'Don't make me laugh': age representations in a humorous context

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ABSTRACT. *The Golden Girls* is a highly popular television series which, since its inception in 1985, has received praise for presenting the elderly on television in a positive light. Research, however, has not investigated the messages of the show in any depth and the current study aims to remedy this. A discursive analysis of the show is conducted to identify ways in which the show marks age and achieves humorous effect. The multiple ways in which these effects are achieved are schematized in typology form. Indications that age marking and humor overlap considerably are interpreted in terms of propagating views of aging inconsistent with the show's 'public agenda'. Specifically, the link, which has theoretical implications, is seen as perpetuating stereotypes of the elderly, by making counter-stereotypical portrayals, quite literally, laughable. The results are discussed in terms of various theoretical positions, as well as more applied production issues.

KEY WORDS: age, discourse analysis, humor, intergenerational contact, media, television

1. INTRODUCTION

Aging and life-span concerns are an increasing presence on the social science agenda, largely due to the dramatic demographic growth of over-65-year-olds in recent years. The aging of the population has led to greater interest in the physical, psychological and communicative correlates of increasing age. An extensive literature has developed in recent years describing the disadvantaged nature of the aging population in western societies. The predominantly negative nature of stereotypes of the group has been outlined in some detail (Kite and Johnson, 1988). These findings have been supported by a large literature examining mass media portrayals of the elderly (see Davis and Kubey, 1982, for an overview). This work has produced almost uniformly consistent findings that the elderly are under-represented, and negatively represented, in television programming. In the words of Cassata and Irwin (1989: 14), 'for years the older age group has been symbolically annihilated by television'.

In contrast to the results of the majority of mass media research, there

are indications that recent developments in programming are providing less damaging representations of the elderly. In the forefront of this 'new wave' of programming is the show *The Golden Girls*. Given its 'vanguard' status, it seems essential to evaluate the messages regarding aging and the elderly that the show is providing. Such analytical work is the focus of this paper. For the moment some indication of the positive regard for the show's portrayal of the elderly is to be provided.

Atkins et al. (1990/1991: 31) state that 'it is commendable that recent TV programming has departed from past practice and included a number of highly successful television series starring characters that are over 50 years of age'; they describe *The Golden Girls* as 'especially noteworthy' in this regard. Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989: 179) agree with this assessment, pointing to what they describe as a 'shift toward the presentation, and positive depiction, of older individuals' in prime-time television. Cassata and Irwin (1989: 14) claim that '"The Golden Girls" is one answer to the many older people who have asked: "where am I on television?"'. Meanwhile, Nussbaum et al. (1989: 60) comment that 'shows such as "The Golden Girls" . . . seem to indicate some improvement in portrayals of the elderly', although they qualify this claim with a call for empirical research in the area.

In general, the 'academic' opinion outlined above is mirrored in public conceptions of the show. A consensus appears to exist that *The Golden Girls* is a valuable and positive representation of the elderly in society. An indication of the 'positive image' of the show in public life is provided in newspaper commentaries concerning it. A few illustrative extracts are presented below:

> *The Golden Girls* is surprisingly mature for prime-time television in both its characters and characterizations. But it is innovative mainly in its demographics ... [the producer and director] have dared to create a comedy that revolves around three older single women. (*The Christian Science Monitor*, Thursday, 12 September 1985: 26)

> Week after week, TV's dynamite 'Golden Girls' prove that mature women can still be sexy and beautiful. (*National Enquirer*, 22 January 1991: 16)

> [paraphrasing a producer of the show] Take some women around 60. Society has written them off, has said they're over the hill. We want them to be feisty as hell and having a great time. (*New York Times*, 22 September 1985, Section II: 1)

> [discussing the appearance of *The Golden Girls* on prime-time schedule] [Senior citizens] are trendy right now, having supplanted yuppies as the demographic darlings of the media. (*TV Guide*, 19–25 October 1985: 6; quoted in Vande Berg and Trujillo, 1989: 179–80)

The apparent consensus on the 'positive' nature of *The Golden Girls* for the elderly as a group is an encouraging sign, considering the problems older adults currently face. Indeed, if we are to conclude that the show may be causing attitudinal improvement in viewers, then a wholesale welcome for the show is appropriate. However, there is considerable value in

examining more deeply the acceptance of the show, both to uncover the reasons for its popularity, and to outline any possible caveats to such positive regard. In particular, the analysis to be presented focuses on the humorous content of the show. It will be argued that the presentation of consistently humorous material in what is shown to be an 'age-salient' context may contribute to attitudinal change that is less desirable than that previously considered. In other words, the show might be sustaining, and contributing to, an agist culture. Ultimately, the compromise between producing commercially viable television and attempting to present the elderly in a positive light may prove more complex than supporters of *The Golden Girls* might claim. Cassata and Irwin (1989: 12) put this question clearly: 'Does a comedy series centering around the issues of aging enhance or demean the identity of older people, especially older women?'

Following a brief description of the program, the elderly presence on television will be described, together with the literature concerning audience effects of such representations. Such work is then contrasted with more 'discoursally' grounded media work. Following this, two areas of specific interest to the analysis undertaken in this paper are examined, namely age marking and humor. Finally, work in social psychology concerned with intergroup contact is described in terms of its potential application to media viewing situations. We are aware that the integration of such diverse literatures may appear somewhat long and involved. It is our belief that the resulting confluence of ideas is worth achieving.

The Golden Girls

The television show *The Golden Girls* focuses upon four elderly women living together in a house in Florida. Three of the women (Dorothy, Rose and Blanche) can be characterized as 'young-old' (aged 55–65), while the fourth (Sophia) is in her mid-eighties. Dorothy is Sophia's daughter—a fact which is frequently referred to on the show. Hence the generational divide within the group is made explicit. Three of the group are widowed (Blanche, Rose and Sophia), and one is divorced (Dorothy). The show follows a fairly standard half-hour sitcom format, and the majority of the 'action' occurs within the house—either in the communal living area or around the kitchen table. The show was first broadcast in 1985 and has retained its place in prime-time scheduling into the current season (1991–2). The show was framed, at least initially, in terms of increasing the visibility, and likability, of the elderly on prime time, as discussed above. Younger individuals do feature fairly frequently on the show, but there are no younger members of the permanent cast. The focus throughout our discussion of the program is on the elderly in general. It is crucial to note early on, however, that this is a show in which the cast 'regulars' are all women. An awareness of this is important to our analysis, especially in the context of a predominantly male-oriented media.

Mundorf and Brownell (1990) indicate that for the season 1988–9, *The Golden Girls* ranked second in viewing frequency for their over-65 group,

incidentally behind *Murder, She Wrote*, another show featuring an elderly star. During the same period *The Golden Girls* came out sixth in the overall Nielson rankings (Best and Worst by Numbers, 1989). These results are consistent with a more general finding that programs featuring elderly characters are more popular with elderly viewers (Cassata and Irwin, 1989; Meyersohn, 1961; Parker et al., 1955). In the context of discussing *The Golden Girls*, it is important to mention the findings of Mares (1991). She has investigated elderly viewers' responses to a variety of portrayals of old age. Her results indicated that lonely viewers tended to engage in social comparison processes when viewing, and hence preferred to see depictions of others in their predicament. Non-lonely viewers preferred depictions of non-lonely elderly characters, and tended to adopt more of a mood-matching perspective. This has direct implications for elderly viewing of *The Golden Girls*. It could be hypothesized that lonely viewers would be distressed by the active social life portrayed on the show, while non-lonely viewers would find it pleasurable. A recent survey focusing on *The Golden Girls* has demonstrated that even among younger individuals the show has a high level of popularity (Harwood, 1992). Of the students questioned in the survey, 50 percent demonstrated detailed knowledge of the characters featured in *The Golden Girls*.

