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Voicing experiences of ageist nonrecognition in performance appraisal interaction: complexities in constructing stories that counteract organisational ignorance

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ABSTRACT

A growing line of research aims to give voice to employees' experiences of ageism at work. This article complements this body of research by demonstrating how voicing experiences of ageism, and hence counteracting organisational ignorance towards ageism, can be a complex discursive endeavour. Ageist experiences can be based on subtle interactional exchanges at the workplace, including other workers' nonrecognition (e.g. ostracism). We suggest that experiences of nonrecognition can be a source of what we call *interactionally troublesome exchanges* (ITEs), that is, instances of social interaction that a worker experiences as problematic, although the social violations of the interaction partner may be difficult to report to others (e.g. supervisors) who lack the same first-hand experience. We argue that the difficulties of reporting ageist nonrecognition are anchored in cultural and institutional expectations that undermine the organisational 'tellability' of stories that aim to describe colleagues' subtle acts and omissions in daily workplace encounters.

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Ageism; conversation analysis; discourse; performance appraisal interviews; recognition; storytelling

Introduction

According to Butler's (1969, 243) classic formulation, ageism is 'prejudice by one age group towards other age groups'. More recently, the World Health Organization (WHO 2021, 295) has defined ageism as 'the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age'. Ageism in the workplace is a relatively recent and growing object of research, and a field of research that has been dominated by quantitative methods (Cebola, dos Santos, and Dionísio 2021; Harris et al. 2018). To complement quantitative studies on ageist attitudes, intentions, and perceptions, a recent review calls for more qualitative research on actual workplace practices through which ageism is reproduced at work (Harris et al. 2018). To answer this call this study draws on naturalistic data comprising video-recorded

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interactions between employees and their supervisors. Theoretically, we draw on the traditions of socio-constructionist and discursive organisational research (Chia 2000; Hosking 2011; Tsoukas 2005) and, respectively, conceptualise ageism as a phenomenon that is constantly constructed, and possibly resisted or ignored, in organisational interaction practices and through discursive patterns of age-relevant meaning-making, communication, and categorisation (Previtali et al. 2022; Previtali and Spedale 2021; Riach 2007; Spedale 2019; Spedale, Coupland, and Tempest 2014; Thomas et al. 2014). Our study contributes to the need to study 'how aging workers, and other actors within workplaces, attempt to negotiate ageism' in concrete face-to-face interactions within the workplace (Harris et al. 2018, 10).

A recent review of discursive studies on ageism in working life identifies three lines of research (Previtali et al. 2022). The first aims to 'give voice to participants to describe their experiences of stereotypical treatment and discrimination because of their age' (Previtali et al. 2022, 104). The second focuses on ageist ideologies and discursive practices (micro or macro) that construct particular age-groups as inferior to others (e.g. Previtali and Spedale 2021; Previtali, Nikander, and Ruusu-vuori 2023; Riach 2007; Spedale 2019). The third line examines 'the strategies that individuals, as well as organisations, implement to counteract ageism' (Previtali et al. 2022, 106). In this article, we primarily complement the first and third lines of research by demonstrating how voicing experiences of ageism, and breaking organisational silence regarding ageism, can be a complex discursive process, especially when experiences of ageism are based on subtle acts and omissions in workplace encounters. While previous (and scant) qualitative research has mainly focused on research interview data (Previtali et al. 2022), we draw on naturally occurring data from performance appraisals to examine the complex discursive practices through which employees' voice their experiences of ageism to their supervisors. To our knowledge, there are no prior studies on authentic workplace interaction in which employees voice their experiences of ageism (see Cebola, dos Santos, and Dionisio 2021; Harris et al. 2018; Previtali et al. 2022). Consequently, we contribute to the third line of discursive research on ageism by foregrounding strategies for counteracting ageism that have not yet received scholarly attention: that is, discursive strategies through which individual employees seek to call for managerial responses to ageism at their workplace by constructing organisationally relevant stories about their ageist experiences. Specifically, we focus on experiences of indirect ageism that are especially challenging to articulate in the form of compelling narratives that position the managers of the organisation as morally and practically accountable for addressing the issue at hand.

Based on previous research on social interaction, we suggest that mobilising managerial responses to ageism at work is particularly difficult when the experiences of ageism are based on subtle acts and omissions in workplace encounters (e.g. between colleagues). Such encounters can be a source of what we call *interactionally troublesome exchanges* (ITEs). ITEs refer to instances of social interaction that a person retrospectively experiences as problematic (e.g. ageist), although the social transgressions or violations of the conversational partner may be difficult to identify, name, and report to others (e.g. supervisors) who lack the same first-hand experience. Typically, ITEs concern violations of the ritual order of interaction (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1963; 1967; Tavory and Fine 2020), which have been described as 'interactional vandalism' (Duneier and Molotch 1999), 'failed coordination of action' (Collins 2009), 'micro-interactional assaults' (McCurn 2017), and 'failed ritual' involving 'uncivil inattention' or 'uncivil attention' (Horgan 2020). Given that these violations are often extremely subtle, concerning, for example, insensitivity to hints, such as cues to end a conversation (Duneier and Molotch 1999), providing a plausible and managerially relevant report of an ITE may be a complex endeavour. To our knowledge, no prior research has theorised such complexities in the context of ageist encounters.

Descriptions of ITEs are reminiscent of everyday storytelling (Mandelbaum 2013); that is, they resemble mundane, omnipresent instances of social interaction in which people construct versions of (past) events and experiences. In addition to description, stories typically contain chronology, evaluation, and explanation, and they are always told in relation to cultural conventions and the (assumed) expectations of the (local) audience (e.g. Hyvärinen 2008). In the practices of everyday

storytelling, it is important for the storyteller to create an environment for an extended period of talk (Hall and Matarese 2014; Sacks 1992) and to choose the contents of the story and the features of its delivery such that the story is perceived as ‘tellable’ (e.g. Ochs and Capps 2001). Indeed, telling a story without a currently relevant point constitutes a loss of face for the teller (Norrick 2005). In a performance appraisal context, describing an ageist ITE without an apparent, identifiable and managerially relevant problem to report undermines the legitimacy of investing time in the telling. Stories about misconduct are also inherently delicate and necessitate interactional work through which the tellers must distance themselves from negative dispositional identities, such as those of a moaner, whiner, oversensitive person or habitual complainer (Edwards 2005; Whitehead 2013).

