

Rethinking age in developmental research: A Discursive Psychology perspective

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Abstract

Age occupies a central role in developmental research, yet is typically treated as a stable individual variable explaining change or continuity in behaviour. In this position article, we argue that such a treatment overlooks how age itself is socially organised and interactionally consequential. Drawing on discursive psychology (DP), we advocate for a stronger integration of discursive frameworks into developmental research, not by abandoning age as an analytic focus, but by examining how age becomes relevant in context. This entails a shift toward an emic perspective in which development and ageing are understood as interactional resources rather than background explanations for action. We illustrate this argument through a discursive analysis of everyday interaction, showing how age emerges as a locally managed and contested category. Rather than chronological age or age-group membership, it is the situated work through which age categories are invoked, resisted, and ratified that becomes analytically salient. From this perspective, phenomena commonly described as “age effects” can be reconceptualised as outcomes of situated category work. We conclude that integrating DP into developmental research supports linking short-term interactional processes with longer-term developmental patterns.

Keywords: development, ageing, age categories, context, developmental psychology

Introduction

The study of human development can be approached from a variety of disciplinary lenses, each offering distinct assumptions, methods, and conceptual frameworks. Among these diverse perspectives, the current article focuses on what Discursive Psychology (DP) can bring to other disciplines that study human development. We argue the position that DP offers conceptual frameworks and methodologies that can work to expand the study of human development as it is commonly studied in disciplines such as developmental psychology. In doing so, we suggest that DP can help move the study of human development forward. Specifically, we suggest that DP offers new ways of conceptualizing and studying age categories and the reach of contextual influence.

‘Age’ is a central concept in developmental studies. In Developmental psychology, for instance, the focus is typically on how skills or psychological constructs change with age, where age is often included as a predictor of development in regression models (Cao et al., 2025). However, the concept of age itself, and the social construction of age categories, rarely receives explicit scholarly attention in developmental research. For instance, while *developmental trajectories* across age categories are often placed in a social context, the age categories *themselves* are not. We suggest that DP can help deepen and expand the understanding of ‘age’ in developmental research, and in doing so, can expand the study of how development across age categories is contextually situated.

Age and aging are often treated in essentialist terms in society, where age categories are viewed as natural, biologically determined, and indicative of inherent properties of the members within each category (Amrhein, 2025). This approach is similar in academic research, where developmentally-focused research treats age categories, such as ‘infants’ or ‘the elderly’, as natural kinds, or categories that exist in the world and that differ meaningfully and fundamentally from each other (van Geert & de Ruiter, 2022). This is evident in empirical studies, where age often functions as a key independent variable. Developmental change is commonly studied by comparing different age groups in cross-sectional designs or by tracking age-related changes over time in longitudinal studies. In these approaches, age is treated as if it were a causal factor, with the aim of revealing ‘age-effects’ and ‘age-related change’ (Cao et al., 2025). In such studies, age is typically treated as a proxy for development itself: differences between age groups are assumed to reflect underlying or common changes in

cognitive, emotional, or social skills. This logic is especially visible in classic stage theories, such as those proposed by Piaget (1970), Erikson (1963), and Kohlberg (1963), which posit universal, sequential, and qualitatively distinct phases of development that are closely tied to chronological age. In this framework, age is descriptive and implicitly taken to indicate an individual's developmental level (Lourenço, 2016). Traditional developmental research has thus relied heavily on age categories, treated as a central organizing principle for describing and explaining psychological change (Lourenço, 2016).

The role of context has come to have an important focus in development research. Yet, as age categories themselves are not viewed as subjects of study, developmental research does not typically investigate how age categories are contextually situated (Matusov & Hayes, 2000). The common approach in developmental psychology, for instance, aims to understand context as an external explanatory factor for individual development (Van der Gaag et al., 2025). With this, 'age categories' and the 'context' are approached as two separate explanatory areas of analysis.