The elderly on television

There is evidence that some adults accept television as an accurate representation of real life (LoSciuto, 1972). In addition, Gans (1968) has demonstrated that individuals use television to help them understand life-issues. To this extent, it is argued that 'using television programming to identify messages about human life in general is appropriate, and can be applied to specific categories of individuals, such as older adults' (Dail, 1988: 700). As such, it is important to consider how the elderly are portrayed on television.

Numbers of elderly on television. Gerbner et al. (1979) have provided the most comprehensive review of the elderly on television to date. Their report indicated that elderly characters averaged 3.7 percent of major and minor prime-time characters in the years 1969–78. The proportion was seen to *decrease* in the first five years of the 1970s. Similar results to those of Gerbner et al. are reported by a number of authors (Peterson, 1973; Levinson, 1973; Northcott, 1975). A number of these studies also point out a gender bias whereby more elderly men than women are represented in the media. It should be noted that a number of these studies are, themselves, fairly old. Recent reports have implied a positive trend in elderly portrayals, at least anecdotally (Davis and Davis, 1985; Nussbaum et al., 1989). However, the most recent data available indicate that the characteristic underrepresentation and negative portrayal remain, both in programming and in advertisements (Atkins et al., 1990/1991; Pfefferman and Robinson, submitted; Robinson, 1989).

Danowski (1975) has demonstrated that game shows (a favorite of the elderly viewer) rarely feature elderly contestants. The study showed that the studio audience was generally seen on television as being younger, with elderly audience members being systematically selected to sit in the rear rows of the audience. Hence there is evidence of at least one explicitly discriminatory studio practice with regard to the elderly.

In contrast to these results, some more positive findings have emerged. Elliot (1984) and Ansello (1978) examined daytime serials and found higher proportions of elderly characters. Elliot's results indicate that, compared to 14 percent in the population as a whole, 8 percent of characters in daytime serials were elderly. Dail (1988) also suggests that television portrayals are not as negative as has been previously suggested. In addition, Dail's content analysis appears to show that life for those aged about 55 was worse than for those who were aged over 55. This finding raises the possibility that life is actually portrayed as getting better with increasing years (at least from what may be a 'low-point' in late middle age). Many of the authors described above also examined *portrayals* of the elderly, and these are considered next (see also Davis, 1984).

Characterizations of the elderly on TV. Harris and Feinberg (1977) found no romantic involvement for characters over the age of 60 in their sample of shows. Most characters in their sample were seen as in moderate to high physical health. However, Kubey (1980) warns that these counter-stereotypical presentations may be used for comic effect, a factor that leads to reinforcement of the stereotype, and a perception of the portrayals as atypical of the elderly as a whole. With regard to this point, Harwood (1992) has shown that the characters on *The Golden Girls* are perceived to be significantly *younger* than the lower boundary of the category 'elderly' (see Rubin, 1986, for a theoretical exposition of possible reasons for this perceived difference).

Aronoff (1974) has shown that as men age on television, they are more likely to be shown in villainous roles. However, men also receive some positive treatment in that they become figures of authority with age, and receive positive coverage in news and informational programming (Harris and Feinberg, 1977). The elderly *woman* is less fortunate, and is found to age more quickly, and more 'decrementally' than the aging man. In particular, older women are seen as suffering from more physical and psychological impairment, and being increasingly socially inept (Aronoff, 1974; Greenberg et al., 1980; Peterson, 1973; see Coupland and Coupland, 1990, for a general discussion of the relationship between chronological age and 'decrement'). Bishop and Krause (1984) show (although with a limited sample) that elderly individuals receive little exposure in Saturday morning cartoons, and that what exposure there is is primarily negative. While their work does not test for effects, they argue that such portrayals are the bases of socialization into an agist culture. Meertz (1970) concluded that 82 percent of media portrayals of the elderly are 'stereotypical'.

Gerbner et al. (1979) present the most negative assessment of the content of elderly portrayals on television. They conclude that the elderly on TV are sexually and romantically inactive, closed-minded, inept, mentally slow and generally live alone. While these scholars also conclude that the elderly are not portrayed as lonely, and are portrayed as generally useful, their study nevertheless describes the television portrayal of the elderly as extremely negative. Elliot (1984) provides a caveat to the mainstream of research into elderly portrayals, indicating that daytime serials provide more heterogeneous and less stereotyped role depictions of the elderly. Similarly, Harris and Feinberg (1977) indicate that elderly women receive their most positive portrayal in soap operas, where they are seen as efficacious and independent.

While the findings related to media content are fairly reliable, there is little work on a more detailed level examining the differentiated ways in which the elderly are presented. In addition, there is little work specifically on the ways in which elderly communication is represented on television, or the ways in which talk about aging and the elderly is constructed and reproduced. A move in the right direction here is provided by Pfefferman and Robinson (submitted), who have examined persuasive talk across age groups in situation comedies. Pfefferman and Robinson were interested in whether individuals of different age groups were portrayed as engaging in different types of influence behavior. They found no significant effects, implying that systematic examinations of communication variables may yield findings different to the more 'impressionistic' work on 'character' portrayals of the elderly. Northcott (1975) has also examined the nature of dialogue concerning aging. He concludes that dialogue pertaining to advancing age is predominantly negative in tone. Considerably more work is required in this vein, as communicative portrayals will have a powerful influence on the viewer, and on resulting social representations of the elderly (see Farr and Moscovici, 1984, for a discussion of social representations in general).

Effects of viewing. Given the nature of portrayals of the elderly on television, it seems important to consider the effects that these might have on viewers. Gerbner et al. (1980), within the cultivation paradigm, have indicated that heavy television viewers may hold more negative views of the elderly. Their study showed that heavy viewers believed the elderly to be less healthy, in worse financial shape, less sexually active and more closed-minded than the young. Gerbner et al. also examined young adolescents' (6th through 9th graders') conceptions of when we start getting old. They found that heavy TV viewers (those viewing six hours or more in a day) claimed we start getting old at age 51. Light TV viewers (those viewing two hours or less in a day) proffered an age of 57, the difference between the groups being significant. It should be noted that Gerbner et al.'s findings have been vigorously disputed by a number of authors (Passuth and Cook, 1985; Wober and Gunter, 1982). Considerably more work is encouraged

considering the multidimensional effects of elderly portrayals on public conceptions of the elderly as a group. In addition, work is encouraged that examines in more depth the messages that are produced by the media.

Discourse and the mass media

Recent work from the Dutch text theorist and discourse analyst van Dijk (1985a; Smitherman-Donaldson and van Dijk, 1988) has begun to open up new areas in the analysis of media content. As indicated above, the vast proportion of analyses of media content have been satisfied with methods based around 'counting' the incidences of certain characters/demographic groups in programming. Such studies have proven useful in their own ways, for instance in documenting the presence of given groups in the 'public eye'. However, van Dijk (1985b) has begun to open up deeper levels of analysis for those interested in media content. He points out that the two fields of mass communication and discourse analysis have virtually ignored each other for long periods of time. Linguists and interpersonal scholars have paid little attention to the importance of *mass media* messages and their multiple contexts. Meanwhile, mass communication specialists have generally disregarded 'one central element in mass communication processes, viz. the "message" itself' (van Dijk, 1985b: v; see Downing, 1988, for an exception to this pattern). This point is echoed by Baetens Beardsmore (1984: 5), who states that 'we know almost nothing about the language of television itself' (see also Rubin and Rubin, 1985, for a discussion of the interface between interpersonal and mediated communication).

The discourses that we are exposed to in the media are crucially important for our understanding of society. Television is not simply a visual medium through which we obtain relaxation, it also provides us with texts through which we may construct the realities surrounding us. For many people, television may be a primary source of contact with aspects of the world detached from their direct experience (Gerbner et al., 1980). Indeed, Harwood (1992) has presented some evidence for the fact that certain individuals receive more exposure to the elderly from television than interpersonally. Nevertheless, detailed qualitative analysis of talk with and about the elderly has been restricted to the interpersonal level.

