The Morality of Age Talk

Apostolos Poulilos
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
appoul@lit.auth.gr

Abstract: Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis has always been concerned with the issue of morality in everyday interaction. This paper attempts to examine the extent to which conversational exchanges that involve age talk are loaded with moral meanings. It explores the ways in which age talk communicates, whether overtly or covertly, judgments about other people’s morality as well as the ways in which a speaker’s own identity is cast in a positive light during such talk.

Key words: Conversation Analysis, Ethnomethodology, Morality, Age talk, Identity, Membership Categories

1. Introduction

Ethnomethodological conversation analysis has consistently dealt with the issue of morality in everyday interaction. In a number of studies (e.g. Bergman 1998, Jayyussi 1984), ethnomethodologists have asserted that “morality and interaction are deeply intertwined with each other” (Bergman 1998: 279). In Jayyussi’s words, “[l]ogic and morality are the twin guardians of our discourse and activities; they provide our fundamental source of normative criteria for conduct of our practical human life” (1984: 207). Ethnomethodology explores “the world of practical activities and practical reasoning” (Nikander 2002: 150), in other words, the ways in which members organize their actions, their behaviour as well as the way they conceptualize the world (cf. Clayman and Maynard 1995). Since moral beliefs and moral concepts are understood as constituents of people’s practical everyday reasoning, the analyst’s task is to show how such beliefs and concepts become evident in the interaction, that is, how they shape the interaction.

This task seems to subvert the commonsense view of morality, which places it within the individual person and treats it as a notion similar to conscience or faith (Bergman 1998: 283), as well as philosophical approaches to morality, according to which a person’s consciousness or moral attitudes are not directly accessible to others and the inward nature of morality is taken for granted as an element of the subject’s interior world (ibid, 282). Ethnomethodologists claim that “morality must be stripped from its evidentiality” and must be treated “as a continuous interactive achievement” (ibid.).

Harvey Sacks illustrated that in everyday interaction moral work can be done through reference to membership categories, a notion he introduced to show how members of a society organize a great deal of the knowledge they have about the society” (1992: 40). Membership categories are “classifications or social types that may be used to describe persons” (Nikander 2002: 45), for example: politician, old woman, grandfather. Sacks observed that there are strong expectations and conventions associated with such categories, i.e., there are expectations about certain rights and obligations that are category-bound. These expectations render the conduct of people belonging to a category accountable. According to Drew, “any consideration of the accountability of social conduct brings directly into focus moral dimensions of language use” (1998: 295). In everyday interaction “we report our own or others’ conduct [and] our descriptions are themselves accountable phenomena through which we recognizably

© 2009. Selected Papers from the 18th ISTAL
display an action’s (im)propriety, (in)correctness, (un)suitability, (in)appropriateness, (in)justice, (dis)honesty, and so forth” (ibid).

Thus, any reference to these expectations is connected to moral judgment and, consequently, any reference to categorization is linked to moral work. Whenever speakers produce an account or description of the world, on the one hand they assess or comment on the morality of others and, on the other, they make themselves available to possible findings about their own moral appearances. In a sense, whenever one describes, he/she analyzes his/her morality or makes his/her morality available for analysis by others (Nikander 2002: 152). Morality is omnipresent in everyday conversation: as Bergman notes, “it is so deeply intertwined with everyday discourse, that the interlocutors hardly ever recognize their doings as moral business” (1992: 281). It has been shown (e.g. Heritage and Lindstrom, 1998) that morality need not be thematized in conversation; rather, it often “lurks under the surface of some discursive interactions and sometimes is rather strongly implicated in [interlocutors’] attitudes as displayed in their talk” (Bergman, 1998: 288). For example, in the case of storytelling and narrative, “[w]hat makes a story significant and remarkable and what makes us observe, remember and narrate an event in this first place is its moral, which must be captured and conveyed in the telling of the story” (ibid.). Storytellers and story recipients somehow act as moral agents even though they do not perceive themselves as such. For instance, elderly storytellers achieve self-foregrounding through their narratives by constructing heroic self-identities with positive moral implications (Poulios 2005, 2008).

In this paper I attempt to examine the extent to which discursive actions that involve age talk “are heavily loaded with moral meanings”. I want to explore the extent to which age talk communicates, whether overtly or covertly, respect or disrespect for another individual as well as the extent to which a person’s identity is cast in a positive light during such talk.

2. Morality in (inter)action

In the fragments I’m going to present, speakers of various ages are involved in age talk, that is, talk in which age becomes an issue, whether there is explicit age-telling or a more vague reference to an age category (for example, old people).