The traditional approach to stage-based development across age categories has received criticism, with critics most commonly urging for a deeper acknowledgement that development is inherently embedded in contexts, and that separating the two is thus impossible (Matusov & Hayes, 2000; van Geert & de Ruiter, 2022). Indeed, McLean and Riggs suggest that that traditional focus on age-effects has obscured our understanding of developmental processes and the actual mechanisms at play. Their solution, however, is to shift the focus to "the role of context, culture, and individual differences rather than the simplistic variable of age" (McLean & Riggs, 2022, p. 4). While we agree that a deeper study of how development is contextually situated is vital, we suggest that there is also benefit in retaining the central role of 'age'. However, we posit that a different conceptual and methodological approach to age is needed. Specifically, we suggest that it is valuable to move away from treating age as a "simplistic variable", and age-categories as fixed and objective facts. Instead, we stress that DP, especially as it has been applied to research on ageing, offers a valuable lens through which to revisit the relationship between context and age categories. It focuses not on internal psychological states lying behind or beneath discourse, but on how psychological concepts - such as beliefs, skills, or identities - are constructed and made relevant through talk (Edwards 2006). Rather than treating age categories as inherent and given indicators of developmental phases, discursive psychology investigates how phenomena such as age categories emerge through talk (Antaki, 1988; Billig, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). For example, DP may study how a child comes to be positioned as "mature" or "immature" in a family conversation, or how the category of "old age" is negotiated in care settings. With this, DP treats age as co-produced in and through interaction. Despite a growing acknowledgment of the promise of discursive methodologies for understanding development (Mascolo, 2009, 2020; De Ruiter & Gmelin, 2021; Wetherell, 2007), the uptake of DP has been relatively slow in developmentally-oriented studies from the field of Developmental Psychology (Gardner & Forrester, 2010), but the studies that have been done demonstrate the value of this endeavour (e.g., Budwig, 2000).

Below we review the dominant ways in which 'development' and 'context' have been approached in developmental psychology and ageing research. Within the field of developmental research, there is wide agreement that human development does not occur in a vacuum. Influential theories and empirical studies emphasize the formative role of material, social, and cultural contexts in shaping developmental trajectories. From Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), context is treated as an essential element in understanding change across age-related phases. What this means with regards to how context is treated as essential for development, differs quite broadly. For clarity, we have organized previous research into three waves: (1) Traditional developmental psychology and gerontology, which frame ageing as a biologically driven, inevitable process of growth followed by decline; (2) Early critiques of this paradigm through more context-sensitive approaches; and (3) practice-based approaches informed by DP. In this third wave, we present an empirical case study for illustration. We conclude by arguing that the study of age-based development would benefit from a

critical approach to age categories, and a deeper understanding of how these categories are - beyond simply an indicator of biological maturation - also an interactional accomplishment.

Ageing as unfolding of inevitable growth and then decline

From a traditional developmental psychology perspective, development is viewed as a process of unfolding of universal stages. Although typically focused on stages across earlier life, from the 1960s developmental psychology has extended beyond childhood, to include adulthood and ageing (Whitbourne & Whitbourne, 2025). While progression through stages in earlier life is typically viewed as 'growth', adulthood is seen as stable at best, leaving little room for change in later life to be perceived as anything other than regression and decrement (Labouvie-Vief & Blanchard-Fields, 1982). Here we briefly introduce traditional developmental psychology approaches in work from early and late life stages.

In traditional developmental psychology, progression from one stage to the next reflects either a progression of 'innate' steps toward gaining skills (stemming from a 'nativist' perspective), or as a blank slate upon which behaviors are shaped by parents and caregivers (stemming from an 'empiricist' view). Both of these approaches to development in early life tend to view development as relatively passive, rather than active. Moreover, both approaches have been criticized as being adult centric, as they posit a baby or child's experience and mental content as simply immature (not yet fully unfolded) versions of the adult experience (Warming, 2011). This takes the adult perception and experience of the outside world to be the 'correct' understanding of its ready-made characteristics, which the baby or child has yet to grasp.

Psychological research in later life focuses on the cognitive processes of the ageing individual and typically regards ageing as a process of progressive, unwanted and inevitable bodily and mental decline (Andrews, 1991; Butler, 1975; Westerhof & Tulle, 2007:235). This reductive view -sometimes summarized as 'downhill all the way'- is well established as the dominant discourse in Western cultures (Hepworth, 2003, p. 89; Westerhof & Tulle, 2007, p. 235; Wilson, 1991). A variation on this is the 'terminal drop' model, which frames decline as concentrated into a brief period of dependency prior to death (O'Hanlow & Coleman, 2004; Wilson, 1991:35). These narratives have significantly shaped the psychological research agenda, with theories such as disengagement, which highlights withdrawal and introversion in later life, often reflecting ageist cultural assumptions more than objective evidence (Andrews, 1991:12).