This article demonstrates the difficulties of accounting for ageist ITEs in the context of performance appraisal interviews. The alleged violations in the ITEs we focus on involve a lack of recognition of an employee’s value as a person and professional, which the employee himself attributes to his high age. Our study demonstrates ‘how ageism at work is reproduced in and through interactions between employers and employees’ (Previtali and Spedale 2021, 9) not only because employers or supervisors can express explicit ageism towards their subordinates. In addition, interactions between supervisors and supervisees can perpetuate, legitimate and licence organisational inattention or even ignorance towards ageism in the workplace. Organisational ‘ignorance involves deciding what can be talked about and what cannot be talked about; what should be remembered or forgotten; known or not known; seen or unseen’ (Knudsen, Pors, and Bakken 2023, 13). Organisational ignorance is socially constructed within interactive and communicative processes (Roberts 2015) through which organisational actors, particularly those in positions of power (e.g. managers and supervisors), bypass or forget issues that might necessitate their intervention if they were properly acknowledged by these powerful actors (McGoey 2012; also Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Knudsen, Pors, and Bakken 2023). When such ignorance is marked as legitimate and accepted by other organisational members beyond those in power, this acceptance can effectively diminish powerful actors’ perceived moral and practical responsibility to, for example, implement organisational strategies aimed ‘to counteract ageism’ (Previtali et al. 2022, 106).

A lack of recognition as a source of trouble

In this article, we focus on an ITE in which the alleged trouble involves a lack of recognition of an employee’s value as a person and a professional, which the employee himself attributes to his high age. Recognition ‘is a social act by which an individual’s or group’s relative positive social worth is affirmed or acknowledged by others’ (Lamont 2018, 423). In a profound sense, professional skills and competences always depend on the recognition of others (Hughes 1984; Olakivi 2018; Watson 2002). This relational notion ‘underlines the view of professionalism as always enacted and performed – a processual and temporal phenomenon’ (Powell and Gilbert 2007, 200), and thus also a precarious phenomenon, since professional skills and competences can also be misrecognised and ignored by others.

Recognition is a source of professional prestige, but it is also a source of human dignity in a broader sense. Since the early twentieth century, the social roots of the self have been increasingly highlighted in social sciences. Pragmatists, such as James (1891), Cooley (1902), and Mead (1934), considered that the self emerged from social interactions and was thus fundamentally social. The same idea is also central to the sociology of Goffman (1963; 1967), who discussed the notion of face as a positive image of the self that a person claims for him- or herself and which requires ratification by others. As such, the self is vulnerable to social interactions (Peräkylä 2015; Rawls 1987). This is why ‘the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition’ (Honneth 1996, 92), which is enabled by those concrete practices by which people respond to each other’s utterances and behaviours in an affiliative manner (Koskinen, Stevanovic, and Peräkylä 2021b). All interaction, however, contains an inherent risk of nonrecognition, which is most vividly described by James in the quotation below:

A man's [sic] social self is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favourably, by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, but if every person we met 'cut us dead' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all. (James 1891, 293–294.)

In its most dramatic form, a lack of recognition may thus concern the entire presence of a person. More recently, growing research on workplace 'ostracism', that is, the experience of being excluded or ignored by others in the workplace, has foregrounded the negative consequences of nonrecognition on employees' psychosocial wellbeing (Bedi 2021; O'Reilly et al. 2015; Sarfraz et al. 2019; Zheng et al. 2016). Studies have further indicated that participatory and democratic leadership styles can decrease experiences of ostracism within work organisations (Kanwal, Lodhi, and Kashif 2019). Sociologists, in turn, often highlight 'recognition gaps', that is, 'disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society' (Lamont 2018, 421–422) due, for example, to gender and 'race'. Extensive literature demonstrates such gaps also with respect to age (Cebola, dos Santos, and Dionísio 2021; Harris et al. 2018).

In workplace interaction, nonrecognition may be limited to specific aspects of the self – including professional skills and competences (Olakivi 2018), as well as statuses of power and knowledge (Stevanovic 2021). The recognition of all these aspects of the self is an omnirelevant part of social interaction, accomplished implicitly in and through the specific ways in which participants' utterances and behaviours are collaboratively organised into sequences of joint action (Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2014). This means, then again, that also a lack of recognition of these aspects of the self can be traced to the minor details of the sequential organisation of interaction – independently of the extent to which such details as a source of trouble would warrant a tellable story.

Data and method

The data for this study were collected in the context of performance appraisals (also called as employee development conversations/dialogues especially in the Scandinavian context). Performance appraisals, which involve supervisors and their subordinates, are processes that typically occur once or twice a year. In a performance appraisal, the subordinate employee's performance and development are evaluated and the need for pay rises, promotions, support or training is determined (Grote 2011). Critical literature commonly portrays performance appraisals as power techniques employed by organisations to cultivate self-reflective, self-governing, and entrepreneurial employees (Du Gay, Salaman, and Rees 1996; Fejes 2008). However, in performance appraisals, supervisors can also assume responsibility for resolving organisational issues raised by employees (Dessler 2012). As a result, the performance appraisal is not inherently an individualising technique – the allocation of responsibility for the discussed problem, whether it falls on the employee or the supervisor, is to some extent negotiated in the specific context (Asmuß 2013).

The data analysed in this study are drawn from a larger data corpus of 125 performance appraisal interviews. Each interview was attended by a supervisor and one of their subordinate employees. The larger data corpus included a total of 84 different supervisors (42 females/42 males) and 122 different subordinates (69 females/53 males). Three supervisors attended the performance appraisal interview with their own supervisors and thus also participated in the data in the role of employee. The participants were from organisations in various fields, including education, banking, media, chemical engineering, food production, social services, engineering, daily consumer goods, and cleaning and facility services. The participants' mean age was 43.7 (SD = 8.7) years for the supervisors and 44.2 (SD = 9.7) years for the subordinates.

The recruitment process proceeded by first contacting the supervisors, who were then asked to recruit one or two of their own subordinates. The study was performed in accordance with the recommendations of the Finnish Advisory Board on Ethical Integrity. All subjects provided written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data collection was performed at the premises of the participating organisations, either in a meeting room or in the supervisor's own office. Interlocutors were seated at a table, and a stand for two web-cameras was placed between them. In addition, electrodes were also attached to participants to measure psychological responses. The results from these measurements will not be discussed here. Once the video cameras were activated, the participants were free to discuss for as long as necessary. The supervisor was asked to conduct a typical performance appraisal, following the structure and guidelines provided by the relevant organisation. The researchers waited in an adjacent room or in the hallway during all the recordings. On average, the discussions lasted for 51 minutes (SD = 13 minutes), with a maximum duration of 1 hour 2 minutes and a minimum duration 15 minutes.

Methodologically, our data analysis draws on the research tradition of *conversation analysis*. Conversation analysis (CA) is a qualitative method for studying interaction using audio or video recordings from real interaction situations, and its aim is to identify and unravel the reoccurring interactional practices through which social actions are constructed and organised as sequences of joint action (e.g. Clift 2016; Schegloff 2007). Previous conversation analytical research has shown several ways in which participants may negotiate aspects of their identity through sequences of initiating and responding to actions (e.g. Heritage 2013; Rossi and Stivers 2021; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2014).