2.1 Confirming one’s own morality

The fragments presented in this section involve speakers who use age talk to cast themselves in a positive light and thus promote, confirm or defend their own morality. In the first fragment, specific reference to the speaker’s own age is used defensively. During a TV variety show with Annita Pania, the guest, an elderly woman, Π(αρασκευούλα)/P(araskevoula), is listening to a middle-aged man (A) who has phoned in to ask a question (see Ten Have 1999 for transcript conventions):

**Fragment 1**

1 (m) **A:** Πως ρωτάτε την κυρία Παρασκευούλα αν έχει πάει το λεωφορείο με τον γιό της και έχει πάει στο Ζεφύρι, αν αν έχει πάει στο ποδήλατο στο Καματερό.

2 (f) **Π:** Αν δεν έχει πάει και δεν έχει πάει το λεωφορείο, δεν έχει πάει στο Ζεφύρι. Αν δεν έχει πάει το λεωφορείο, δεν έχει πάει στο Ζεφύρι.

1 (m) **A:** Do you ask Mrs. Paraskevoula if she has taken the bus with her son to go to Zephyri, if she is well-known in the (police) station in Kamatero.

2 (f) **P:** Lies, lies, what he says are lies. I’m sixty-five years old and I have never set foot (in such places), all this is slander.
The middle aged man accuses Paraskevoula and her son of having been involved in some kind of illegal behaviour and are, therefore, well-known at the police station in Kamatero. Paraskevoula is indignant: she accuses the man of telling lies and she says that she is 65 years old and she has never been to the places the man implies or to the police station. Her reaction is interesting. Apart from the repetition of the word ψέματα, her voice becomes louder, her tempo is faster: this prosodic prominence is a para-verbal means that gives her utterance a “kind of an inbuilt moral commentary” (Bergmann 1998: 288). But her main argument seems to be her age. She is a respectable 65-year-old woman who has never been to such places. Reference to her age is insulating her discourse and moral character as well.

The next fragment comes from a recruit’s experience in the Greek Army. 28-year-old Χ(ρήστος)/C(hristos), who is the leader of a recruits’ squad room, is angry because 18-year-old Ν(ίκος)/N(ikos) has been repeatedly causing trouble.

Fragment 2
1 (m) X: Re μαλάκα θα σοβαρευτείς καμιά φορά;  
2 (m) N: Re Χρήστο είμαι δικαιοτέρος, κι είσαι είκοσι οχτώ. Είναι δυνατό να χρονες τα ίδια μαλάκα.

1 (m) C: Re ((interjection)) asshole, will you ever be serious?  
2 (m) N: Re Christos, I’m eighteen and you are twenty-eight. How can we possibly have the same brains?

Christos asks Nikos to behave properly; Nikos, however, justifies his own misconduct by referring to his being young, much younger than Christos, and can therefore be excused for his actions. On the contrary, what he implies is that Christos, being older, is expected to behave properly and, after all, this is the reason he has been appointed as a leader of the squad room. The younger man is able to exploit his young age in extenuation of his conduct and in defense of his morality.

The following fragment comes from a similar military context. After some military drudgery, the soldiers are complaining about being overtired. Α(ποστόλης)/A(postolis), a 31-year-old soldier, says in a somehow melodramatic way (cf. Μυκρή-Τσιλιπάκου 2001):

Fragment 3
1 (m) A: Τι μιλάτε με, είμαι ο πιο μεγάλος εδώ μέσα και κουφάζομαι πιο πολύ: απ’ όλους σας.  
2 (m) A: Μην τον κουφάζετε με τον παππού, θα ροξαλίζει πάλι μετά.

1 (m) A: Why are you complaining re ((interj.)), I’m the eldest here and I’m tiring myself out more than you all.  
2 (m) D: Don’t tire the grandpa out, re, he will be snoring again.

Apostolis believes that he’s more tired than the other soldiers especially since he’s worked harder than some of them and, being the oldest soldier in the camp, he seems to expect some kind of preferential treatment, which, alas, never comes. Instead, a much younger colleague, 19-year-old Δ(ημήτρης)/D(himitris), sarcastically uses the word παππούς/ grandpa to remind everybody that Apostolis snores too much.