In this paradigm, language is understood through a 'mapping metaphor', where it is mapped onto underlying cognitive constructs (Budwig, 2000). As such, language is included in developmental or ageing studies, primarily as a representational tool, offering researchers access to participants' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. Language and communication are not seen as a matter of choice but as results (and indicators) of growth or decline (Coulmas, 2005:62). In ageing research particularly, the focus has been on age-related deterioration in communicative ability, especially in relation to cognitive impairments such as Parkinson's (Obler, 1980) or Alzheimer's disease (De Bot & Makoni, 2005). Yet, as pioneering DP research on ageing has shown, this focus reinforces the assumption of inevitable deterioration, thereby sustaining the deficit model of ageing (Coupland & Coupland, 1990:455). On the whole, the language of children and older populations is seen as more or less 'deficient' and 'deviant' relative to the adult language norms Georgakopoulou and Charalambidou (2011).

Research within this paradigm typically relies on quantitative methods using elicited talk (e.g. surveys, structured interviews) and standardized scales to assess psychosocial, cognitive, and linguistic functioning. Statistical results of controlled, experimental studies lend themselves to generalisation and can shape policy decisions (Wilson, 1991). However, the validity of the results is contestable, particularly because language is studied outside the context of its natural occurrence (Coupland & Coupland, 2001, p. 482). Not only are categories and identities approached from an essentialist and decontextualized perspective, but development itself is viewed as something that takes place *within* an individual against a contextual backdrop. Following from this, traditional developmental psychology

assumes that -once a context 'produces' development- the documented development will remain within the individual as a decontextualized result.

Countering notions of inevitable development: contextual approaches

An important shift away from notions of 'inevitable' developmental progression or decline is the recognition of development as contextualized. Rather than assuming a universal, biologically driven process unfolding within individuals, considering the role of context has allowed developmental psychologists to understand that development is also a function of what takes place *outside* an individual. Systems-oriented developmental studies have been central to this shift. Bronfenbrenner's classic bioecological theory, for instance, emphasized development as a function of the dynamic and bi-directional interaction between an individual and their proximal and distal environments, which themselves evolve and intersect over time (Tudge et al., 1996).

A pivotal contribution of contextual approaches (such as those that adopt a systems perspective) to early child development is the recognition that development is not a universal, stage-based process. Instead, trajectories and stages of development are embedded within other factors, like family context and personal characteristics. For example, classic developmental psychology suggests that children across cultures typically transition from failing to passing the 'false belief' task between ages 3 and 5, indicating the 'presence' of Theory of Mind, especially the ability to understand that others can hold beliefs different from reality and from one's own. This critical milestone of childhood development was traditionally attributed to age-linked cognitive and biological development, reinforcing the notion of universal 'unfolding'. However, studies incorporating linguistic context have revealed its situated nature. Vinden (1996), for example, showed that Junín Quechua speakers of Peru, whose language lacks direct equivalents for the words 'think' or 'believe' (and instead refer more indirectly to these notions by, for example, asking 'What would she say?'), develop false belief understanding at least three years later than Western children, even after adjusting the false belief task to include these linguistic norms. This suggests that children in this culture are linguistically less socialized to conceptualize states of one's own or others' 'beliefs'. Such studies reveal the culture-specific nature of development, and specifically, the likely role that linguistic differences play. This is vital for moving beyond development as simply the universal progression through fixed stages. However, these studies still treat development as occurring passively 'within' the child, with the linguistic and cultural context as the backdrop for the child's development.

Contextual factors as well as the local situation of the interaction have also been employed in explaining change in later life, with a focus on moving beyond age-based determinism. For example, Makoni et al. (2005) explored how narrative and syntactic complexity in storytelling by older Chinese adults in the USA related not necessarily to age, but to a range of sociocultural and cognitive factors. Using formalized assessments of cognitive competence, mental state and narrative performance, their study revealed that education level, rather than chronological age, was more strongly associated with narrative complexity. Their findings prompted a re-evaluation of the assumption of inevitable linguistic decline in older adulthood, drawing attention instead to the relevance of factors such as bilingualism, gender, interactional setting, ethno-racial identity, and educational background in shaping language practices in later life.

As an alternative to deficit views of ageing, more positive views on ageing seek to reframe changes in cognitive performance in later life from decline and regression to growth and gain. Although not widely tested, partly due to the traditional emphasis on problems and setbacks in later years (O'Hanlow & Coleman, 2004), some theories about positive development and growth in old age exist. Labouvie-Vief & Blanchard-Fields (1982) propose that a reorganisation of cognitive functioning occurring in middle adulthood leads to new and adaptive functions in later life. Still change, whether positively or negatively evaluated, is seen as residing within the individual and measured in experimental conditions.