From a CA perspective, our analysis is based on the literature on storytelling and affiliation. In the context of storytelling, affiliation refers to the ways in which the recipients of a story share and endorse an affective stance towards the events described in the story (Stivers 2008; Stivers, Mondada, and Steensig 2011). In the absence of an affiliative response, storytellers seldom explicitly mention the problem; rather, they act as though the story were not yet complete and produce a new story component that provides the recipient with a second chance to produce an affiliative response (Jefferson 1978). Moreover, storytellers can strive for affiliative responses from the recipients by, for example, re-enacting their displays of affective stance, recycling the climax of the story, and modifying the ways in which affective stance is displayed (Couper-Kuhlen 2012; Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori 2012; Selting 2010). Storytellers' commitment to such interactional work suggests, firstly, that storytelling is a 'high-stakes activity' in which the storyteller's face is specifically threatened (Koskinen 2022) and, secondly, that the recipient's expression of affiliation as a response to the story plays a key role in alleviating the stressful experience associated with such a threat (Peräkylä et al. 2015).

Merely taking time to tell a story may thus be seen as an implicit claim about its tellability and its relevance for the activity in which the participants are engaged, in which case a display of affiliation legitimises this investment of time. In this respect, stories of ITEs told in performance appraisal interviews may be assumed to be similar to stories of any kind. However, one might also assume that the institutional context of a performance appraisal enables particularly good opportunities for the supervisee to voice experiences of ageist encounters in the workplace – as long as these experiences are portrayed as relevant vis-à-vis the performance of the supervisee or the wider organisation and thus vis-à-vis the practical and moral responsibilities of the manager (Ruusuvuori et al. 2019). Thus, telling an ITE story should not inevitably violate the institutional order of a performance appraisal. Regarding ITE stories, performance appraisals might thus be conceived as a 'critical case' (Flyvbjerg 2006): if voicing experiences of ageist ITEs proves to be a difficult task in performance appraisals, one can expect that similar difficulties also exist in other contexts, such as spontaneous meetings between supervisors and supervisees.

In addition to CA, we draw on the discursive research tradition of *positioning analysis* (Davies and Harré 1990) to explore the malleable nature of ITE stories that may unfold in supervisor-supervisee

interactions and the type of relationship and identity work generated during these stories. According to the relational framework of positioning analysis, 'an individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate' (Davies and Harré 1990, 46). Key concepts in positioning analysis include 'positions' and 'storylines'. 'Position is what is created in and through talk as the speaker and hearers take themselves up as persons', and, moreover, as particular *kinds* of persons with specific qualities such as competences, rights and responsibilities (Davies and Harré 1990, 62). Indications of positions can be identified through personal attributes, biographical detail and socio-cultural categories (e.g. 'supervisor' and 'supervisee', 'older' and 'younger worker'). Moreover, paralinguistic cues, such as frequent pauses, deep breaths, searching for words and nervous laughs can reinforce the positions constructed during narrating, for example by indicating a person's insecurity, nervousness, and unwillingness (Kayi-Aydar 2021, 6).

Discursive practices also include storylines, through which 'different subject positions are elaborated' (Davies and Harré 1990, 47). Storylines are 'strips of life unfold[ing] according to narrative conventions' (Harré and Dedaic 2012, 51), and they are 'organised around various poles such as events, characters and moral dilemmas' (Davies and Harré 1990, 49). Storylines, in turn, 'position individuals or reaffirm their self- and other-positionings during narrating' (Kayi-Aydar 2021, 6). In addition to themselves, speakers can indeed position others 'by adopting a story line which incorporates a particular interpretation of cultural stereotypes to which they are 'invited' to conform, indeed are required to conform if they are to continue to converse with the first speaker in such a way as to contribute to that person's story line' (Davies and Harré 1990, 50).

The storyline of a typical 'performance appraisal' positions one of the participants, the 'supervisor', with the right and responsibility to ask questions and evaluate the performance of the other participant, the 'supervisee'. Conversely, the 'supervisee' is granted the right and responsibility to address obstacles affecting their work performance, and they can expect an affiliative response from the 'supervisor', as long as the addressed obstacles are considered relevant from an organisational standpoint. What is considered relevant, in turn, is a matter of negotiation. Within this overarching storyline, the participants can employ more specific storylines when seeking affiliative responses from the story recipient. These storylines may revolve around specific work-related issues or offer different interpretations of particular problems, thereby shaping the participants' positions in the conversation (e.g. 'victim of discrimination', 'oversensitive person', 'democratic leader'). In the subsequent discussion, our focus centres on the storylines that emerge as the supervisor and the supervisee co-construct distinct interpretations of ageist nonrecognition in the workplace.

As elements of a conversation, storylines exert certain power over the participants (Davies and Harré 1990). The irresistible nature of storylines becomes particularly emphasised in situations where the speaker uses a storyline with cultural stereotypes to which others are reluctant but are obliged to adapt, causing retrospective feelings of anger, oppression, or insult (Davies and Harré 1999, 49). Of course, one might want to resist a storyline for a wide range of reasons, and, indeed, several reasons might exist for abandoning that resistance. In this article, however, we suggest that one of the main reasons that a storyline might prevail in spite of the unfavourable positions that it imposes on some of the participants is its capacity to foster the tellability of the story.

For the purposes of this study, we examined the data corpus by searching for ITEs in which an employee told their supervisor about their experiences of ageist encounters. However, such sequences proved to be extremely rare. While we found several segments of talk that revolved around the more general problematic of age at work, we were able to identify just one case in which the participants sought to address the problem by telling a story of concrete interactional practices at the workplace. We suggest that the extreme rarity of such instances of storytelling in our data of 125 performance appraisals from various occupational fields is already in itself indicative of the difficulty of reporting ITEs associated with ageism (although, more research is required on the frequency of ITE experiences and stories, as well as on the assumed imbalance between the

frequency of experiences and stories in various working life contexts). The following analysis, we believe, clarifies the same difficulty even more.

The original Finnish data were transcribed with conversation analytic conventions (see the Appendix: transcription conventions) and subsequently translated into English. Only the English translations of the data extracts analysed here will be shown below (with a simplified transcription notation; the original Finnish transcript is available in a supplemental file).

Analysis: describing experiences of ageist encounters

Our analysis of how an employee reports an ITE to his supervisor is divided into six sections, each of which relates to a specific phase in the unfolding storyline. The episode begins with an *initial problem presentation* by the employee, who works as a teacher in a public (i.e. 'state') school. This is followed by a *request for specification* by the recipient, the supervisor, who is the principal of the school. Thereafter, the employee provides an *upgrade in the description of the violation*, which ultimately includes reports of violator thoughts. Finally, the employee *reintroduces the core of the problem*, which leads to the *recipient uptake*. The episode nonetheless ends with the employee's *self-deprecation*. The mere schematic description of the structure of this interaction episode already points to potential problems in the smooth unfolding of the conversation, which will be described below in more detail. The employee and the supervisor are both men (based on their self-identification). The chronological age of the supervisor is 55 years. We do not know the chronological age of the employee who, nonetheless, explicitly presents himself as an older worker in the following extract.