Another instance of using one’s own age as a means of promoting a respectable identity is found in the following fragment. Μ(ερόπη)/M(eropi) and Κ(ατερίνα)/K(aterina), both in their early 70s, have just finished shopping at Φ(ενία)/F(enia)’s shop. Meropi insists that she must be given a present because she has
already bought many things. Therefore, she wants to talk to Voula, Fenia’s mother about it. Fenia, who is 23 years old, is trying to escape this demand in a humorous manner but Σ(ουλά)/S(oula), who is 85, and has been listening to Meropi’s insistent remarks, seems to be losing her temper.

**Fragment 4**

1 (f) **M:** Αλλά εγώ εφώνσα τόσα (.) έπρεπε να μου κάνετε: έτσι ένα διαρκές να το πάω στη νύφη μου (.) πάς να μην πάω; Στα κορίτσια πήγα. (.) Θέλω τη Βούλα. (.) Να μου δώσει ένα διαρκές (.) δεν μου δώκατε; είναι τόσο να πάω στη νύφη μου; Η η ψονίσει το; σαμ μέα τοά; ντα ενα

2 (f) **Σ:** [Τα] να σου δώσει διαρκές για να πας στη νύφη [σου;]

3 (f) **Φ:** Χριστούγεννα αρχούν ακόμα για τα δόρα

4 **Σ:** Α:; ρε γαμώ; το::

5 **Φ:** Δεν κατάλαβα τι εννοείτε;

6 **Σ:** Α:: ρε γαμώ; :heh heh to

7 **Φ:** [Δεν της πήρατε τίποτα;

8 **Μ:** Δεν της πήρα (.) γιατί δεν με φτάσαν τα λεφτά. ( ) Ήθελα να κάνω δόρο στην κυρία Ντίνα ( )

9 **Σ:** [Ε: όταν τα κονομήσεις να βάλες στο πορτοφόλι σου, (.) γιατί έτσι τα σου προσφεύγετε διπλά; και τριετίπλα: έτσι θα τα ΧΑ σείσι.

10 (0.5)

11 **Μ:** Εμένα τα λες αυτές; (.) Ε πόσοιν χρονόνε είσαι;

12 (0.1)

13 **Σ:** Ενώ; πόσο είμαι; [Τρομάρα σου

14 **Μ:** [Ναι

15 (0.1)

16 **Σ:** Ενώ είμαι ΟΓΔΟ ΝΤΑ ΠΕ:ΝΤΕ.

17 **Μ:** Γιατί λες τρο- τρο[μά·ρα μου;

18 **Σ:** [ΤΡΟΜΑ]ΡΑ μου ΤΡΟΜΑ:ΡΑ μου, [με συγχωΡΕΙ:Σ

19 **Μ:** [Ούτε σένα ούτε μένα

20 **Σ:** Ενώ είμαι ΟΓΔΟ ΝΤΑ ΠΕ:ΝΤΕ η Σπαρτιά·τισα.

21 (.)

22 **Μ:** Εμ εγώ πούθε λες ότι είμαι επειδής ακούω και δεν μιλά[·ω;

23 **Φ:** [Εσείς πό·σο είστε, εξίντα

24 πέντε;

25 (0.3)

26 **Μ:** ( )

27 **Φ:** Όυ:: να σας σταυρώσω να μη σας ματιάξο

28 **Σ:** Πόσο είναι;

29 **Κ:** Εβδομήντα δύο είμαι εγώ δεν [έχω χ

30 **Μ:** [Τρία, τρία εγώ, τρία, το 25 γεννηθείς

31 **Σ:** [Εβδομήντα δύο;

32 **Φ:** Κι εσείς;

33 **Μ:** Είμαστε άμα

34 **Φ:** Εγώ- παραπάνω από 65 δεν σας έκανα

35 **Κ:** heh heh heh

36 **Μ:** Α·υτή: είναι πέρδικα γι αυτό ταυράξαμε

37 **Φ:** Και: οι δύο είστε λεβέντισες=

38 **Σ:** =Για αυτό να είσαι πέρδικα παντού;

39 (.)

40 **Μ:** Είμαι

41 **Σ:** Α μπράβο.

42 **Σ:** Ναι ε· εσάς; (.) εσάς τουλάχιστον σας γέννησε (.) σας γέννησαν νέοι γονείς . h

43 **Μ:** Εμένα που μι' έσπειρέ το πατέρα σου στα εβδομήντα του;

44 (.)