Intergenerational communication and age marking

A recent program of research concerning communication and the elderly has opened up the communication patterns of the elderly to new dimensions of interpretation. Most importantly, this line of research has disputed the traditional 'decremental' approach to aging, preferring to investigate *patterns* of communication and miscommunication intergenerationally. N. Coupland et al. (1988: 3–4) operate from the premise that 'elderly speech may have its own "intrinsic" (i.e. not historically derived) stylistic qualities which reflect elderly speakers' particular communicative needs and their

social psychological and other circumstances'. Such an approach has led to an important body of literature that examines the talk patterns of the elderly population, and attempts to frame them within their social context (for an overview, see N. Coupland et al., 1991a). In the context of the current study, certain patterns have emerged that might be of importance in *The Golden Girls*.

N. Coupland et al.'s (1991b) work has most recently focused upon the ways in which age appears within talk, and, specifically for this study, the ways in which age identity may be marked and made salient in talk. While recent work has accepted the idea that age markers exist in speech (see Helfrich, 1979), N. Coupland et al. discuss such markers at a more discoursal level than previously. The markers are considered in two areas—those concerned with 'age categorization' and those concerned with 'temporal framing' processes. The former considers how an older person 'comes to be viewed or is predictably viewable as inhabiting a category which either is explicitly defined as old age, or implicitly . . . characterizes old age' (J. Coupland et al., 1991: 9). This category considers mention of exact age, mention of characteristically 'elderly' category or role reference, and mention of age-related states. The second category concerns discoursal framing that marks the speaker as elderly. Specifically, the category concerns itself with talk about the past, or talk about the present which invokes the past in some sense.

Humor

Together with age marking, humor is a second discoursal variable of importance to this paper. Zillman and Bryant (1991) present a historical survey of theories of humor in which they describe various types of humor theory that have been developed in recent years (Koestler, 1964; Schultz, 1976; Suls, 1977; Zillman, 1983, 1988). In the context of the current study, the work on which these theories are based is seen as being of limited potential. Zillman and Bryant (1991: 272) themselves note that theories of humor derive 'mainly from studies of jokes and cartoons rather than from the investigation of comedy as such'. This is problematic in light of their conclusion that 'the enjoyment of situation comedies on television and elsewhere is probably best explained by the application of the disposition theory of humor' (p. 270).

The current work is partly aimed at demonstrating the complexity of humor in something such as a TV sitcom, and providing an alternative, more complex, description of what makes people laugh. In addition, in line with Alberts (in press), an attempt is made to examine the linguistic bases of humor, which have been largely ignored to date. McGhee (1977) contends that molecular models of humor are necessary before we attempt global theories. Herein, it is argued that the multiple molecular models available are contributing little to an understanding of humor in a broader context.

Two subtopics of humor relevant to the current analyses are discussed

here, namely an overview of work concerning the elderly and humor followed by a review of research considering humor in the mass media.

Humor and the elderly. Aging has been a topic of humor for a long time, and there is little doubt that such a focus serves many functions for those involved (Nahemow, 1986). At least one recent volume (Nahemow et al., 1986) has dedicated itself entirely to examining the relationship between aging and humor. Extensive content analyses have been carried out that claim primarily negative representations of the elderly in jokes (Davies, 1977; Palmore, 1971). In contrast to these studies, certain authors have suggested that humor concerning the elderly performs important coping functions for the aging population, and that it highlights social inequities suffered by members of that population (Richman, 1977; Weber and Cameron, 1978). Similar conclusions were drawn by Huyck and Duchon (1986) in their examination of age-theme greeting cards (cf. Dillon and Jones, 1981).

Kelly et al. (1987) also examined humorous birthday card messages and were interested in investigating the link between enjoyment of humor and attitudes toward the elderly. Their study appeared to show no link between attitudes and appreciation of humor. In the context of the current study, of course, this does not indicate that humor will not have harmful long-term effects in terms of constructing negative societal (and/or psychological) representations of the elderly. Kelly et al.'s study examined humor appreciation in a static 'laboratorized' setting (as do many others), and the 'one-off' telling provided no indication of how cumulative effects of humorous messages relating to age might build up over time.

Considering the current analysis, it is worth pointing out that a range of greeting cards are currently available featuring the characters from *The Golden Girls* television show. These cards feature greetings such as 'At our age the days of wine and roses aren't necessarily over . . . you just have to alternate them with days of antacids and aspirin', and, 'I love celebrating birthdays . . . as long as they're someone else's', among others. The cards appear to be produced with the cooperation of the television company.

As of this time, there appears to be very little work on age-related humor on television, reflecting a dearth of work concerning humor and the media in general. Despite their thorough analysis of jokes concerning the elderly, contributors to Nahemow et al.'s (1986) volume consider the media only in terms of greetings cards (Huyck and Duchon, 1986) and children's picture books (Ventis, 1986). A small amount of other work does exist concerning elderly humor in the media (Barrick et al., 1990; Kehl, 1985; Polivka, 1988; Smith, 1979). This research primarily concludes that humorous media contexts provide little in the way of positive representations of the elderly.

Considering the predominance of humorous content within the mass media, and the value that most people place on humor in life, a paucity of research exists on the issue, possibly reflecting a negativity bias within the psychological and communication literatures whereby such 'light-hearted'

issues are considered second-class research matter. In contrast to this lack of research attention, Zillman and Bryant (1991) point out that 40 percent of the top 100 film rentals of all-time are classified as comedy, and 45 percent of the top 100 television shows of all-time are also of this genre (Variety, 1990; Wiener, 1989). In both categories, comedy is the leading genre by almost 20 percent.

Marc (1989: 27) sees the sitcom as occupying an uncomfortable position within the present world context. In his words, 'though the restoration of harmony has traditionally been the denouement of comic drama, it is the sitcom's unfortunate mandate to be sloshing through the mud of post-bomb cynicism with the happy ending strapped to its back'. For *The Golden Girls*, this position may be more uncomfortable than many others. The characters are attempting to present a realistic view of a group with numerous problems, and retain the humorous element that keeps ratings up. While issues concerning age *are* salient within the show, it is necessary to question where the line is drawn in production between the values purportedly underlying the show, and the necessity of keeping the atmosphere light-hearted and 'prime-time-friendly'.

Contact in social psychology

This final section of the Introduction considers prospects for improving attitudes towards the elderly as conceived within current versions of contact theory (Hewstone and Brown, 1986). This approach attempts to ameliorate problems associated with a primarily 'media free' approach to contact within social psychology (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew 1971). Concurrently, it is hoped that some constructive theoretical base will be provided for media producers. Such an approach may well be more practically useful than theories that suggest the ideal mode of interpersonal contact, with few indications of how such contact might be encouraged on the huge scale necessary for any societal effects.

A large body of literature in social psychology derives from Allport's (1954) exposition of the determinants of successful intergroup contact. This literature is reviewed by Hewstone and Brown (1986) in an attempt to delineate the conditions under which contact with an outgroup member may contribute to a reduction in stereotyping, and hence presumably a reduction in prejudice and discrimination. Most important to Hewstone and Brown's model is the notion that contact with any individual of an outgroup must be generalizable to other members of that group. Rothbart and John (1985) have demonstrated that individuals easily discount positive interactions with a member of an outgroup, on the basis that that person is not a 'typical' member of the group to which they belong.

In order to overcome such discounting effects, Hewstone and Brown (1986) argue that the contact occurring must be perceived as explicitly 'intergroup' contact. Social categories need to be salient, and the individual in question must be seen as a typical outgroup member. In situations in which the contact is seen as predominantly inter-*individual*, generalization

to outgroup members is short-circuited, and stereotype change does not occur (see Hewstone et al., in preparation).