The above studies have succeeded in bringing into the discussion many contextual factors that affect change and stability across the lifespan. With this approach, context is treated as a backdrop that

can *modify* the developmental process, making it secondary to an underlying developmental process (Moscolo, 2020). Age categories, and the progression from one to the next, continue to be seen as a more or less static, pre-discursive entity. More dynamic approaches that document development and ageing in earnest are to be found within the DP framework, which is discussed below.

DP approaches to development

DP offers an alternative conceptualisation of development and ageing. It privileges the empirical, systematic study of commonplace, everyday activities on their own terms. The emphasis is on a social members' observable apparatus or machinery that social members use to accomplish actions, produce social practices (including talk), and acquire, confirm, extend, or revise commonsense knowledge (Schegloff, 1991:152; Sharrock & Anderson, 1986:66, 113). DP has encouraged the development of data-driven perspectives that shift the focus from age, as a set of essential features that the individual carries across contexts passively and latently, to practices: the very nuanced, contextually contingent, *interactional negotiations of age and ageing*. The DP approach is characterized by its emphasis on social interaction, on what language does in specific contexts and for specific purposes. It is also characterized by a view of identities as flexible and fleeting categories, agentively constructed and de-constructed *in situ* by the interlocutors. The data used are naturally occurring conversations in informal, everyday situations or institutional settings.

While there is diversity within this paradigm, DP research is grounded in several shared assumptions. First, it highlights how categorisations are coproduced within local contexts. Second, linguistic resources are not seen as directly mapping onto fixed categories; instead, they often serve multiple, context-dependent purposes. Third, age-related identities are understood as intersected with other categorisations. Fourth, there is a critical stance toward generalisations like 'this is how children speak' or 'this is how older adults speak', recognising the significant variability that exists within any given age group (Georgakopoulou & Charalambidou, 2011).

We argue that research on ageing has led the way in treating development as an interactional resource and achievement. As early as in eighties and nineties a body of socio-psychological studies on old-age communication was developed, which -influenced by DP- for the first time looked at interactional data, often focusing on the co-construction of ageist attitudes and stereotypes in inter- and intra-generational interactions (Adelman et al., 1991; Coupland & Coupland, 2001; Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991; Giles, 1991; Hummert et al., 1994; Williams & Giles, 1991). For instance, Ylänné-McEwen (1999) explored interaction in a travel agency between middle-aged agents and an older couple showing how over-accommodation on behalf of the travel agents contributed to the construction of the customers as frail. Similarly, Paoletti (1998b) demonstrated that in interviews, the younger interviewer's over-accommodation contributed in constructing the elderly interviewee as excusably incoherent and senile. Importantly, talk perceived as patronising, over- or under-accommodating is viewed in this paradigm as an achievement of all interlocutors, and not a manifestation of pre-existing, decontextualized ageist attitudes. For instance, Backhaus (2008) found that residents in a Japanese eldercare facility sometimes strategically construct themselves as frail and decrepit to accomplish specific interactional goals, such as deflecting responsibility for not following institutional rules.

These studies demonstrate how individuals can shift between markedly different constructions of age and ageing depending on the interactional context. For example, Coupland et al. (1991) showed that a 79-year-old woman, across two successive encounters, adopted contrasting self-presentations: in one, with an 82-year-old interlocutor, she collaboratively produced a positive, counter-stereotypical portrayal of ageing; in the other, with a 38-year-old woman, she oriented to and reproduced ageist assumptions. Therefore practices related to age-related change or stability cannot be assumed to exist outside their context of occurrence.

The DP perspective on ageing and later life, broadly referred to as 'discursive gerontology' (Heinrichsmeier, 2023), has gained increasing traction as a significant alternative to deficit-based models of ageing. It focuses on how individuals in interaction may take up, resist, or negotiate age-

related identities that are made relevant to them, and how such positionings are shaped by the immediate context. In addition, emphasis is placed on how individuals make specific life-style choices and style themselves in ways that 'construct' them as members of a particular age group, regardless of their chronological age. This body of work, using Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis, has shown how ageing is collaboratively produced and reworked across diverse settings, ranging from committee meetings and theatre workshops (Paoletti, 1998a) to the telling of sexually explicit jokes among peers at home (Charalambidou & Georgakopoulou, 2014) and at a hair salon (Heinrichsmeier, 2023).

