying you are too old and bla bla bla yes! I am! And I will slip out again, before I strangle someone's crappykid! But Wow! I just had to say it! OMG it is worrying to think that our children are going to grow up in a society like this* **Nina Rikke Pernille** [these names are tags]

Nanna indicates that she is "10 years older", i.e. she indicates her age relative to the age range expected of the members of the group and thereby distances herself from them by using a round figure that indicates that Nanna presumes that she is a decade, i.e. considerably, older than group members. Consequently, Nanna has herself indicated that she, by implication, does not meet the criteria for membership: as mentioned the forum is closed and specifically for teenagers. Nanna, then, is accountable for participating in the forum anyway, and she clearly refers to that in her post.

In various ways she indicates, with reference to age and stage of life, why she is interfering by pointing out the practices of the forum as problematic. As we argue, in this case age and stage of life is linked to morality in the sense that participants indicate that becoming older may also mean become more sensible and knowledgeable, and with it comes a moral obligation to interfere, for example, when harmful behaviour is witnessed.

First of all, Nanna links the view that she puts forward (that roasting behaviour may be harmful to the victims) to a view that it may be perceived as "old fashioned" by the community members. Hence, she builds in her understanding of their view of her argument and may thereby anticipate such a reaction from the community. The suggestion that an ability to reflect on how one's actions affect others would be considered "old fashioned" for the recipients provides an explanation for why group members would not partake in such a practice of reflecting morally on what they do, and it also contributes to the accounting work of positioning herself as someone who is entitled to moralize. Of course, an "old fashioned" point of view of behaviour does not necessarily have to be put forward by someone who is old, but rather is indicative of behaviour considered to be typical of a time in the past and in that sense may be connected to Nanna who has indicated that she is older than the other members and may at the same time indicate an understanding that people in the past had higher moral values than the teenagers of today.

Secondly, Nanna indicates that group members have behaved in ways that should incur sanctions. Sanctioning or punishing someone for blameworthy behaviour is described as a procedural-relational pairing device, which may be used in interaction, based on an expectation that one (punishment) should follow another (blameworthy behaviour) as a product of common-sense knowledge, as with the case in the data, or be built as a case in interaction (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 349). Nanna takes on the role of someone who could carry out the punishment ("strangle" one of them) and thereby implicitly claims entitlement and possibly an obligation to punish "someone's crappykid" for participating in roasting others. Through that formulation, Nanna takes on a parenting role: Nanna volunteers to punish someone else's child for misconduct, and she positions group members as someone's children. In doing so, she makes use of a standardized relational pair of "parent and child" and thereby invokes specific category-based moral obligations on her own part as someone standing in for a parent. In Reynolds and Fitzgerald (2015)'s view, Nanna is a "challenger" (2015, p. 114) who invokes the failures of the Facebook participants to adhere to moral values and thereby positions herself "higher in the same moral device" (2015, p. 115). Furthermore, she adds: "I just had to say it!", thereby stressing the action of problematizing the roasting behaviour that the forum is also known for as a moral obligation. In this case, then, stage of life ("10 years older" and potentially considered "old fashioned") is linked to the MCD family in which parents and children form a pair. Members of this relational pair normatively have moral rights and obligations to each other. For

example, being a parent normatively involves an educational function, which here is used to claim entitlements to interfere.

Thirdly, and related to the previous point, Nanna indicates that the behaviour that she has witnessed in the forum is illustrative of the kind of society that she envisions for the future: "OMG it is worrying to think that our children are going to grow up in a society like this". Again, she positions herself as someone in a position to make moral judgements, and again, she uses the standardized relational pair of parent and child in order to achieve this end. This time, however, she does not position herself as a stand-in for the parents of members of the forum who, by implication, may not punish their children for bad behaviour, but she positions herself as the parent of children who will be confronted with such behaviour as they grow up and therefore have to deal with that. By implication, Nanna may feel morally obliged as a (future) parent to draw attention to the moral aspects of roasting behaviour that group members, as suggested by Nanna, may not be aware of.

Other participants join the discussion, but they do not address Nanna's accusations or appeal to self-reflection. Instead, they indicate that participation is a choice, and they question Nanna's membership and motives:

*D10 Carsten: If you can't tolerate the tone here, then go somewhere else*

*D11 Nanna: Carsten, try reading the entry again*

*D12 Christine: Nanna Sorry to interfere, but just one question.. Why are you in this group in the first place??*

*D13 Nanna: Christine, you're welcome to do that, try reading the entry again, I'm on my way out. But here beats the heart of a mother and I just couldn't go without trying to appeal to your sense of right and wrong as a good human being !*

Nanna responds to the challenges of Carsten (D10) and Christine (D12) in post D11 and D13 by referring back to her previous posts and acknowledging that she does not meet the membership criteria. Again, in response to Christine, Nanna indicates a moral obligation to interfere as her reason for having done so; in doing so, she uses the term "heart of a mother" and she thereby attributes certain values to mothers and to herself as someone who possesses such a heart. By implication, she also, in a sense, exonerates the group members for their actions, since they are teenagers and therefore cannot be expected to be parents and consequently cannot be expected to possess the same moral values as parents.