Initial problem presentation

In Extract 1, the employee (E) launches a complaint about the school's 'younger teachers' (line 1) radically ignoring him (lines 6–10). The exchange takes place in a section of the performance appraisal in which the supervisor (S) has invited the employee to discuss wellbeing at work.

Extract 1 (26:41, Besserwisser teachers and an old veteran)

01 E: if I think of our young teachers I will
 02 make this distinction h [ere]
 03 S: [there] are not that young there
 04 E: no but nonetheless (.) let's say=
 05 S: younger=
 06 E: =younger teachers the situation is that quite many people don't
 07 speak a word to me in the teachers' room (.) neither
 08 about work nor anything else they might in an extreme situation
 09 if there's some work situation they do talk about it
 10 but otherwise they don't talk with me about anything at all.
 11 (1.5)
 12 E: and umm I've been watching it a little bit and then of course
 13 things always have two sides=I probably don't discuss with them either
 14 but the kind of dialogue does not exist.
 15 (0.5)
 16 E: and I feel that umm in some sense the situation is a bit like these
 17 younger like=I already told you about these besserwisser¹ teachers so
 18 [they kind of know how these things are han]dled (.) so from us
 19 S: [EHh Hh Hh Hh Hh Hh Hh .HhhhE]
 20 E: it isn't necessary to even ask anything (.) and in a certain
 21 way they like in my opinion (.) do control many situations.
 22 (0.3)
 23 E: I feel that way
 24 S: okay?
 25 E: yeah. (.) so I don't mean that they run this school
 26 but they do control many things here.

By referring to the category of ‘our young teachers’ (line 1) as an ‘age-group membership identification’ (Previtali and Spedale 2021) device, the teacher distances himself from this age group and positions himself as an older and more experienced teacher, in contrast to those whose behaviour he is about to criticise. Moreover, with the use of the first-person plural possessive pronoun ‘our’, the employee seems to position the supervisor as his senior peer, implicating an alliance of the two against the younger teachers. The supervisor, however, rejects this categorisation (line 3). After the employee’s insistence (line 4), the supervisor nonetheless accepts the scalar view in the treatment of age (line 5), which allows the employee to continue his complaint in line with a storyline of *ageist nonrecognition*, located in a wider discussion about wellbeing at work. In this storyline, the employee positions himself as a victim of ageist discrimination. In the complaint, the employee depicts the scene of the ‘teachers’ room’, in which no one speaks to him. With the extreme case formulation ‘anything at all’ (line 10), he portrays the situation as worthy of complaint, thus seeking to legitimise his story and foster its tellability (Pomerantz 1986). Moreover, his presence in the story-world teacher’s room highlights his availability as a conversation partner. Such ‘prepositioning’ (Harré et al. 2009; Harré and Dedaic 2012) contributes to the interpretation of the other teachers’ behaviour as an instance of unfair nonrecognition and uncivil inattention (Horgan 2020). This storyline does not initially receive any affiliation from the supervisor (see the 1.5 s pause, line 11).

After failing to receive affiliation from the supervisor, the employee displays self-reflection and a balance of views by pointing out how ‘things always have two sides’ (line 13). Hereafter the employee nonetheless continues the story of ageist nonrecognition, now highlighting how the problem is not only the younger teachers’ uncivil but perhaps casual behaviour, but also lack of dialogue and, moreover, the younger teachers’ lack of respect towards the older teachers’ knowledge and expertise. The shorthand ‘besserwisser teachers’ (line 17) highlights the younger teachers’ dispositional unwillingness to learn from the older teachers. The supervisor receives the shorthand reference with laughter (‘€Hh Hh Hh Hh Hh Hh Hh.Hhhh€’, line 19), thus, on the one hand, displaying recognition of the phenomenon it refers to, while on the other hand, treating the reference as unserious.

The notion of ‘besserwisser teachers’ nonetheless adds a novel organisational and practical layer to the problem description: the problem is not (only) about the employee’s experience of nonrecognition as a source of subjective illbeing (as it might have appeared before); rather, it also concerns the insufficient exchange of professional knowledge at the school. Moreover, this lack of communication concerns not only the employee and the younger teachers (‘they don’t talk with me’, line 10) but the younger and older teachers more generally (‘so from us it isn’t necessary to even ask anything’, lines 18–20), possibly including the principal as well (although the pronoun ‘us’ remains ambiguous). This storyline of *organisational dysfunction* thus positions the employee not only as a victim of ageist discrimination, but also as a witness to broader ageist tendencies that may have practical implications for the proper functioning of the school, which is even more pronounced in the complaint that follows: by positioning the younger teachers as powerful actors who ‘control many situations’ (line 21), this storyline dialogically positions the principal as a weak leader who has lost control over his school. The employee orients to this problem description and respective act of positioning as one that might appear as a serious complaint towards the supervisor. The use of a disclaimer (‘I don’t mean that they run this school’, line 25) and a reference to personal experience (‘I feel that way’, line 23) can be interpreted as attempts to mitigate the complaint. Referring to personal experience is also a way for the employee to pursue a response from the supervisor and limit the supervisor’s ability to ignore the employee’s story.

A request for specification by the recipient

In response to the employee’s problem presentation, the supervisor asks him to specify the problem (lines 31–32), thus making the employee accountable for his complaint.

Extract 2 (27:40, Besserwisser teachers and an old veteran)

25 E: yeah. (.) so I don't mean that they run this school
 26 but they do control many things here.
 27 (1.5)
 28 S: okay?
 29 (0.5)
 30 E: and and be [cause umm]
 31 S: [could you] could you give some
 32 [concrete example (--)]
 33 E: [well I can say that umm] in many different
 34 situations that kind of occur here at school and so on (.)
 35 so (.) so surprise surprise that (.) those certain people
 36 are there like fussing and bustling around (.) and kind of
 37 (.) there comes a bit of a feeling that we know how to handle this
 38 that they can already move like (.) like (.)
 39 aside. (0.2) that umm=
 40 S: =you (.) †couldn't you say some concrete example because
 41 (.) for a little (.) [I became (.) I beca]me interested a little.
 42 E: [well †I don't know]
 43 I do not now th==
 44 S: =because I do not notice this myself here
 45 E: the speech machine is starting to beep here
 46 S: €Hh Hh Hh Hh .Hhhh Hh .Hhhh€
 47 E: well so umm (.) how could I explain it
 48 (3.5)

In Extract 2, the supervisor's request for the employee to concretise his complaint (lines 31–32) is followed by a longer description of the problematic behaviour of the younger, 'know-all' teachers that involves them 'fussing and bustling around', knowing how things should be done (lines 33–39). This description builds on the previously enacted storylines of ageist nonrecognition and organisational dysfunction. However, it seems to add little new and concrete information to the previous description; rather, it simply reiterates it. The supervisor displays dissatisfaction with the account – and a motivation to hear more – by rephrasing his previous request (lines 40–41). By switching from the positive interrogative 'could you' to the negative interrogative '†couldn't you', the supervisor claims upgraded entitlement to get his question answered (see Heinemann 2006). In response to the supervisor thus determining the precise terms of the employee's further talk, the employee displays an inability to provide an adequate response, claiming lack of knowledge (lines 42–43). The supervisor provides a short account for his request (line 46), after which the employee makes a joke about the battery of the 'speech machine' running flat (line 45) and displays difficulty 'explaining' the matter (line 47).