45 **Μ:** Ναι;

46 **Σ:** Αλλά;

47 **Φ:** Είχε γερό σπόρο, γι αυτό βγήκε και η [κυρία Σουλά έτσι
46 Σ: [O πατέρας μου μ’ έσπειρε στα εβδομήντα
tου]
47 Κ: Η μηνυμα σου πόσο ύδωρ;
48 Μ: [Γ’ αυτό είσαι οραιά]
49 Σ: [Κι η μονοφαλα μου τριάντα πέντε.

1 (f) M: But I’ve bought so: ((many things)) (.) you should give me a present to take it to my
daughter in law (.) I have to. I bought ((gifts)) for the girls. (.) I want Voula. (.) To
give me a small gift. (.) You di:dn’t give me so:mething to give my daughter in
law...hh I bou:ght so: many ((things, give me)) a ba: [something
to give your daughter in [law?

2 (f) S: ]What, give you a small gift
3 (f) F: [Christmas is a lo:ng time off to give presents
4 S: Oh:: fu:::ck
5 F: I didn’t understand, what do you mea::n?
6 S: Oh:: fu:::heh [heheck
7 F: [Haven’t you bought anything for her?
M: I haven’t (.) because I’ve run out of money ( ) I wanted to give a present to
Mr:s. Dina ( )
9 S: [We’ll when you make your pile, put it in your wallet (.) because that
way you will see it double and triple, thi:s way you will LO:se it.
(0.5)

10 M: Are you saying these things to me:? (.) How old are you:?
12 (0.1)
13 S: How old am I? [Da:mn you
14 M: [Yes
(0.1)
16 S: I am El:GHTY FI:VE.
17 M: Why do you say da: damn [me?
18 S: [DA:MN me, DA:MN me, [I’m SO:rry
19 M: [Neither me nor you
20 S: I am El:GHTY FI:VE ((I’m a)) Spartan woman.
21 ()
22 M: And where do you think I come from? Just because I’m listening and not say::ing
any[thing?
23 F: [How: old are you, sixty-five?
24 (0.3)
25 M: [“
26 F: Oh:: let me make the sign of cross on you, to keep the evil eye away.
27 S: How old is she?
28 K: I’m seventy-two, I don’t [know the-
29 M: [Three, ((I’m seventy-))three, three, I was [born in 25
30 Σ: [Seventy-two?
31 F: And you?
32 M: We’re the same
33 F: I- I wouldn’t say you’re older than 65
34 K: heh heh heh
35 M: She::: is a partridge, that’s why we fit with each other
36 F: Both of you are upstanding women=
37 S: =That’s why you should be a partridge in a:ll cases
38 ()
39 M: I am.
40 S: Well done.
41 S: Yes, y- you: (.) at least you: were born by (.) you were born by you:ng parents. h
What about me, my father sowed me when he was se:venty?
42 ()
43 M: Really?
44 S: Sure he did.
45 Φ: He had a strong se:ed, that’s shy Mrs. Soula was [born like that.
46 S: [My fa:ther sowed me when he was
Soula’s way of speaking resembles a man’s. Her voice is loud and low, her tempo is slow and she uses a four-letter word, which is usually not expected from a woman in a public place. She finally (turn 9) scolds Meropi for bad management of her finances. Meropi is initially surprised (notice the silence at turn 10) and then asks Soula how old she is, implying that she, too, is old enough to accept such critique. Soula is older, however, and prides herself of being 85 as well as coming from Sparta, the city which was famous in ancient times for the bravery and skills of its soldiers. So there are two categories that Soula selects for herself: being an old woman and a woman from Sparta. Both categories give her the right to project a heroic identity, to demand others’ respect and comment on others’ actions. However, when the other two elderly women prove to be old enough themselves, and gain the young woman’s admiration and respect, too, Soula has to resort to another “heroic” aspect of her identity that seems to guarantee her morality, that is, the fact that her father was rather old when she was conceived (70 years old).

2.2 Questioning other people’s morality
Let us now examine cases in which a speaker’s morality is questioned by other interlocutors through age talk. The first example comes from a TV panel discussion show. The panel consists of Θ(New) /S(ophia), Α(ρίτα) /A(rieta) and Ν(ίκος) /N(ikos), all of whom are in their mid-twenties. A 47-year-old woman, Θ(άλεια) /T(halia), has phoned in to voice her complaints about her daughter. A caption on the screen summarizes Thalia’s complaints in the following way:

| ΘΑΛΕΙΑ, 47 ετών |
| «Η κόρη μου δεν με αφήνει να δω τα εγγόνια μου γιατί έχω σχέση με έναν 25άρη. Δεν έχω δικαίωμα να ζήσω;» |
| ΤHΑLΙΑ, 47 years old |
| “My daughter does not allow me to see my grandchildren because I have an affair with a 25-year-old man. Don’t I have the right to enjoy my life?” |