This body of research shows that ageing is not **viewed** as an internal state but as something people do in conversation; an accomplishment that emerges through talk and social interaction. This is an argument gaining currency in ageing research in general because of a) the negative associations of 'change' in later life and b) late-modernity ideas that biological and psychosocial ageing can be accommodated or reversed through lifestyle and consumerist choices. However, unlike research in later life, research on earlier life stages has been somewhat reluctant to conceptualize categories and development as an interactional achievement and discursive resource, rather than a pre-discursive process, partly because change in early life is positively appraised, thus eliciting less criticism.

DP approaches to the study of development in early childhood focus on children's *observable* functioning, rather than 'underlying' skills or cognitive constructs, and on the ways in which children actively participate in these processes (Budwig, 2000). A key departure from the traditional focus is the rejection of the assumption that children are simply shaped by adults or that they reliably internalize adult behavior. For example, Budwig (2000) showed that mother and child linguistic functions during play did not necessarily lead them to arrive at similar meanings.

A **DP** approach to studies of early life stages reveals the more nuanced and complex ways that socialisation processes occur. Rather than viewing children as passive recipients of parental influence, these studies reveal how both children and parents actively negotiate behavioral norms in the moment. For example, Hepburn (2020) showed in an analysis of parent-child interactions that parents use embodied practices -such as changes in gaze, vocal volume, and pitch- to guide children's behavior and create openings for self-correction, while children actively shape the interaction through their own embodied actions. Behaviors like burping, while framed as involuntary or accidental, can be strategically used by children to challenge parental authority.

These ambiguous bodily acts allow children to resist norms playfully while maintaining plausible deniability. Such findings highlight socialisation as a dynamic, context-sensitive process in which children act as agentive, meaning-making participants.

Authority, power, and agency are central concerns in studies of childhood development. Kent (2012) asks "...do parents, by virtue of their social role as parent, possess a normative entitlement to control their child's behavior and to expect compliance?" (p. 74) and shows how discursive psychology can help to elucidate how control and authority are negotiated and accomplished in moment-to-moment talk. While compliance may indeed lead to smoother directive sequences by aligning with the speaker's course of action, this should not be taken as evidence of inherent or decontextualized authority. As Kent notes, "until a recipient complies with a directive, the speaker's claim to entitlement is simply that; a claim" (p. 79). Authority exists only *in interaction*. Resisting a directive, by contrast, demonstrates a real-time contest over deontic rights: who has the right to decide or act. These exchanges do not *manifest* inherent roles and power distributions but constitute the ongoing negotiation of power and relational roles.

How then can one speak of 'development' when considering change in sequences of talk, such as shifts in whether claims to authority are resisted or not? By studying how these sequences change over a longer span of time, such as across repeated instances of talk-in-interaction, one can examine how a child comes to take up a new role within recurring interactional contexts (like parent-child interactions). However, this new role-taking should not be seen as evidence of individual development, but as a resource for accomplishing social goals within interaction, or (depending on how these shifts are responded to) as the achievement of those goals (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021). **Longitudinal CA**

provides a framework for studying the longer-term changes of practices and interaction in naturally occurring contexts, and offers some methodological lessons. Comparability can be achieved by researching the same members (or category of members), activities, or sequential environments (Deppermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2021). Given that change is not linear and different ways of accomplishing the same action can coexist, and practices may recede only to reappear later or in another context, longitudinal CA calls for collection-based analysis at different points in time, documenting in-between stages of development. Finally, when it comes to explaining change, relating observed changes to researcher's assumptions about "learning or development, shared interactional experience, or sociocultural context as explanatory templates" (Deppermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2021, p. 134) can be problematic and create a circularity of account. Such motivations need to be **independently verified**. At the same time, we call for longitudinal CA that focuses on development in interactional competence to extend its focus from young members and novices (Lee & Hellermann, 2014) to change across the lifespan.