Asking a question in response to an account is an inherently ambiguous action (Koskinen, Stevanovic, and Peräkylä 2021a). On the one hand, a question involves a display of interest, which allows the teller to elaborate on the account (Mandelbaum 1993). On the other hand, a question may also serve as a way for the recipient to redirect the focus away from a complaint (Maynard 1980) and to refrain from producing an affiliative response at the point at which it is due (Heritage 2011). In the above, the mere asking of the question creates an immediate shift in the positions of the teller and recipient – the situation comes across as interrogatory and the account occurs in response to this interrogation. Thus, the teller can no longer complain about the problem on his own terms; instead, he is made accountable for his complaint over the younger colleagues' inappropriate behaviour. One factor contributing to this interrogatory shift may be the employee's own expression of category-based complaints concerning a particular group of colleagues at the workplace. Without further evidence, these complaints could potentially portray the employee as displaying ageist attitudes towards the 'younger teachers', making it difficult for the supervisor to validate such claims. By requesting further information, the supervisor displays an interest in understanding the nature of the complaints while also maintaining a neutral stance and implying reluctance to take sides in the absence of sufficient evidence (also Asmuß 2013; Ruusuvaori et al. 2019).

Upgrade in the description of the violation

Being treated as accountable for the complaint, the employee launches into a long description of violator behaviour, casting it in ever more upgraded terms.

Extract 3 (28:24, Besserwisser teachers and an old veteran)

47 E: well so umm (0.5) how could I explain it
48 (3.5)

49 E: however I feel a bit something like (1.5) that maybe those
50 people who have quite a lot of knowledge of teaching

51 S: yes

52 E: so that [knowledge isn't] the thing they are interested [in.]
53 S: [(--)] [yeah o]kay

54 E: and then those who are begin- still in the early stages with this
55 knowledge (.) I don't mean that [knowledge would] be more false=
56 S: [yesyes]
57 =yesyes but there's no experi[ence.]

58 E: [but] there's no experience yeah (.)
59 like it then becomes (.) like more meaningful in various
60 settings (.) and and then umm one could even like
61 snap say yeah let's handle this like this and and and (.) this
62 this is how it is (0.8) so that like (1.5)
63 such a pedagogical dialogue does not work in that.=

64 S: =aah.

65 E: so we could discuss the experienced and the slightly
66 more inexperienced teachers together and reflect=
67 S: =but it is=actually we have not k-=like I have not=from
68 this side the opportunity has not even been offered
69 for those kind of (0.3) things that is the first one
70 here (.) after a couple of [week]s when we are going to have that
71 E: [mmm]
72 S: team building thing which would be (0.3) like (0.2) ((43 seconds removed,
during which S and E discuss the upcoming team building event and matters
related to staff meetings more broadly.))

73 E: but I I was actually thinking about the everyday here
74 S: yes

75 E: =that I don't I don't (.) I don't set those (0.6) like
76 expectations like for you or l[ike] for the house management
77 S: [yeah yeah]

78 E: but I set those expectations as if kind of (.) or those like
79 those expectations for the community itself
80 that it has to take care of certain things

81 S: but look that common- (.) the community must
82 be gu[ided so that it is not otherwise] otherwise it will not go
83 E: [of course of course]
84 S: otherwise it goes wherever it wants
85 E: but but this too will change as there will be [next au-] autumn
86 S: [yeah yeah]

87 E: so this this this will break out=but I I
88 have felt this way and kind of like
89 (3.0)

90 E: in my opinion the atmosphere here is like that (.) that umm (.)
91 there's like (0.4) some teachers with whom (.) one can discuss
92 and go through things with (.) and there's also many who do not
93 speak like at all.
94 (1.0)

95 E: and maybe not even greet.
96 S: (2.0) ((S spins his head.))

97 E: and it gives you the feeling that so I'll get back to
98 what I just started a little bit so I feel like that
99 that that well umm that kind of it might
100 be great if you already retired from the staff (.)
101 so ↑I cannot ↑avoid that thought.

102 S: (2.0) ((S nods.))

103 E: so kind of like (.) umm it is like made nonsense
104 like your professionalism (.) that it doesn't matter that

105 he is just an old geezer there teetering along he's been here for
 106 ages he is already starting to be more like a hindrance than (.) like
 107 (.) being something of a resource.
 108 (1.0)
 109 E: this is exaggerated again a bit but the other side of it is true

In Extract 3, the employee first elaborates his previous accounts of the younger teachers' behaviour (lines 49–66), but he provides little additional information. The lack of 'pedagogical dialogue' (line 63), as a shorthand, continues the previous storyline of organisational dysfunction in which the problem he describes is a problem concerning the core functions of the school. This storyline is fostered through the cultural stereotype of older workers as the workers who have more experience and whose experience should be recognised in the school for the sake of rational reasons. The supervisor responds to the problem description by displaying a degree of personal responsibility; that is, he refers to his inability to facilitate communication between teachers of different age-groups ('from this side the opportunity has not even been offered', lines 67–68). The supervisor thus accepts the employee's problem description but refrains from providing an affiliation to the employee's critical stance towards his younger colleagues.

By foregrounding his personal responsibility, the supervisor mitigates the responsibility of the younger teachers: the problem is on 'this side', not with the younger teachers. By raising an upcoming team building event ('ryhmäytyminen' in Finnish) as an opportunity for creating dialogue between the younger and older teachers (lines 63–66), the supervisor further suggests that a viable solution to the problem is already on its way. The employee displays a critical stance towards this solution by offering a reiterated problem description that foregrounds ageist nonrecognition in everyday encounters and constructs a contrast between those encounters and the formal events and meetings discussed by the supervisor (lines 73–80). The employee further takes up the question of responsibility, highlighting that – in contrast to the supervisor's previous stance – 'the community itself' is responsible for solving the problem. The supervisor nevertheless defends his previous stance that highlights his personal responsibility ('the community must be guided', lines 81–82). The employee then invokes an upcoming organisational reform that seems to undermine the principal's account ('but but this too will change', line 85), although the topic is not discussed further.