The analysis to be presented herein builds upon Pettigrew's (1986: 193) suggestion that work on the contact hypothesis should compare 'the intergroup changes that result from direct contact with changes that result from other processes of social influence that do not require face-to-face interaction'. Pettigrew's point has direct bearing for the study of mass media—viewer contact. In this context we should note that attitude change in a mediated intergroup contact situation may be a different process to that in an inter-individual situation. Hence, Intergroup Contact Theory may need substantial reworking for mediated contexts. Such a reworking will be beyond the scope of the current paper; however, some indication of the nature of such a theory may emerge.

For the purposes of the current analysis, it is contended that viewing *The Golden Girls* may be usefully conceptualized as an intergroup contact situation, of sorts.[1] Hence, the extension of Intergroup Contact Theory to the media realm, and also to *intergenerational* concerns, is proposed. While contact theory has focused on a number of different social groups, there is little explicit reference to intergenerational concerns in the work of Hewstone and Brown (1986), or others (see Fox and Giles, forthcoming, for a review of work on intergenerational contact). It is not disputed that certain intergroup phenomena may be generalizable across social groups, but, at the same time, the processes mediating intergenerational contact *may* be very different to those underlying contact between other groups.

Summary

This introduction has attempted to describe a number of literatures pertaining to the current study. As a whole, the intent has been to set the scene for work concerned with the multidimensional discursive representation of the elderly in the media, and the possible repercussions of such representations for audience members in contact with these media. Of chief concern is to describe the interactions between age marking and humor, and discuss the possible implications for the audience member. The theoretical and practical implications of such work are enormous. First, such communication-based work will examine ways in which viewing-*mediated* representations can be construed as intergroup contact. Consideration of the nature of contact, and in-depth examination of the content of the show, will reveal the complex nature of linguistic markers of group membership. This may aid the development of a generalized contact theory that is applicable beyond the interpersonal realm. As a secondary issue, work in the contact area will be extended to the inter*generational* context.

Second, current theoretical approaches to humor will be extended by examining 'causes' of humor within a broader context than has previously been the case. Rather than looking at individual jokes and punch lines, this analysis will be looking at humor that is embedded within a group of

familiar characters, and an on-going narrative. Third, textual analyses of the mass media will be extended to provide outlines of media content that have implications for production, and program development. The scene will be set for coherent theoretical bases that will consider both the nature of the text itself and the audience's response. Previously these two concerns have been separated by methodological and theoretical divides. It will be suggested that a unifying theoretical base for both is not only possible, but preferable.

2. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This paper is generally concerned with the multiple ways in which a purportedly positive portrayal of the elderly on television may affect cognitive representations of that group. Specifically, however, it is concerned with the marking and negotiation of elderly identities in fairly localized areas of discourse. The aims of *The Golden Girls*, and its position as a 'role model' for presentations of the elderly, make closer examination a priority. While unidirectional effects on an undifferentiated audience may be difficult to detect, it is hoped, via a textual analysis, to point out subtle messages that may be conveyed to different users of the show.

In studying the relationships between messages and people, discursive processes within the media are at least *as* important to understand as those in inter-individual contexts. Media symbols and images are pervasive in our society, and constitute significant factors in daily life. In addition, media and inter-individual discourses are interdependent elements of societal structures and representations. In line with Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), the current paper sees the interactions between social institutions, the audience and the specific message as being of crucial importance in determining the nature of mass media use, and mass media effects. In particular, these elements are thought to be of importance in the analysis of viewers' uses and gratifications in consuming particular media (Rubin and Windahl, 1986). Given this assumption, and the review presented in the Introduction, there would seem to be two primary goals for our research program.

First, to explore the conceptual possibility of whether watching *The Golden Girls* constitutes contact of any sort with the elderly, and especially whether it can be viewed as *intergroup* contact. It should be noted that any contact with an elderly person is not necessarily intergroup contact. In line with Tajfel and Turner (1979), it is argued here that an inter-individual encounter may possess a greater or lesser degree of 'intergroupness'. For viewing *The Golden Girls* to be considered as an intergroup encounter, marking of age would need to be common and available to those viewing the show. At the same time, we would warn against a 'glossed' characterization of the show as 'intergroup' or not. However, there is value in viewing how themes of age arise (both implicitly and explicitly), and how they are dealt with, and how they are consequential. This leads to the

possibility of outlining the variety of ways in which age is made salient to the viewer, and hence the ways in which an intergroup experience is 'available' to those who respond to such characterizations.

Second, to determine whether such contact, if it has *any* effects, might have 'positive' or 'prosocial' effects. This question will be approached in terms of how the stereotype is constructed and manipulated through the discourse of the television show, and how multiple (positive and negative) meanings are assigned to the category 'old' in the process of the media event. A central point of departure here will be the examination of humor in the show, since it is argued that the greatest threat to prosocial outcomes lies in the discounting of 'counter-stereotypical' messages that is facilitated by humor (Kubey, 1980).

Research questions

The ultimate goal of this analysis is to demonstrate the multiple ways in which age is made salient within the program, and the problematic nature of this salience with respect to a positive portrayal of the elderly as a group. The aims of the analysis can be condensed into two research questions:

1. What aspects of language use on the show can be characterized as 'age markers'? Markers in *language* appear most important as dialogue is the most dynamic element of the show, and because it is the primary reason for watching the show.
2. How do the humorous devices used within the show utilize the social meanings of age for their subject matter, and what are the implications of this for possible 'positive' and 'negative' effects of viewing the show?

Analysis

Given the time-consuming nature of discourse analysis, detailed analysis of six (randomly selected) episodes from the 1990–1 season of the show has been conducted. The selection procedure, and the variability that will be demonstrated across the shows, seem to allow generalization to the series as a whole. While not inherently formulaic, the dialogue on the show is fairly homogeneous across episodes, and viewing of other episodes did not appear to indicate that those selected for analysis differed in any substantial fashion. All references perceived to relate to age and all humorous comments (anything accompanied by a laugh track) have been transcribed. It should be noted that there is considerable overlap between these two elements of discourse, a fact which will receive more detailed attention at a later point.

Age markers

With regard to the first research question, three groups of age markers have been identified on the show (see Figure 1). The upper portion of the

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│                      Content Markers                              │
│                                                                   │
│   ①  CHRONOLOGICAL          ②  PROBLEMS-OF-AGING                  │
│        MARKERS                    MARKERS                          │
│   ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐            │
│   │                      │   │   Social problems    │            │
│   │  Mention of exact age│   │  Medical complaints  │            │
│   │  Talk about old people│  │        Death         │            │
│   │  Talk of elderly     │   │     Bereavement      │            │
│   │  activities          │   │  Financial problems  │            │
│   │  Not wanting to get old│ │  Impotence (sexual   │            │
│   │  Reference to past   │   │   and otherwise)     │            │
│   │                      │   │                      │            │
│   └──────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────┘            │
│     TIME REFERENCE             STATE REFERENCE                    │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