Fragment 5

| 1 | (f) | Σ: | Κυρία Θάλεια (.), να ρωτήσω κάτι; |
| 2 | (f) | Θ: | Ναι,: |
| 3 | Σ: | Εσές πάντα αυτό που είχατε στον: χαρακτήρα σας ,h που φτιαχνόσασταν, που περιπ- ήσα[σταν περιποιημένη |
| 4 | Θ: | Πάντα μ’άρεσε |
| 5 | Σ: | Σας άρεσε πάντα, [.hh θέλετε γεινικά: να προσελκύσετε το= |
| 6 | Θ: | Πάντα, πάντα |
| 7 | Σ: | αντικό φύλο ,[ςας αρέσει |
| 8 | Θ: | Μ’ αρέσει να πε- να μην περνώ απαρατήρητη μ’ αρέσει να στέρηστε τα βλέμματα όταν περνάω από: κάποιο χέρι,.hh αισθάνομαι πάρα πολύ οράμα, αισθάνομαι ότι είμαι ύμορφα αισθάνομαι,.hh= |
| 9 | Σ: | [Κολακέδεστε |
| 10 | Θ: | =[βασιλείας |
| 11 | Σ: | [Νίκος: θει |
| 12 | Θ: | Πιο νέα Αρίτα τα μου, [ΠΙΟ: ΝΕ;Α |
| 13 | (f) | Α: | [Ορίστε |
| 14 | (m) | Ν: | [Ναι, αλλά |
| 15 | Ν: | Μπορεί να νιώθει αλλά δεν είναι νέα Βρε Σοφά:κι μου, μπορεί να δείχνει εικοσπεντά;ρα αλλά δεν εί:ναι εικοσπε; ντάρα |
| 16 | Σ: | [Ό,τι νιώθεις αυτό είσαι, ό,τι νιώθεις αυτό |

seventy.

47 K: How old was your [mother?  
48 M: [That’s why you’re pretty  
49 S: [And my mommy was 35.
Sophia asks Thalia if she has always wanted to be attractive to men. Thalia answers positively and it is interesting to note how she projects herself as a woman who wants to be admired “despite her age”. Sophia’s formulation of Thalia’s answer (“She feels younger this way”) is countered by a male panelist, Nikos, who, rather conservatively, wants to call her to order. She may feel younger but she is 47 and must behave accordingly. Thalia’s morality is questioned. She is held accountable for her conduct and for transgressing the category bound obligations of being a grandmother. At least, Sophia disagrees with Nikos’s claims by pointing out that even if she has grandchildren, Thalia is too young to be associated with the features of a grandmother.

A similar case of calling somebody to order is offered in the next fragment, which comes from a television programme, too. 55-year-old host Μ(ικρούτσικος)/Μ(ikroutsikos) wants to find out why his 34-year-old guest, Π(ιώργος)/Π(hiorgos) decided to appear on the show.

Fragment 6

1 (m) M: Θέλω να σε ρωτήσω Γιώργο ποιο είναι το πρόβλημά σου
2 (m) Γ: Το πρόβλημά μου είναι ότι εγώ... (.) η: γυναίκα μου και τα τρία μου παιδιά: πληρώνουμε τις αμαρτίες του πατέρα μου.
3 (2.5)
4 M: Ε::: αν μου επιτρέψεις να σου κάνω μια ερώτηση τι: ηλικία έχεις.
5 Γ: ( [ ] )
6 M: [Και το λέ::ω αυτό γιατί έχεις τώρα μία οικογένεια με τρία παιδιά και με μια γυναίκα, (.) και σ’ αυτή την ηλικία από πού είσαι πόσο;
7 Γ: Τριάντα τέσσερα
8 (.)
M: Τριάντα τεσσάρων ετών έρχεσαι και μου λες για τον πατέρα σου.

G: Ναι.

M: Το όπως (. . .) πληρώνουμε είτε με τη θετική έννοια είτε με την αρνητική έννοια του όρου πληρώνου (. . .) τα υπό και τα κατά της οικογένειάς μας είναι γεγονός (. . .) Αυτοί μας μεταλάμπουν αυτοί μας (. . .) δείχνουν τους πρότυπους δρόμους, αυτοί είναι που μας βοηθούν να διαμορφώσουμε τον γοργοκήρυκα μας (. . .) και μας τον διαμορφώνουν (. . .) αλλά να γςεται είναι άθροπος στα 35 του που την όρα που έχει οικογένεια, έχει ευθύνες, έχει πατριάδα (. . .) και να κάνει ανάγνωση των ευθυνών στον πατέρα του, (. . .) το βρίσκου λέγοντας περήφανό. 