The two participants thus pursue different interpretations regarding the most viable solutions to the problem they discuss. Interestingly, it is the supervisor who ensures that the problem – that is, ageist nonrecognition in everyday encounters – continues to be conceived as a managerially relevant problem that warrants discussion in the context of a performance appraisal. The employee, by contrast, mitigates the supervisor's role and responsibility regarding the problem at hand, questioning the ability of formal meetings to solve problems in mundane, ageist interactions. The younger teachers remain positioned as responsible and blameworthy. However, since the employee fails to demand clear actions from the supervisor, the tellability of the story, and the reasons for discussing the topic in a performance appraisal, become unclear.

After questioning the solution offered by the supervisor (i.e. the formal meeting), the employee makes a new attempt to increase the tellability of the story by upgrading his description of violator behaviour, fashioning it with an extreme case formulation ('do not speak like at all', lines 92–93). This is followed by the accusation that his colleagues have broken the most fundamental rules of social interaction and ignored the employee as a not only a professional but also a person ('and maybe not even greet', line 95), and with a reference to the ageist prejudices of the violator ('it might be great if you already retire from the staff', line 100). The employee also implies that the younger teachers' prejudices might be gendered against older men ('he is just an old geezer', line 105; 'äijä' in Finnish).

The upgrading of the initial problem description underscores the employee's negative emotional stance towards his younger colleagues, thus re-invoking the *ageist nonrecognition* storyline with an

increased emphasis on the younger colleagues' inappropriate actions and omissions, and importantly their thoughts as well, in mundane encounters. This storyline anchors the problem in the younger colleagues' ageist dispositions and failures to respect professional and pedagogical rules and, importantly, the most fundamental norms of interpersonal behaviour (e.g. greeting). The employee thus constructs his experiences of ageist nonrecognition as a problem that may engender and include *organisational dysfunction*, but that also includes more fundamental violations of interactional norms that cannot be solved through pedagogical dialogue in official meetings. The upgraded *ageist nonrecognition* storyline is responded with a degree of affiliation by the supervisor (S spins his head, line 96; S nods, line 102).

The new storyline is dramatic, interesting and in that sense tellable, but the upgraded drama carries an epistemic cost. The more the employee adds layers to his problem description, the more this description foregrounds his personal feelings and interpretations. The employee seeks to manage this challenge by presenting his interpretations as natural and inevitable ('I cannot avoid that thought', line 101) and by offering meta-level information about how his accounts should be interpreted ('this is exaggerated again a bit but the other side of it is true', line 109). The upgraded *ageist nonrecognition* storyline thus offers a vivid narrative that animates the teller's personal experiences and encounters with the violators, but it provides scant indication of how the supervisor could intervene to solve the problem.

Reintroducing the core of the problem

The principal does not respond to the teacher's complaint in Extract 3. The lack of response (see the pauses, lines 108 and 110) launches another shift in the storyline, which reinvokes the responsibility of the supervisor for the current problem.

Extract 4 (31:30, Besserwisser teachers and an old veteran)

- 109 E: this is exaggerated again a bit but the other side of it is true
 110 (2.0)
 111 E: and it is a pretty interesting situation when umm I was
 112 twenty years ago quite actively like building up
 113 this school then when this reform process began and I've been
 114 working with many things here (.) and and they were umm
 115 in primary school back then as students (.) so umm it is quite
 116 an interesting setting that now I notice that in a certain way
 117 I am kind of already excluded from this kind of mainstream.
 118 (0.3)
 119 E: and by mainstream I mean when I said that there's someone that
 120 is kind of controlling the school. ↑I feel this way.

In Extract 4, the employee seemingly relaunches the storyline of organisational dysfunction that highlights the supervisor's responsibility for the problem at hand. The problem does not merely concern a single, emotionally injured employee suffering from some inappropriate behaviour; rather, it is an issue that can *potentially* harm the wider organisation if the less experienced teachers control the school and the older teachers' extensive professional expertise is underutilised. Given the superior position of the supervisor in the organisation, this storyline positions the supervisor as morally and practically responsible regarding the matter. At the end of the extract, however, the employee again invokes the subjective side of the complaint ('I feel this way', line 120).

Recipient uptake

Reinvoking recipient responsibility appears to work as an effective way to pursue a response from the supervisor, as Extract 5 demonstrates.

Extract 5 (32:05, Besserwisser teachers and an old veteran)

120 E: is kind of contro [lling] the school. †I feel this way.
 121 S: [yeah well yes]
 122 all right well yeah (1.0) Eh(hh)great that you are telling me€
 123 this I'll have to pay attent- I'll try to pay attention
 124 I will see [what I (.) if I notice anything]
 125 E: [well I I do not know actually]
 126 I would not really put it on your [shoulders any of this type of]
 127 S: [no no I am not]
 128 taking it like that you are putting it but you see that
 129 I of course put it if we talk about our work community=
 130 =yeah
 131 it is like for me (.) my job is to make the work community
 132 function like (0.5) for the benefit of the students=
 133 E: =of course [of course]
 134 S: [so that way] the better the feeling (.) and
 135 the better we work together in the work community (.)
 136 the better it is for the children

In Extract 5, the supervisor displays a degree of affiliation with the employee. The supervisor's laughter and the use of a smiley voice ('€h(hh)great that you are telling me€', line 122), however, display distance regarding the employee's problem description. It almost seems that the supervisor is orienting not only towards a serious organisational problem but also towards a vivid and entertaining story previously told by the employee, a story that 'is exaggerated again a bit' but where 'the other side of it is true' (Extract 4, line 109). Indeed, the supervisor seems to support this interpretation, at least partly, by stating how he will 'try to pay attention' (line 123) to the problem and see 'if I notice anything' (line 124), indicating that the problem may or may not exist as it is described by the employee – or that the problem may at least be difficult to observe. Interestingly, the supervisor also engages in self-repair, replacing the verb 'have' with 'try' (line 123). While the notion of '*having* to pay attention' would have acknowledged the necessity of the leadership becoming properly informed about the matter, the notion of '*trying* to pay attention' constructs the issue as one of low priority.

After the recipient uptake, however, the employee again mitigates the supervisor's responsibility for the problem (lines 125–126). The supervisor responds by referring to his position in the school ('my job is to', line 131) and by clarifying his motives and offering the assurance that he is not taking sides in the possible conflict between the older and younger teachers but instead serving the students. Invoking shared responsibility for the children at school seems to offer the supervisor a relatively unproblematic position of moral agency in a situation that appears as dilemmatic both to the supervisor and to the supervisee.