③ MANNER MARKERS

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                ┌──────────────────────┐
                │     Reminiscing/     │
                │      Rambling        │
                │    Incoherence/      │
                │     Absurdity        │
                │      Cunning/        │
                │      Rudeness        │
                │     Childlike-       │
                │   communication      │
                └──────────────────────┘
                 ACTION REFERENCE
```
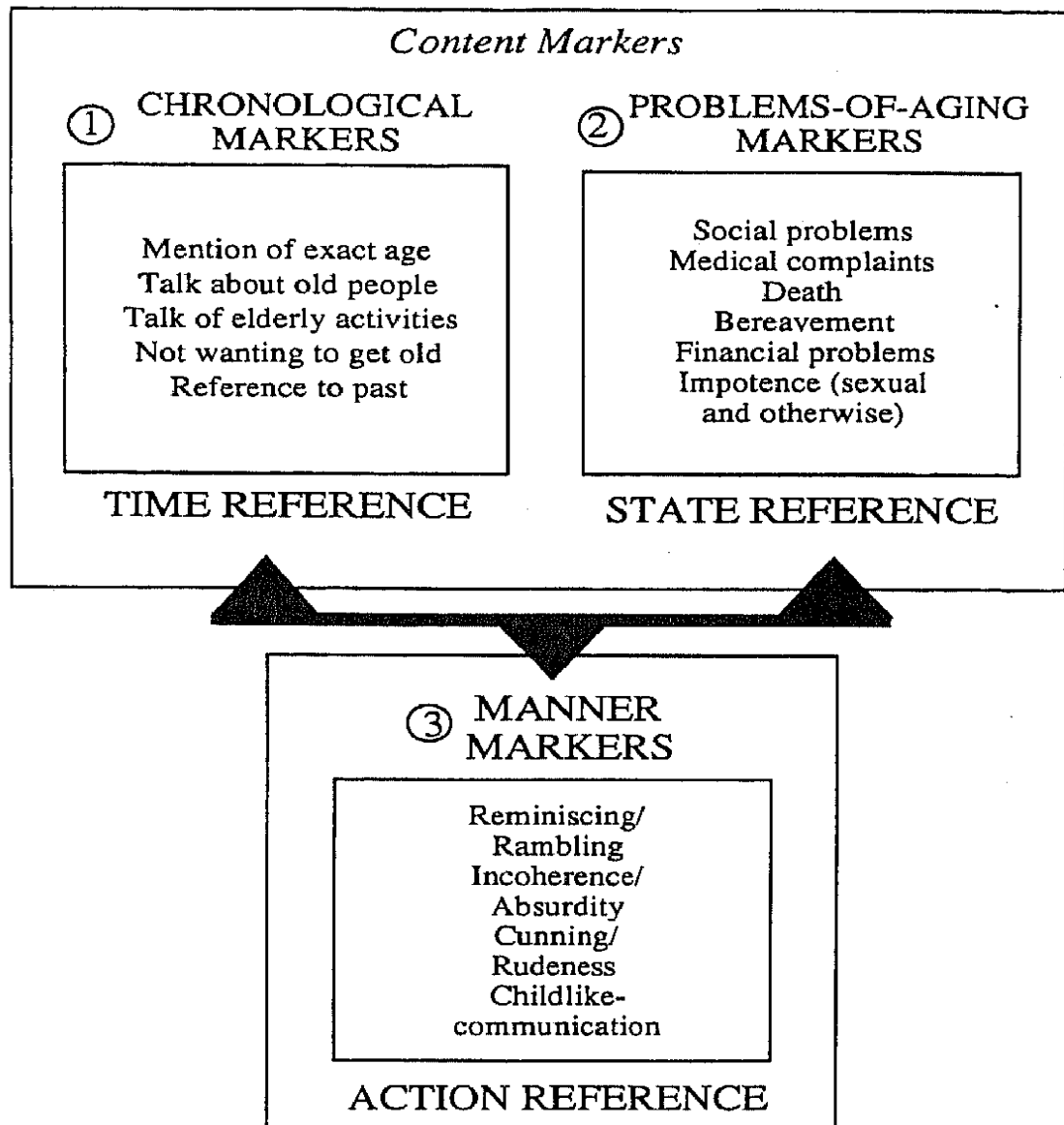
FIGURE 1. Typology of age markers in *The Golden Girls*.

Figure describes the two categories which are seen as marking age primarily through 'content' of talk. The distinction between the two lies in whether the content of the talk explicitly invokes the elderly time of life ('chronological markers'), or is 'associated' with age ('problems-of-aging markers'). The final category is concerned with marking age through the 'style' of talk ('manner markers'). Here the concern is with whether certain speech *acts* may be reliably invoking notions of age.[2] It should be noted that these categories are overlapping, and constitute somewhat 'fuzzy' sets (see J. Coupland et al., 1991)

(1) Chronological markers. This first group of age markers is possibly the most explicit. It includes mention of exact age, talk about the elderly and elderly activities, explicit discussion of problems concerned with aging, and (commonly) not wanting to get older. Reference to the past is also included here, when such reference provides cues from which age is obvious. Extract 1 is from a conversation concerning Blanche's birthday. The rep-

resentations of aging provided by Sophia explicitly invoke the categoriz-
ation 'elderly' as well as adopting a strongly negative tone:

Extract 1

Blanche: You know Sophia, this birthday thing has me kind of depressed as
  well. Do you think you could help me too?
Sophia: Sure. No matter how bad things get remember these sage words.
  You're old, you're sad [/you sag] get over it.
Blanche: Sophia.
Sophia: So what if you knew Jesus personally. Wake up and smell the coffee
  you fossil.
Blanche: My mistake. I thought since you looked like Yoga [Yoda] you were
  also wise.

   While not all markers are as potentially 'offensive' for some viewers as
those in Extract 1, the characters do label themselves as old fairly often,
and fairly explicitly. The entire episode concerning Blanche's birthday
revolves around this 'chronological markers' category. Age is fore-
grounded in terms of a desire *not* to get old. Extract 1 gives some indication
of the reluctance with which Blanche confronts her aging. The 'taboo'
nature of 'age talk' as a whole is indicated by Extract 2:

Extract 2

Blanche: You were right Rose, what's in a number. I mean I still have my
  health, I have my challenging career at the museum. Most of all I have you
  all—my family. All that birthday nonsense was just an exercise in vanity.
  And so today for the first time Blanche Deveraux is going to reveal her
  true and accurate age. Right after you tell me your weight.
Rose: A hundred and nineteen.
Blanche: Forty two.
Rose: Coffee?
Blanche: Please.

As a 'sensitive' issue, age is paralleled here with weight. Rose and Blanche
negotiate a mutually satisfying resolution, involving avoidance of the issue
on both accounts. Such 'explicit avoidance' will make age all the more
salient, while also foregrounding negative assessments of aging (as expla-
nations are invoked for the desire to avoid such discussion).

   (2) *Problems-of-aging markers.* This category contains reference to
issues that are salient among the elderly population. While some of these
issues are present for many of us, the *Golden Girls* context will likely
encourage age-based attributions by viewers for such references. Issues in
this category include death, medical complaints, sexual problems, trouble
with finding relationships, financial problems, employment, bereavement
and the like (cf. J. Coupland et al., 1988). Blanche's comments in Extract 3
provide an example of a 'problems-of-aging marker'. 'Big Daddy' is
Blanche's pet term for her deceased father. She occasionally engages in
fond remembrances of 'Big Daddy' and his outdated bigotry. Talk of
bereavement is seen here as a marker that foregrounds issues of age:

Extract 3

Blanche: You know Rose, I'm luckier than you cos I had a father, a wonder-
  ful father whom I loved dearly, but right now you have an opportunity I

would give anything for. Just to have 10 minutes more with Big Daddy. to hear that sweet old husky voice once more. 'They're admittin' wh my country club?'

Rose: Oh there's a difference, Blanche. That bigot was there for you.

While bereavement may be a problem at any time during the life-sp such loss is particularly likely as we grow older, and our social group gr older with us.

(3) Manner markers. These are utterances which might be seen as cl acteristically (or stereotypically) elderly due to the *act* that is being p formed. It is not *necessarily* the content of what is being said that is ac as a marker, but more the choice of locution that is made. The prim type of marker identified in this category is that which might be labe 'reminiscing' (Coleman, 1974; see Merriam, 1980, for a review of w concerning reminiscence). The characters in the show engage fairly quently in reminiscing narratives. The ease with which they achieve s talk is demonstrated by Extract 4, a 'group reminiscence' in which women appear to be mutually supporting each other's identities thro the sharing of past events.

Extract 4

Blanche: Oh you just look so beautiful. You know this reminds me of the I married George. 500 people in that big old church and I didn't have underwear on.

Dorothy: Why?

Blanche: I just felt it was the right thing to do.

Rose: My wedding was out of doors. February twelfth, I'll never forget wore the most beautiful flannel wedding gown. It even had feet sewn i

Dorothy: Ohh when Stan and I were married. Stan was crying, I was cry Ma was crying, all for different reasons. If you didn't know us it loo touching.

Thorsheim and Roberts (1990) discuss the empowering consequence this 'group reminiscence' or 'storysharing' for the elderly, and the pr lems encountered by those without the available social support to eng in it (see also Boden and Bielby, 1986).

In addition to reminiscence, Dillard et al. (1990) indicate that a cer abrasiveness, directness and even rudeness is seen as characteristic of elderly communicator. Sophia is the primary progenitor of comments t could be categorized in this way. Her companions frequently suffer fr the sharp end of her tongue, and are rarely able to compete with her ve fluency and facility (see Extract 5 in which Dorothy has encountere recluse).

Extract 5

Dorothy: How pathetic. A person could live their life totally alone devoi companionship or love. I wish there was something I could do.

Sophia: Start a club.

Sophia is rarely reticent about goading her daughter with regard to D othy's lack of romantic interests. This directness is seen as marking through the mode of telling, if not necessarily the content of what is to

It should be noted that the markers considered within this category (

throughout the analysis) are not necessarily common in everyday elderly communication. In addition, they are not thought to be 'unique' identifiers of old age, sui generis. Rather, they are markers whose presence (in the context under consideration) has a high likelihood of being attributed to the age of the characters.

These three categories are thought to be exhaustive as regards the verbal items that make age salient on the show. Inevitably, they are not mutually exclusive—indeed the items deal with issues at different levels. As indicated by Figure 1, the first and second categories are concerned with the *content of talk*. Here it is *what* is being said that tells the viewer that the character may be old. The third category is more concerned with the nature of *speech acts* being carried out. The *act* of referring to the past, or the *act* of making incoherent communication are the cues here. Consider Extract 6:

> **Extract 6**
> *Dorothy:* You know when I was a little kid I got angry with my mother and father and I imagined that I had different parents.
> *Blanche:* Who?
> *Rose:* Who?
> *Dorothy:* Well it's really silly.
> *Blanche:* Well come on now, who?
> *Dorothy:* Well my dad was Errol Flynn, and my mother was Amelia Earhart. I wanted dad all to myself.

Although common among most of us, the act of reminiscence ('when I was a little kid') is a component, and possibly the component par excellence, of the elderly communicative stereotype. Since the *act* of reminiscence will mark age here, this will fall into category 3 (see Coleman, 1986, for a recent discussion of reminiscence processes). In addition, in this instance, the 'elderliness' of the communication is reinforced by the reference to Errol Flynn and Amelia Earhart—both individuals that most viewers would recognize as associated with a now-elderly generation. Hence the category of chronological markers is also invoked in this instance. As pointed out by J. Coupland et al. (1991) in their analysis, the fact that multiple levels of age markers can be invoked at one time emphasizes the complexity of the identity processes occurring, and strengthens the argument that we cannot simply differentiate 'age marked' from 'age *not* marked'. Rather we must consider such marking along a continuum of relative age salience, and note the extent to which an intergroup experience is available to those watching.

The analysis of age markers has demonstrated that an intergroup interpretation of the events in the show is possible, and may be likely. Indeed, an informal quantitative investigation of the age-marking phenomena described above was, in itself, informative. The approximate number of age markers ranged from 28 to 55 per show in the six episodes examined. Based on a 25-minute program length, this gives an average of between one and two age markers per minute! While there are considerable limitations on quantitative accounts of such discourse variables, these figures

seem to justify an interpretation of the viewing experience as 'intergroup', or at least potentially so (for younger viewers).

Following from the Hewstone and Brown (1986) framework, the discussion of age markers, above, indicates that the show may be having some attitudinal impact. If interpretations of events and behaviors in terms of age were not available then the show would not be seen as likely to change attitudes. Since quite the reverse is true, it will be useful next to examine the messages that are being conveyed regarding age, in terms of the show's text.

Hewstone and Brown (1986) indicate that the outcome of contact, and hence the generalized view of the outgroup, may be positive or negative. As such, they recognize that establishing encounters as 'intergroup' is not a panacea for positive change. The remainder of this analysis focuses on the plausible direction of any change in attitudes that might result from viewing *The Golden Girls*. The most profitable approach to this was thought to be an analysis of humor on the show. Indeed, to ignore the issue of humor would be to ignore many people's primary motivation for watching the show. It is believed that the humorous nature of the show is crucial to consider when examining its presentation of the elderly and the phenomenon of aging. The central point of interest with regard to humor was the question of whether age markers were closely linked, within the text, to humorous utterances.

Links between age marking and humor

Initially, the 'loci' of humor within the show were isolated. In this context the locus of a humorous act is seen as the structural or compositional element within any segment of communication that makes that communication humorous—the humorous 'device' that is being used. Humorous comments were easily identified from the studio laughter on the soundtrack of the show, with four primary loci being identified (see Figure 2). Examples of these four types independent of age markers are provided and discussed in Harwood (1992). For the purposes of the current analysis, the four types form the center of a discussion of how age and aging are used as resources for humor within the show. Sometimes aging may actually provide the 'device' for the humorous content, often it is simply the subject matter on which the humor is based. In most instances the humor could *not* be described as explicitly agist or offensive; however, it is suggested that the use of age marking to provide a significant portion of the humor within the show is a potentially harmful aspect of it. More detailed qualitative investigation of the four 'types' of humor, and their 'use' of age-related phenomena, is presented below.

(1) Non-verbal humor. The first category is concerned with non-verbal behaviors in general. Little attention will be paid this particular device in the current analysis, as such behaviors generally seem to have little relevance to a discussion concerned with age. Occasionally, of course, humor in the show derives from individuals' non-verbal expressions (primarily
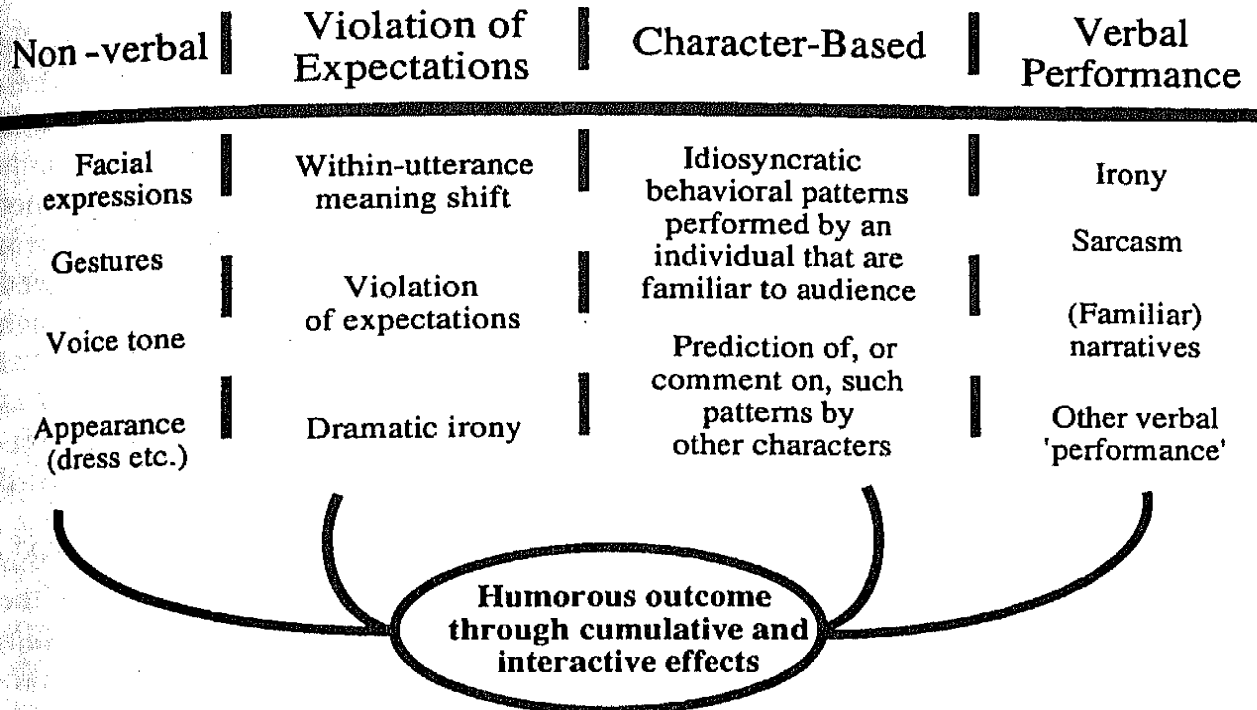
Non-verbal	Violation of Expectations	Character-Based	Verbal Performance
Facial expressions	Within-utterance meaning shift	Idiosyncratic behavioral patterns performed by an individual that are familiar to audience	Irony
Gestures	Violation of expectations		Sarcasm
Voice tone		Prediction of, or comment on, such patterns by other characters	(Familiar) narratives
Appearance (dress etc.)	Dramatic irony		Other verbal 'performance'

Humorous outcome through cumulative and interactive effects

FIGURE 2. Initial typology of locus of humor in *The Golden Girls*.

facial). The focus within the current discussion is primarily on language use.

(2) Violation of expectations. Here the humor is seen as located primarily in the juxtaposition/embedding of an event within a particular local stream of events/the local flow of communication. The primary principle in operation here appears to be a shift in meaning embedded within textually generated expectations (cf. incongruity theories of humor: Koestler, 1964). Most generally this violation of expectations category deals with individuals providing unexpected responses to others (Extract 7):

Extract 7
Rose: Oh I just wish my mother and father were here to see this.
Blanche: Because they'd be so proud of you?
Rose: No, because they'd be alive.

In Extract 7, Rose's initial comment leads to an expectation in the audience, and in Blanche who vocalizes it. Rose's response gains its humor from its unexpected meaning in this context. Age reference is apparent in the reference to the death of Rose's parents (a problems-of-aging marker).

A particular subcategory within the 'violation of expectations' category has been labeled 'within-utterance meaning shift'. This phenomenon occurs when expectations arise within the same utterance that later provides the violation.

Consider Extract 8 in which Sophia is confronting Dorothy's ex-husband, prior to their remarriage:

Extract 8
Sophia: OK, you've got a second chance. But if you hurt my daughter again, I'll make you miserable for the rest of my life. And if I lay off meat and dairy that could be as much as five years.