In the first post shown from this exchange, D7, Nanna tagged three friends. They now participate in the thread as well. The tagged friends, Pernille and Nina, start gossiping about the group with Nanna. They do so in public, i.e. as part of the discussion thread and thereby use the public nature of the interaction as a resource to position themselves as not members of the group by gossiping in public (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Pernille and Nina align with Nanna as they question the norms and practices of the group, and as they attribute blame for misconduct to group members' parents rather than to the group members themselves:

*D14 Pernille: Nanna, what kind of a page is this? I guess some parents should have a serious talk with their offspring*

*D15 Nanna: Pernille, do you think it works*

*D16 Nanna: I don't even understand what they write*

*#fucklamold!!!!*

*D17 Nina: Agree totally with both you Nanna and Pernille and really hope their parents see this one day!" (...)*

*D20 Pernille: No, it is completely off ... My kid would get a spanking old school style if he as much as considers being this disrespectful and mean!*

Both Pernille and Nanna construct the behaviour of the group as questionable and problematic by expressing amazement and wonder about the purpose and content of the forum ("*what kind of a page is this*"; "*I don't even understand what they write*"; "*it is completely off ...*"). Nanna connects lack of understanding of the content with her stage of life (which she established initially when she said that she was 10 years older than the other group members): "*#fucklamold!!!!*". This comment and the specific construction of it, using a hashtag, slang and several exclamation marks, may, though, be a playful way of distancing her from the group, using stage of life as a membership category while demonstrating competence in using symbols typically recognized as indicative of young people. Hence, she may demonstrate that she does know, recognize and is able to participate in the forum even though it has been questioned whether she meets the criteria, specifically based on age.

By tagging and addressing practices, Pernille, Nanna and Nina construct a participant framework (Goffman, 1981) in which they talk *about* the group and their practices rather than talking *with* them. This framework demonstrates that, in effect, Pernille, Nanna and Nina are not part of the online community. They also continue moralizing on who is to blame for the conduct on the page that they distance themselves from. Pernille writes: "I guess some parents should have a serious talk with their offspring", thus aligning with Nanna's previous post, and Nina displays agreement, while pointing out that parents should be made aware of the practices before they can interfere (D17). Nanna, who in a previous post (D7) mentioned "strangling", questions whether talking works (D15), and Pernille picks up on both of these points by indicating how she would act if her own child behaved in that way: "My kid would get a spanking old school style if he as much as considers being this disrespectful and mean!". Here the three friends negotiate not whether the roasting behaviour in the forum is blameworthy, but who is to blame and how the behaviour should be punished, i.e. they base the discussion on a normative assumption that punishment should follow the blameworthy behaviour (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009). They claim their own entitlement to make moral judgements by using membership categories and devices that position them as not only older than other forum members, but also as morally obligated as (at least hypothetical) parents to interfere and determine the behaviour of the forum as morally problematic, "completely off", "disrespectful and mean".

Subsequently, Nanna is asked to leave the group with reference to the fact that she is too old (post omitted for anonymization). After this, Christine, who also participated previously in the thread (D12), makes the following request:

*D35 Christine: Argh, how I hate it when mothers/parents/adults feel they have to interfere in young people's groups and posts. Can't you just form groups for yourselves in which you can write what you want and complain about what we write to each other without us having to read it?? Thanks..*

Christine expresses a disregard for (moral) interference from people who do not meet the criteria for membership of the group, namely those of age and stage of life, as she makes the generalized claim that "mothers/parents/adults" feel an obligation ("have to") to interfere when "young people" interact in online communities. Thus, Christine recognizes the actions of Nanna and her friends as moral judgements ("complain about what we write to each other"). In her view, they feel morally obliged to react even

though they are not members of the group as they do not belong to the specified social category and therefore have no right to participate. In short: Nanna's entitlement to make such judgements is called into question by linking rights to make moral judgements to social categories.

### **Concluding remarks**

It is noteworthy that participants in online communities use social categories, which are not visually or otherwise available, to explain conduct judged by others or participants themselves in interaction to be socially accountable. Although not well researched in online communities, age and stage of life categorization seems to be a resource for either *suggesting (when stage of life is not a defining criterion for membership) or indicating (when age is a defining criterion) age as a social category to explain conduct*, thereby also linking category-bound features, expectations, rights and obligations to the person who is accused of having conducted an accountable action.

The data that we have analyzed indicates that participants do orient to the availability of social information. They do so by constructing indications about stage of life of other participants that have not indicated their age or stage of life as suggestions (example B), in the context of an analogy (example C) or as teasing or bullying (example A) which suggests that participants orient to their own accountability in terms of access to knowledge when making claims and social judgements about others.

Other research on age and stage of life categorization in co-present situations (a TV reality show) suggests that age and stage of life categorization may be used as part of argumentation and may be collaboratively negotiated (Poulios, 2009). Similarly, analyses of the timeline on a Facebook profile shows how the meanings of age and stage of life categories are negotiated and how different features may be related to age and stage of life categories in order to achieve various ends (Georgalou, 2015). In the case of a reality show, participants have visual access to information about the speakers, and in the case of a Facebook timeline, co-participants can be expected to be acquaintances of the owner of the timeline, and/or information about the owner of the timeline such as his/her age is often to be found on the page.

Our data is different in the sense that participants do not so much negotiate the meaning of social categories such as what "old" means, i.e. take the availability of social categories for granted and negotiate their meaning. Rather, in our data, participants link online written actions to certain stage of life categories based on features linked to the action that are either implicated or mentioned and use the stage of life categories as part of their arguments for why a certain practice breaches the norms of a certain online community. Therefore, lack of availability of social information and lack of shared knowledge about the identity categories of co-participants seems to be central to understanding how and possibly why age and stage of life categories are used to manage accountability in these particular contexts.

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