To illustrate how DP can allow developmental researchers to understand the socially situated nature of age categories, we draw on an eighteen-hour corpus of self-recorded, every-day conversations of a long-standing, all-female group of Greek Cypriot friends, aged 62-79, all living in close proximity in a suburb of Nicosia, Cyprus (more on the corpus of data in Charalambidou 2019). The participants speak in Cypriot Greek, typically described as a dialect of Standard Modern Greek. Here we offer the English translation of the original. The following interactional sequence takes place during an afternoon meeting of the main five core members of this friendship circle, at Gregoria's house. Gregoria is 79, Charoulla and Loulla are 73, Myria is 72, and Tasoulla 62. Tasoulla mentions that in their next meeting at her house she will also invite her friend Limbourina, with whom the other participants are not well acquainted. Tasoulla mentions Limbourina, who often hosts coffee meetings for her circle of elderly friends, and likens Limbourina's elderly friends to her interlocutors.

Excerpt 1 (participants: Myria, Tasoulla, Gregoria, Charoulla, Loulla)

1. M =Limbourina?
2. T yeah: and she has her fr- her friends as well they are [like]
3. M [yes of] course.
4. T THEY ARE LIKE YOU elderly he:r companions and they hold their little crochet hooks and
5. G =(we) thank you my dear,
6. [((we)) thank you my dear.]
7. T [and you should see things]
8. C [°she called us elderly °]
9. T and you should see <things> that they <make> a:nd-
10. C = ↑she called us elderly!
11. T =em [I mea:n] she doesn't and, and does not le-
12. G [ha ↑ha ↓ha]
13. T I mean to say she is elderly and she doesn't say:[°enough stop°]
14. C [↑again! ha ha ha]
15. T she makes coffees all the time.
16. C dear! ((smile voice)) (.2)
17. G oh. (.3)
18. T she brings all these ready-made stuff and she makes a:nd [(well anyway)]
19. C [ah truth be told,]
20. M erm. Leonida's Vereniki says one day.
21. but how many times will the mayor call us elderly elderl(h)- ha:haha
22. T [well we are] in the third age: ↓wha:t, °come on.°
23. M [ha ↑ha ↑ha:]
24. C you are not dear don't fret about
25. [dear!] [well don't fret about]
26. T [well I'm] I'm [SIXTY-TWO ↑YEARS OLD!] mother of Jesus;

In this excerpt we see an instance of ascribing to one's interlocutors old-age categorisations, excluding oneself (l.4). A closer look at this excerpt reveals the interactional trouble such a categorisation entails. The emphatic utterance '*they are like you*' (l.4) heats up the conversation as it brings about the lively reaction from Gregoria and Charoulla, who have not taken any of the recent turns. Gregoria repeats the ironic '*thank you dear*', in lines 6-7 showing that the comment is perceived as negative. Also, Charoulla's

repetition of '*she called us elderly*' (the second time, in l.11, markedly louder and in stylised irritation) makes it clear that they want Tasoulla to attend to this category ascription. Also the '*she called us elderly*' indicates that the opposition is to the categorisation *elderly*, and not related to any other membership categorisation device (MCD) made relevant. This others Tasoulla from the rest of the group, as her non-membership in a category which is ascribed to the rest is implied.

Tasoulla on the other hand, goes on to describe activities of the older group she is comparing her interlocutors with, such crocheting and mainly 'things they make' (l. 4-5, 8, 10). Therefore, Tasoulla's utterances could be seen as trying to deflect attention from the MCD age and introduce a different MCD about domesticity and homemaking practices, and thus to imply that the similarity between the participants and Limbourina's friends is not only, or not so much, related to the category *elderly* (which is highly contested), but to the category competent housewives (which, especially in this context, is markedly positive). Her effort to maintain the floor over the overlap and keep focus on the MCD about 'homemaking' as opposed to the MCD for 'age', is marked by the repetition of her own components of the overlap (l.8, 10), a device found to be employed in extended overlaps like this one in order to claim the floor for oneself, when the speaker has an interest in reserving the immediately next turn (Schegloff, 2000:35).

Following Gregoria's and Charoulla's persistence on being categorised as old, Tasoulla has to address this critical comment. Thus, in line 14, she reiterates the age categorisation of Limbourina (this time in the singular, excluding her interlocutors) but combines it with an implicit categorisation from the MCD about sociability, emphasising the frequent coffee meetings Limbourina hosts. In fact, Tasoulla, in line 14, orients to the two categorisations (*elderly* and socially active) as incompatible, since she regards ceasing hosting coffee meetings as a CBA of the category *elderly*. Therefore, by comparing her interlocutors with Limbourina, she tries to show that she categorises them with regard to the MCD sociability rather than the MCD age. Tasoulla's turn is framed around the laughter of the two interlocutors, Gregoria and Charoulla, who are opposed to being categorised as *elderly*. Tasoulla only stops her account of Limbourina's sociability and counter-decline attributions when Charoulla, in line 20, explicitly ratifies Tasoulla's old-age categorisation of her interlocutors, by saying '*ah truth be told*'.