Sophia's comment that 'that could be as much as five years' violates the expectation that the threat she is engaging in should be 'powerfully' delivered. This expectation is established in the first half of her utterance, and promptly violated in the second half. Age marking in the Extract occurs primarily through the chronological markers category. While age is not mentioned explicitly, mention of 'number of years left to live' would seem to fit within the chronological marking type, invoking notions of death and relative point in the life span. Age might also be said to be marked through the problems-of-aging markers category. Following the power of the initial threat, the sudden 'defusing' nature of the final statement can be seen as reflecting widespread views of the elderly as lacking power (sexually, interpersonally or societally). This factor is accentuated by Sophia's small stature next to Stan (Dorothy's husband-to-be).

(3) Character-based humor. The next type of humor device identified is described as character-based. Here the individual within the show is the crucial element of the humor, and it is the embedding of an action within the history of that character that leads to the humorous effect. The characters are very different, and each one elicits different responses from the viewers. It helps to look at the characters one by one, identifying the primary sources of humor for each, together with possible accompanying age-marking properties.

(a) Rose. A large amount of the humor derived from Rose's character is in the form of extended (and often tangential) narrative reminiscence about her childhood home—St Olaf, Minnesota. St Olaf is portrayed as a Scandinavian 'small town' full of odd characters, and with a lifestyle far removed from the norm. Her discourse concerning St Olaf provides at least the *opportunity* for an interpretation in terms of age. Consider Extract 9 in which Rose is attempting to comfort Blanche who is worried about the well-being of a friend:

Extract 9
Rose: Dorothy's right. You're worrying for nothing. I remember back in St Olaf=
Dorothy: =Hold it right there Will Rogers, none of us is in the mood for one of those St Olaf stories.
Rose: Well here's one against your will. But to show you I'm a good sport I'll get right to the part that will make Blanche feel better [Blanche sighs; Rose visibly cogitating]. Ah, anyway, everybody in the village hated Ingmar. So we grabbed our torches and climbed the hill to his castle and pounded on the great old door but there was no answer. So we got a ladder and we climbed up to the window and we peeked in and to our relief there was Ingmar lying on the f. . . . oh wait a minute, he was dead [. . .]
Blanche: Oh, Rose is right. What if something's happened to Mel [. . .]
Sophia: Way to go, Rose, I thought you said that story would help.
Rose: Oh but it did. You don't know how long I've been waiting to get that one off my chest.

As always, Rose has good intentions to help, although the others are fully cognizant of the likely outcome. Blanche sighs in a resigned fashion, and Dorothy actually verbalizes the concerns of the others. Sophia waits

until afterwards to put Rose down ('I thought you said that would help'), and eventually the concerns of all parties are expressed, and the history of such narratives is made clear to the audience. This particular narrative is characteristically incoherent, and fails to make a useful point applicable to Blanche's situation (indeed it is counter-productive), and so the tradition is carried forth in fine style. The role of such incoherence as an age marker has already been discussed. Possibly most important here is that such narratives are in reminiscence form (a manner marker of age), with Rose talking about her childhood, her marriage and the nature of St Olaf life, with all its obscure traditions. This seems far removed from the present, and to this extent, with at least one character, there is a distinct possibility that a primary source of humor is also a primary source of age cues.

(b) Blanche. With Blanche the situation is very different. The humor of her character arises largely from an explicitly *counter*-stereotypical portrayal (indeed to some extent this may be seen, on a more general level, as reminiscent of the 'violation of expectations' category of humor). She is a man-hunter of the highest order, with her sexual exploits being a source of consternation and amusement for the other characters in the show. Blanche is genuinely unabashed, and seems to revel in her sexuality— arguably a refreshing portrayal of an elderly character.

Along with this, however, it is necessary to draw out a couple of caveats to a naïvely positive interpretation. First, most references to Blanche's sex life are humorous. While there is little that explicitly suggests that she is lying, the nature of this particular older woman's sex life is seen as amusing by the others in the show, and by the audience. Of course, a younger woman with such a one-track mind might also be amusing, but in a stereotypically asexual context (i.e. with the elderly), such an extreme portrayal of 'hypersexuality' is liable to have any humorous element accentuated. As described by Kubey (1980), among others, the humorous treatment of counter-stereotypical behavior is likely to have few positive effects, and might well serve to reinforce the stereotype.

A further caveat to a superficial support of this counter-stereotypical presentation comes on the occasions when other members of the cast dig a little deeper into the reasons for Blanche's behavior (see Extract 10):

Extract 10

Rose: You haven't drowned yourself in young men since this time last year when you brought those twins home from the Jimmy Smith look alike competition.

Blanche: Oh yeah, Jorge and Esteban. Romantic, passionate and virtually interchangeable.

Dorothy: You know, Rose is right. Every year at this time you start robbing the cradle. ... wait a minute. By any chance does somebody have a birthday coming up?

Blanche: Alright yes damn it it's almost my birthday. And I intend to forget all about it and if you are indeed my friends you will forget all about it too. And never bring up this sordid subject again. [Blanche leaves]

Here some of the underlying motives for Blanche's behavior emerge. Her open sexuality is seen as a reaction to aging, and, implicitly, a response to

the 'assumed' decline of sex with aging. So, while the behaviors may be counter-stereotypical, the assumptions underlying Blanche's behavior still reflect the stereotype. As such, it is argued that a large amount of the humor surrounding Blanche's character marks age through the category described as 'problems-of-aging marking'. Notions of elderly sexual impotence are seen as implicitly invoked whenever Blanche's sexual activity is on the agenda.

(c) *Sophia*. The prime element in the humor surrounding Sophia is her blunt (and sometimes rude) way of dealing with the others. Consider Extract 11:

Extract 11

Sophia: Dorothy was born during the Depression, (.) mine. We had no money, and when it came time to deliver I couldn't afford to go to the hospital. Hospitals were for the rich.

Blanche: So Dorothy was born at home?

Sophia: Homes were for the rich. Babies were for the rich. We tried selling her, but the rich have taste.

Rose: Did you have a hard labor?

Sophia: Oh it went on for days. But she was finally born. 32 pounds and 3 ounces.

All: Oh no.

Dorothy: Ma, nobody weighs 32 pounds when they are born.

Sophia: That's what the guy from the circus said.

Again, age is marked here through more than one of the categories. The side reference to 'The Depression' can be seen as a chronological marker. Although it is negated by the follow up 'mine', for most viewers the link to an early part of this century will have been made. This link is reinforced by reference to times being hard ('hospitals were for the rich . . . homes were for the rich'). In addition, the manner markers category of age markers is present in the direct, and at times rude, comments aimed at Dorothy (cf. Dillard et al., 1990). Further, the discussion as a whole takes on a reminiscence form, although it lacks the traditional sentimentality attached to such performance. Reminiscence again falls into the manner markers category. All three of those living in the house are subject to Sophia's caustic wit, and the subject matters are fairly predictable. Blanche is deluged with comments regarding her relationships. Dorothy is chided for being a less than perfect daughter, for her failed marriage, unwanted pregnancy and her lack of dates. Rose suffers mostly from references to her cognitive deficiencies.