Self-deprecation

After the supervisor's partial affiliation with the employee's problem description, the employee assumes an entirely novel storyline that foregrounds *personal feelings* more strongly than the previous storylines.

Extract 6 (33:40, Besserwisser teachers and an old veteran)

136 S: the better it is for the children
 137 E: definitely=it is not what I am saying (0.5) but like in a way
 138 (0.5) since this is about the talk of an individual person like
 139 (.) like (.) I just feel like this so I (.) I am not
 140 telling the absolute truth (0.2) I am just speaking about how
 141 I have felt here (.) as an experienced veteran (.) that
 142 somehow feels like social exclusion that feeling.

In Extract 6, the employee highlights that the problem description is the subjective interpretation of an 'individual person' (line 138) instead of the 'absolute truth' (line 140). In this storyline of *personal feelings*, which closes the discussion on the topic in the performance appraisal, the employee

adopts the position of a person who speaks from the heart and calls for his supervisor's recognition of his emotions but who is not necessarily calling for any clear and predefined managerial intervention to eradicate the ageism that he has previously reported. In line with recent research on workplace ostracism (Bedi 2021; O'Reilly et al. 2015; Sarfraz et al. 2019; Zheng et al. 2016), the employee foregrounds his feelings of 'social exclusion' (line 142). Ultimately, however, the practical implications of solving the initial problem – that is, ageist nonrecognition in everyday encounters – remain unclear. Furthermore, the personal feeling storyline constructs the problem at hand as a problem that may be difficult to observe by people who do not have the same first-hand experience. The supervisor is positioned as, ideally, an emphatic listener rather than a person who has the responsibility (or the right) to intervene.

The final storyline of *personal feelings* opens up room for various interpretations. At the very least, it mitigates the impact of the earlier complaints made by the employee against the younger teachers, as well as, indirectly, against the supervisor for allowing the younger teachers to exert control over the school. The storyline can thus be interpreted as the employee's attempt to maintain the supervisor's 'face' (Goffman 1963; 1967) in relation to the earlier complaints and the solutions offered by the supervisor. Furthermore, the shift in the storyline can indicate that the employee has abandoned their initial attempt to articulate their experiences of ageism in a way that would resonate with practical organisational and managerial concerns. This, in turn, offers the supervisor a licence to ignore some, if not all, of the previously launched complaints. In sum, the storyline focusing on *personal feelings* highlights the challenges involved in voicing experiences of subtle ageism within workplace discourse.

Discussion

The above analysis demonstrates how a problematic experience originally presented as a matter of ageist nonrecognition becomes interactionally transformed into the personal feelings of the employee. While all these aspects of the problematic experience are in some form present throughout the episode, the final outcome seems to undermine the managerial relevance of the initial problem description. In search of the supervisor's response, and to deal with problems of tellability, the employee first upgrades his account with references to organisational dysfunction, and then with concrete (but markedly subjective) examples of ageist nonrecognition along with references to the inner thoughts of the violators. The latter occurs at the apparent cost of the plausibility and neutrality of the account. Substantial recipient uptake is warranted only after the employee has reinvoked the supervisor's responsibility for the problem at hand. In his response, the supervisor, however, focuses on the issue of ageism by offering only partial affiliation to the employee: the supervisor presents ageism as a problem that may or may not exist as described by the employee – or as a problem that may at least be difficult to observe. As this becomes clear, the employee strongly mitigates the seriousness of the problem by highlighting that his previous talk does not represent the absolute truth but simply the feelings of one person. The employee thus aligns with the supervisor's account of the problem as difficult to observe and, at least potentially, easy to ignore.

In the above empirical episode, conversational complexities surfaced as the employee strove to enhance the tellability of his story about subtle workplace ageism and to receive an affiliative response from the supervisor by employing various forms of dramatisation. These dramatisations included extreme case formulations, accusations of colleagues having broken the most fundamental rules of social interaction, and references to the thoughts of the violators. These conversational devices can help portray a situation as legitimately complainable (Drew 2003; Pomerantz 1986). However, not all extreme or dramatised claims are permissible, and they may require correction to avoid misunderstanding of the speakers' identity and agenda. This type of correction can occur through, for example, indexing the speaker as a reasonable person who is taking account of empirical realities and not just presenting excessive claims (Edwards 2000, 359). In the above episode, the employee himself displayed awareness that his story depicted his subjective experiences and an

exaggerated version of the problem at hand. Thus, upgrading one's story through exaggeration and displays of personal experiences can boost the tellability of the story, but this occurs at a cost: the story comes across as, indeed, a 'story' – that is, as one version or interpretation of the matter at hand.

Context matters, and a performance appraisal is a specific institution. In other institutional contexts, for example over an informal afterwork drink with a close colleague, there may be more room for participants to tell exaggerated stories that animate colleagues' inner thoughts and intentions without the need to claim that every spoken word represents the absolute unadulterated truth. By contrast, in the institutional context of a performance appraisal, participants orient to the organisational and managerial relevance of the matter discussed, and thus upgrading the tellability of one's story through exaggeration and subjective interpretations can hamper one's abilities to make a case for a serious revision of organisational practices.

Based on the above analysis, discussions about interactionally troublesome exchanges (ITEs) at the workplace, such as ageist nonrecognition, can be dilemmatic for both participants of a performance appraisal. The supervisor has the responsibility to display interest in the supervisee's experience, but also to remain neutral towards the other side of the conflict (also Asmuß 2013), particularly if the supervisee's account appears to be an exaggerated interpretation. From the supervisor's perspective, a further dilemma surfaces since the supervisor's epistemic requests for more information can display interest in the supervisee's experience, but they may also come across as interrogative, particularly if the supervisee struggles to present the past events as 'neutral' and 'objective' 'matters of fact' in line with the institutional expectations of a performance appraisal. For the supervisee, in turn, it is challenging to report subtle and hard-to-observe ITEs in the workplace without adding dramatic elements and markedly subjective interpretations. However, dramatisations and markedly subjective interpretations can undermine the report's managerial relevance and ultimately contribute to licencing and legitimating organisational ignorance regarding indirect forms of ageism.

Some of the difficulties faced by the (male) employee in the above empirical case may be gendered. Although the scientific evidence is mixed, public discourse suggests that women face more ageist discrimination in the working life than men (Cebola, dos Santos, and Dionísio 2021; Krekula, Nikander, and Wilińska 2018). Narratives about ageism against both younger and older women in the working life are widespread. This may cast women's experiences as culturally more conventional and, in that sense, more tellable than those of men who, also in order to maintain impressions of masculinity, are perhaps less ready to depict themselves as victims of ageism (Ojala, Pietilä, and Nikander 2016). There is however a need for more research on these theoretical propositions concerning the intersections of gender and age (also Spedale, Coupland, and Tempest 2014).