Myria's short story, however, on lines 21 and 22, seems to point out that the problem is not that they are *elderly* but that they are explicitly and repeatedly categorised as such by incumbents of different age categories. Again, this disaffiliative position towards Tasoulla is downplayed by Myria's loud laughter in line 22. In response to that, and in a third attempt to redeem herself for categorising her interlocutors as old, Tasoulla for the first time includes herself in the same age category as the other participant, ('third age', a probably more euphemistic term than *elderly*), a category that for her is associated with the feature of being 62 years old. Chronological age is oriented to here as an *attribution constitutive* of the generic old-age category, third age, rather than an age category in itself (see Jayyusi, 1984:24, for category-constitutive attributions). However, all four of her interlocutors will contest Tasoulla's self-categorisation as *third age* in the upcoming talk (not included in this example). It is notable that for the first time in this interactional sequence, Tasoulla's interlocutors do not contest being categorised as old, which suggests that old age category ascription, if made from someone who also includes themselves in the same age category, is more easily accepted.

Conclusion: From age effects to category work in developmental research

With this position article, we advocate for a stronger integration of DP frameworks into the study of development. We extend the call within developmental research to go beyond "the simplistic variable of age" and to take the role of interactional and cultural contexts more seriously (e.g., Matusov & Hayes, 2000; McLean & Riggs, 2022). We argue that, rather than doing away with the variable of age in order to orient toward the role of context, we can look more deeply at how age itself is contextually situated. This means a shift toward the *emic perspective*, where lessons from ageing studies can be taken. This means treating development and ageing as interactional resources or achievements rather than an explanation for stability or change of actions. For much of developmental psychology, this will mean a shift in "taking practices rather than cognition as primary" (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2005; p. 598).

This shift allows researchers to continue to study the same topics, such as ‘age’, simply packaged somewhat differently.

This point was illustrated via the analysis presented, demonstrating how age emerges in interaction as a locally managed and contested category, rather than functioning as a stable individual attribute. What becomes analytically salient in the examined excerpt is not participants’ chronological age, nor their membership in a predefined age group, but the interactional work through which age is made relevant, resisted, and ultimately ratified. The interaction that unfolds illustrates that age categories are consequential precisely because they are invoked in specific sequential environments and by particular speakers. From this perspective, what is often treated in developmental research as an “age effect” can be reconceptualised as the outcome of situated category work.

The interaction shows that the developmental significance of age lies not in its numerical value, but in how age categories are linked to normative expectations about behaviour, competence, and decline, and how these links are negotiated in situ. This is clear when Tasoulla’s repeated attempts to shift the relevant categorisation from age to homemaking practices or sociability demonstrate how speakers manage the meaning and implications of age by foregrounding particular category-bound activities. Additionally, the analysis underscores that age categories are not merely descriptive but relationally organised. In the excerpt, the resistance to being categorised as elderly is sustained when the categorisation is made by someone who is not (yet) recognisably a member of the category ‘elderly’ (i.e., Tasoulla), whereas it becomes more acceptable once this person includes herself within the same age category.

Taken together, these observations illustrate how discursive psychology can enrich the study of human development by offering conceptual and methodological tools for examining how age becomes relevant in everyday life. Rather than assuming age as an explanatory background variable, a discursive approach directs analytic attention to the moments in which age is made consequential and to the practices through which its meaning is negotiated. Discursive methods make these processes visible by tracing how participants orient to, challenge, and reconfigure the relevance of age across turns. This shift enables developmental researchers to move beyond static comparisons between age groups and towards a process-oriented understanding of development as something accomplished through social interaction.

By integrating DP into studies of development and ageing, it is possible to integrate mechanisms of short-term timescales of development with those of long-term timescales of development (De Ruiter & Gmelin, 2022). Whereas more discursively-inspired studies focus on how social discourse itself is constructed on a moment-to-moment basis (i.e., short-term development), developmentally inspired studies may focus more on how higher-order patterns of interaction change or remain stable (i.e., long-term development). As Berensta and Deunk (2025) stressed, these two types of methodological approaches represent zooming in and zooming out, and the two foci complement each other, both adding to our understanding.

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