G: Το '89 είχε φύγει απ' το σπίτι (. . .) για: οχτώ μήνες περίπου κι είχε μπλέξει με μια άλλη γυναίκα.

( . . .) 

M: Ναι, ήδε εώς (. . .) άνδρας πλέον στα 24-25, [ασχολείσαι με=]

G: [Ναι]

M: =τη ζωή σου [με το:. τι θα κάνεις επαγγελματικά: με τα =

G: [Ναι]

M: =ερωτικά σου με τα κοινωνικά σου (. . .) από σε επιρρέασε αυτή τη φυγή του πατέρα σου;

G: Με επιρρέασε γιατί άφησε τη μάνα μου κατάκοιτη στο κρεβάτι (. . .) απροσθετ ( . . .)

M: Ναι (. . .) ήδε εώς έκανε πάντα 25 ετών (. . .) 24, δεν θέλω [. . .] να υπερβάλω γιατί δεν ασχολήθηκες με τη ζωή σου (. . .) να δείς=

G: [Ναι]

M: =με μια μεγαλυτηρίωση εντός επισωγιγικόν το τι θέλει ο πατέρας σου;

((several turns later))

M: Έγώ θα σου πω Γιώργη (. . .) με βλέπες λίγο να κοντέρω (. . .) ή και θα σου πω γιατί κοντέρω, θέλω να 'μα μία τιμός και ελικρινής [απελαντίστη] σου,. ή, . . . Είσαι ένας:=

G: [Ναι] [Ναι]

M: =ήνως και άντρας 35 ετών (. . .) κι έρχεσαι σήμερα να μου πεις πηγή της κακοδαμόνιας μου είναι ο πατέρας μου. (. . .) Φοβάμαι (. . .) μήπως έχεις ένα εφάρμοσμα στο μυαλό σου (. . .) είναι μια όρατα λύση για σένα (. . .) την ευθύνη έχει ο πατέρας μου. Άλλα σήμερα 35 ετών (. . .) δεν θα πρέπει για την κακοδαμόνια της ζωής σου να αναζητάς τις ευθύνες στον εαυτό σου;

1. (m) M: I want to ask you, Ghiorgos, what your problem is.
2. (m) G: My problem is that L. my wife and our three children are paying for my fathers si:ns.
3. (2.5)
4. M: Uh:.:., may ask you a question, wha:t is you a:ge.
5. G ( [ ] )
6. M: [And I’m asking this because you now have a fa:mi:ly with three children and a wife, (. . .) and at this age, which is what?
7. G Thirty-four.
8. ( . . .)
9. M: Thirty-four years old, you come and talk to me about your fa:ther
10. G [Yes.
11. M: It is true that (. . .) we pay, whether the term pay has positive or a negative meaning, we pay for the pros and cons of our family. (. . .) They raise us (. . .) they show us the way, they help us form our character or they also fo:rm it,. . . But being a 35-year-old person with a fa:mi:ly, responsibili:ties, chi:ldren (. . .) and attributing responsibilities to his father (. . .) is, I think, a bi:t exagerated.
12. G In ’89 he left the house (. . .) for about eight mon:th:ns and had an affair with another wo:man.
13. ( . . .)
14. M: Yes .hh you are (. . .) a man at the age of 24-25, [and you are occupied with=]
15. G: [Yes
16. M: =your life[with wha:;t you will do professionally, with your love affairs=]
17. G: [Ναι
18. M: =your social relationships .hh did your father’s departure affect you?
19. G: It did because he abandoned my bed-ridden mother who was (. . .) ill
20. M: Yes .hh but you, a 25-year-old young man (. . .) 24, I don’t want to [. . .] exaggerate [why didn’t you mind your own business (. . .) why didn’t=]
Reference to Ghiorgos’s age becomes a rhetorical device for Mikroutsikos. He obviously already knows how old the young man is when he first asks him of his age, but this question helps him express his disagreement (also evident in silences throughout the fragment) and construct his lengthy argument about Kostas’s immaturity and avoidance of responsibilities. Notice how he tends to round his age off: 34 becomes 35 for the sake of his argument, 24 becomes 25, but he then corrects himself to avoid exaggeration, as he claims (however, he will do the same thing again later)—notice that conversational repair is often associated with moral work in conversation (Schegloff et al 1977). Ghiorgos’s morality is questioned in relation to his age: he must account for the consequences of his diversion.