In the above empirical episode, it further seemed that the employee who mobilised the complaint against the younger colleagues' ageist behaviour was at the risk of appearing himself as ageist towards the younger colleagues. We suspect that this is an overarching pattern in the construction of 'category-based complaints' (Stokoe and Edwards 2009, 103–106; also Ruusuvuori et al. 2019) in which the nonpresent subject of the complaint is not an individual person but a member of a group or the group as such (e.g. 'younger teachers'). We further suspect that this pattern is foregrounded when the complaint is practically impossible to support with waterproof evidence – as in the case of all ITEs. More research is thus required on the institutional importance of the identities of both the complainant *and* the subject of complaint as well as their intersections with respect to launching ITE-related complaints in the workplace.

Conclusions

According to Lamont (2018, 422) 'recognition matters in and of itself, because human dignity and social justice have intrinsic value' and also because recognition 'has [a] direct impact on well-

being'. Such an impact on wellbeing is foregrounded also in recent research on workplace 'ostracism' (Bedi 2021; O'Reilly et al. 2015; Sarfraz et al. 2019; Zheng et al. 2016), that is, the experience of being excluded or ignored by others at the workplace. In the context of working life, ageist nonrecognition can further lead to negative organisational and economic outcomes if the skills and competences of particular age groups are not employed to their full potential (Cebola, dos Santos, and Dionísio 2021; WHO 2021). Despite the wide consensus on the consequences of ageism and the importance of recognition in human life, it nevertheless seems that telling others about an experience of ageist nonrecognition is a challenging interactional endeavour. Our larger data corpus of 125 performance appraisals contained only one clear account of ageist nonrecognition. More research is however required on the prevalence of stories about ageist nonrecognition in working life, also beyond performance appraisals.

Based on the theoretical and empirical analysis presented in this article, various cultural and institutional constraints may complicate storytelling about ageist nonrecognition. As noted at the beginning of this article, everyday instances of interactionally troublesome exchanges (ITEs) – including nonrecognition – are often subtle, involving no clear and unambiguous omissions or failures to provide adequate responsive actions. Instances of ageist nonrecognition may therefore bypass the conversational mechanism of accountability, which in turn may make it particularly difficult to 'document' and retrospectively report the alleged violations of the conversational partner. It may be relatively easy for employees to provide evidence of ageist encounters if their colleagues express explicitly ageist attitudes towards them and for example use ageist language, whereas documenting and reporting instances of 'uncivil inattention' (Horgan 2020), such as omissions of greeting rituals or unwillingness to socialise with another person, may be far more challenging. Moreover, it can be especially difficult to document and report that such omissions are driven by the other person's negative thoughts, stereotypes or other manifestations of prejudice towards people on the basis of their age, to reiterate Butler's (1969) classic definition of ageism.

In her article entitled *A Sociology of Nothing*, Scott (2018) invites researchers to pay attention to stories that people tell about things that did not happen. In this article, we have focused on a story about dialogues and greetings that did not happen and demonstrated that in the context of performance appraisals, at least, telling such a story is a complex endeavour. Moreover, calling for a managerial response to remove the source of the ageist experience in the future may require the complainant to construct a story that appears as 'objective' and 'rational'. It is possible, however, that the more implicit the 'trouble' in an ITE is, the more difficult it is for the complainant to cast the experience as tellable without embellishing it with such details that, instead of presenting the ITE as a 'matter of fact', draw attention to the teller's own psychological disposition and the markedly subjective aspects of their ageist experience (e.g. Tholander 2019).

Our case study demonstrates how voicing experiences of ageism can be a dilemmatic discursive process, especially when such experiences are based on subtle interactional exchanges in workplace encounters. Furthermore, the reception of such voices can be a dilemmatic process for supervisors and managers, as we have demonstrated above. We argue that these dilemmas are inherent in all organisational ITE stories, especially those related to subtle nonrecognition, exclusion, and ostracism. To further study such dilemmas and their conversational management in the context of ageism, we call for more research on authentic workplace interactions in which organisational actors engage in age-relevant meaning-making, communication, and categorisation (also Previtali et al. 2022; Previtali and Spedale 2021). Through such data and research, it becomes possible to further analyse the dynamics of ITEs at work as well as the processes that hamper their retrospective documentation, reporting and storytelling.

Analysing multiple consecutive sequences within a single interaction episode, such as a performance appraisal, can reveal institutional dynamics that may not be readily apparent in any individual sequence. In our case example, examining the progression of the situation from the initial presentation of the problem to the recipient's request for clarification, the storyteller's elaboration on the violation, the reintroduction of the core problem, the recipient's response, and

finally, the storyteller's self-deprecation, highlighted the inherent difficulties in narrating ITE stories. It also illustrated the potential consequences of these challenges, namely the conversational licencing of organisational ignorance concerning the discussed ITE. By considering multiple consecutive sequences in a longer interaction episode rather than single isolated sequences, a more comprehensive understanding of the subtle dynamics that hamper the voicing of ITE experiences can be gained.

As Harris et al. (2018, 11) conclude in their review article, 'further exploration of internal and external approaches to managing ageism not just by older workers, but also by managers, HR professionals, and other workers can help to illuminate the complex ways ageism unfolds in the context of work and provide insight into potential strategies that can be used to act against it'. Organisational actors involved in counteracting ageism can benefit from being aware of the dilemmas we have uncovered in this article. Further research on the discursive practices of voicing ageist experiences in front of other organisational actors can illuminate links between individual and organisational strategies of counteracting ageism at work (Previtali et al. 2022). It is one thing to voice ageist experiences in a research interview in front of a researcher and another entirely to voice them in front of one's supervisor. The latter, however, may oftentimes be a precondition if one is to delegitimize organisational ignorance and make directed calls for managerial strategies to eliminate age-related interactionally troublesome exchanges in the everyday.

Note

1. The closest English equivalent to the German word 'a Besserwisser' might be 'a know-it-all'. 'A Besserwisser' is expressing their thoughts in a manner that does not display respect and recognition towards the conversational partner. However, 'a Besserwisser' must also have certain, socially acknowledged knowledge regarding the discussed topic. 'A Besserwisser' without such knowledge is likely to be called 'a Klugscheißer' in German.

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The full transcript with original Finnish speech and English translation is available as supplemental online material.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions.

.	Pitch fall
?	Pitch rise
↑↓	Marked pitch movement
<u>underlining</u>	Emphasis
-	Truncation
[]	Overlap
=	Latching of turns
(0.5)	Pause (length in tenths of a second)
(.)	Micropause
(--)	Inaudible words
hhh	Audible out-breath
.hhh	Audible in-breath
(h)	Within-speech aspiration, usually indicating laughter
€	Smiley voice quality
mt, krh	Vocal noises

Adapted from Hepburn and Bolden (2017), Jefferson (2004) and Schegloff (2007, 265–269).