Let us now look at fragments in which speakers act in collaboration to question the morality of absent persons. In all these cases, the absent members are characterized as “old people” without any specific reference to their chronological age. In the first case, an elderly couple has just left Fenia’s shop (see fragment 3 above). Φ(ένια)/F(Fenia) along with two 67-year-old women, Γ(εωργία)/G(heorghia), who is Fenia’s grandmother, and Ε(ρήνη)/I(iρini), a friend of theirs, start gossiping about the couple whom they consider to be unmarried. They are commenting on the fact that the man wanted to buy a present for the woman and, at the beginning of the fragment, Irini is criticizing the woman for accepting a present from a man who is not her husband:

**Fragment 7**

1 (f) E: Είναι στον άνθρωπο. (.). Εγώ να μου κάνει άνθρωπος (.). Ηι ήξε:νος πράγμα (.) δεν το καταδέχομαι [με τίποτα.
2 (f) Φ: [Μορέ νειάνικη: ην είναι και γρίς και κάθε ριον να πω να ταν νεία άντιπάτει [στον κό:ρακα
3 E: [Μορέ δεν το κα:δεν το [καταδέχομαι από δικό μου [άνθρωπο
4 (f) Γ:  [Σ’ αυτήν την ην: [Σ::: σ’ αυτήν
tην ηλικία κανένας δεν ήρθε θες ένα παγοτό να σε κεράς; Η Αυτούς πώς heh=
5 E: [Ναι
6 6 Φ: =τους κεράνα;Η Και τους παίρνουνε [τα δόρα;
7 Φ: Είναι να το 'χεις μέσα σου τελεκά.
8 Γ: Πός τους παίρνουνε τα δόρα; (.). Και κάνονι και τα μάτια: [::; μμι;
9 E: [Εάν δε-Εάν δε
dόσονε, δεν παίρνουνε. (.). Μη φοβάσαι. Λοιπάν δεν είναι να ξερτιστεί για να τα
10 Γ: Χάλια χρόνια [να μην το φορέσω και να μην το φάω.
11 E: [Α πα πα πα
12 E: Δε γιατί αρέσουν αυτά τα πράγματα.
13 Φ: Μορέ κι άμα είναι κανονικό ζευγάρι, πήραμε την αμαρτία και τους κακολογούμε
14 Γ: [Δε γιατί παθαίνουν τίποτα μορέ;
15 E: [Δεν πήραμε την αμαρτία αυτή και μας νούξει. Η Απλός συζητούμε.
16 ()
17 Γ: Ηιιι Πάντες την πρόσεχε πά:ρα [πολύ
This fragment is a perfect example of how a person’s morality is collaboratively constructed by speakers in interaction as well as how gossip is socially organized (Bergmann 1993) by participants in interaction. The interactants do “not simply take up the moral meaning of an event as a factual property” (Bergmann 1998: 289); rather, the moral nature of the topic of the gossip is interactionally achieved, i.e. the immoral behaviour of the elderly woman who accepts gifts from men who are not officially related to her. The younger participant, Fenia, would show some understanding for a young woman who accepts gifts from (equally young) strangers but she cannot find any excuse for elderly people. The intergenerational consensus on the issue is remarkable. Moreover, both elderly women grasp the chance to project their own moral behaviour since they would never lose their dignity by submitting to such offers. At some point, though, Fenia feels guilty about the possibility of having unfairly accused the couple of this behaviour: they might be married after all. The elderly women rush to reassure her that there is no sin involved in just talking about the two people and then they all go on to comment on the man’s behaviour and the present he bought for the woman he accompanied.

In the next fragment, we have an intra-generational alliance against another generation. Three young women, Σ(οφία)/S(oaphia) and Τ(άνια)/T(ania), who are in their twenties, and Λ(ίτσα)/L(itsa), who is in her thirties) have been watching an old man who has overeaten at a fair and has just vomited.

Fragment 8
1  (f)  Σ:  Τι- τι, μουλό ο κόσμος γέρους άνθρωποι και να:- εξουν εκοσπέντε πίεση και κάθονται:-;
2  (f)  Τ:  [Και τρων σπιτάκι]:
   Σ:  [Εμ θέλει ο κόσμος τους να πεθάνουν heh heh heh. Δεν

Apostolos Poulios
Sophia and Tania cannot find an excuse for elderly people’s thoughtless behaviour: they should have known better and been careful with their diet. If they are not, they deserve to die. However, as Tania remarks, the problem is that they do not always die but, instead, they become bed-ridden and are thus a burden for the younger people who will have to take care of them. Older people’s morality has been tested and judged as blameworthy.

The final fragment is once again an intergenerational evaluation of absent people’s morality. Κ(ουλα)/Κ(oula), who is 62, asks Φ(ένια)/F(enia) if she has heard about a couple who are going to divorce.

**Fragment 9**

1. (f) T: Είδες η Βάσιο τι τραβήγματα είχε;
   2. (.)
   3. (f) Φ: Ναι κάτι άκουσα [αλλά δεν
   4. T: [Τι άκουσες μάνα μου. (.) Τώρα στα τόσα χρόνια [(να )
   5. Φ: [Αυτό: μισέρι
   6. T: Λέω παντρέψαν το παιδί: τους πέρασα, κάτι [οικογένεια [μεγάλη]
   7. T: [Ναι [Ναι
   8. (.)
   9. Φ: Δεν έχω έμμεση καμία φορά δεν ξέρεις τι προβλήματα μπορεί να έχει ο άλλος. Μα
   10. T: Δεν ξέρωμε ποιος φταιεί μάνα μου από [αλλούνον: [ή αλλά δεν είναι καλό πράγμα
   11. T: Να απλώσεις χέρι απάνω [μου (.) να με δείξεις ο άνδρας μου (.) Η Βάσιο έφτιαξε οριζόντιον την έδεις, δεν καφές [τη φωνή άλλος [παρατάρεσε [μέσα στο μαγαζί: [ή μπροστά στον κόσμο
   12. Φ: [Ι:::
   13. T: =:[ή να να γελάς [περίπατο δο [κό- (.) και [ην έδεις τρέμει στο μαγαζί: [ή και θέλει να τον πάρει τόσα και να: γρένου [και πέντε παιδιά [τρεις κόρες
so:meone faces

K: We don’t know whose fault it is my gi:rl in other people’s affairs .hh but it is not a
good think (…)

K: My husband raising a ha:nd (.) to hi:t me (.) Since you beat Va:ss:so te:n ti:mes and
you ca:ll ed her a [who re in the shop .hh in front of other peo:ple]=

F: [Oh:::

K: =.h and- other peo- around (.) they lau:ghed (.) (…) and he beat her in the sho:p .h
and he now wants her to ta:ke him back and they do: have fi:ve children
|three daughters

F: [But tha::ts the point they ma:rried their children, they will beco:me gra:ndparents
no:w. (…) May G o:d gui:de them to ma:ke it up again (…) for the sake of their
children they should have:: pa:ti:ence and ma:ke it up. Ainde. ((interj.))

Although both women totally support the woman who has been abused by her husband,
they think that some kind of compromise is a solution that is more appropriate since the
couple is about to have grandchildren. People of some age seem to be deprived of a
chance to make a new start, even if their previous life was so intolerable, in the light of
the moral expectations associated with the category old person or grandparent. Obviously it doesn’t matter what the actual chronological age of the couple is—they are probably not very old, just in their middle age. However, they are about to be members of the category grandparent, and membership in this category has specific moral responsibilities that seem to deprive them of their own happiness for the sake of their children and grandchildren.

3. Concluding Remarks
To sum up, in the above fragments we saw some examples of the moral work that can
be interactionally achieved through age talk in everyday interaction. Morality is bound
to membership categorization as members of particular categories orient to the moral
implications of their self-descriptions and other-categorizations. In the fragments
presented above, they oriented to notions of age appropriateness, maturity and category-bound rights and obligations.

Speakers used age talk as a resource to either claim certain rights for themselves or
attribute specific characteristics to other people. By dealing either implicitly or explicitly
with other people’s morality, participants exposed their own moral world and made it
available for analysis by other interlocutors. Interlocutors jointly constructed the moral
meanings of certain cases of other people’s misconduct—that is, what they thought to
be cases of misconduct—thus allowing the interactional dimension of conversational
moral work to emerge.

References
(eds), Talk at work. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 137-162.
Gruyter.
Interaction, 31/3-4: 279-294.
Have and G. Psathas (eds), Situated order: Studies in the social organization of talk and embodied
activities. Washington: International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis and
University Press of America, 1-30.
Interaction, 31/3-4: 295-325.