In many ways, Sophia is the most dynamic of the characters on the show, demonstrating a verbal facility that would confound many younger adults. Here too, though, the apparently positive feature is not unproblematic. Sophia gains great delight from her pranks and from her rudeness (in one episode she gets others in the house to taste piping hot food: they scream, and she comments 'My eyesight's going, I like a prank I can hear'). These are behaviors that are generally censored among mature adults (hence the humor), and their counter-normative nature might well lead to group-

based attributions in terms of maliciousness. In other words, further dimensions of the elderly stereotype might be developed by the audience ('not only are they slow and impotent, but they're vicious too!!'). In particular, the free expression that Sophia engages in is reminiscent of uninhibited children's communication, and again may offer confirming evidence for those who subscribe to the 'regression to childhood' belief about aging, a manner marker of age.

(d) Dorothy. The character of Dorothy is the most difficult to say anything definitive about; however, one primary purpose appears to be served by her role in the show. It is that of a 'commentator' on the foibles of those around her. The characteristic personalities of Rose and Blanche especially (see above) are a permanent source of despair for Dorothy, and her despair is a source of amusement for the audience. Consider Extract 12:

> **Extract 12**
> *Rose:* We had a gigantic black hole in St Olaf.
> *Sophia:* Oh God.
> *Rose:* On Main St. right in front of the courthouse, where Charlie and I got our marriage license, and our permit to have kids. Oh it was a lovely hole. Everyone in town'd stand around and look in it.
> *Dorothy:* And they say Hollywood is the entertainment capital of the world.
> *Rose:* Well we didn't just look at it. Sometimes we'd point too. Or spit and time it. Then there was always that wise guy who'd have a couple of drinks and unzip himself.
> *Dorothy:* It's official. I hate her.

The age-marking properties of Rose's discourse have already been discussed in some detail. Humor derived from her by Dorothy is not seen as being significantly different to that derived from use by Rose herself, although such commentary as that provided will possibly increase the salience of such behavior. That said, as a whole, Dorothy's character is the most multidimensional on the show, and to this extent might well be seen as the most positive with regard to age models.

(4) Verbal performance humor. The final locus of humor identified is also concerned with mostly verbal behaviors, and primarily verbal performances. Consider Extract 13:

> **Extract 13**
> *Blanche:* In many ways I feel just the way I felt when I was a virgin.
> *Sophia:* You mean the feeling isn't going to last that long?
> *Blanche:* Are you implying that I lost my virginity at an early age?
> *Sophia:* I'm just saying you're lucky Jack and Jill magazine didn't have a gossip column.
> *Dorothy:* Ma!!
> *Sophia:* Please pussycat, I'm on a roll.
> *Blanche:* [. . .] Mel and I were meant to be together.
> *Sophia:* I wish I could say the same for your thighs [thumps table with joy]. God I'm hot tonight.

In Extract 13, Sophia's rudeness takes on the form of a verbal perform-

ance of sorts—she is 'on a roll', and the individual she is insulting and their relationship become less and less important. Despite the ways in which the humor is entwined with Blanche and Sophia's characters, it is the display of verbal facility that is most entertaining here. As has been discussed earlier, the rudeness that is characteristic of much of Sophia's discourse is seen as an age marker within the current analysis. Notions of the elderly as abrasive and cantankerous are invoked, notions which appear common in stereotypes of the elderly (Dillard et al., 1990).

A further example of the verbal performance category is provided in Extract 14. Sophia is being taken to hospital by Dorothy, her daughter:

> **Extract 14**
> *Dorothy:* Ma, I know you're frightened, but do you really think I'd be pushing for this operation if I believed there was any risk?
> *Sophia:* I don't know, my little beneficiary.

Extract 14 shows a characteristically pithy response from Sophia. This type of response is seen as a verbal performance in that a 'punch line' is being provided. At some level a 'conscious' attempt is being made by the character to be funny as opposed to the norm where everyday interaction is funny for the audience, and the cast do not recognize the 'performed' nature of their dialogue. The link to age in Extract 14 is apparent through the problems-of-aging category of age marker. Talk about death (in terms of its ensuing financial benefits) foregrounds the age issue, as quite possibly does the whole medical setting of the episode. Beyond the immediate discourse, a narrative of aged parents and manipulating beneficiaries is invoked, which may be familiar to some viewers.

To contrast verbal performance with the other categories, it is the verbal *act* that is of prime importance in this category. In the 'violation of expectations' category, it is the juxtaposition of acts within events or with other acts. In the 'character-based' category, it is the juxtaposition of acts with individuals. Much of what fits in category 4 could be seen as 'punch line'-type humor.

An attempt has been made to illustrate the frequency of age-related humorous comments in the show. While these figures are necessarily approximate,[3] they point to a strong relationship between age marking and humor on the show. Age markers as a whole are present in almost half of the humorous utterances. In addition, of the over 200 age markers coded, almost 90 percent occurred within a humorous context. Non-humorous age marking is relatively rare throughout the show, whereas humorous age marking appears to occur as a matter of course. In the context of an attempt to provide a positive portrayal of the elderly, it seems important that the characters should be taken seriously, and that the nature of age should not be simplified or trivialized. This may not be the case in the show under consideration.

3. GENERAL DISCUSSION

In all, it has been shown that there is a considerable amount of age marking within the show, and hence that age is probably perceptually salient in the show for audiences. Within the Intergroup Contact Theory paradigm (Hewstone and Brown, 1986), the potential of the show for influencing attitudes towards the elderly is hence high. Further, the analysis has shown that humor on the show can be dealt with on multiple levels, and that on at least three of these levels a number of types of age markers can be identified. It is argued that the localized juxtaposition of humor and age markers is problematic if positive attitude change is the goal. Such a conclusion is strengthened by the largely negative representations of age and aging that constitute the basis of many of the age markers. Both the 'problems-of-aging' and 'manner' categories of age marker tend to focus upon negative and often stereotypical features of 'being old'. The former focuses on illness, death, bereavement and sexual problems, while the latter marks age primarily via rambling reminiscences, and rudeness. The value of an elderly presence on television, and even on television comedy, is not being questioned here. However, there is a delicate balance between ensuring that the characters are perceived as elderly, and making their elderliness the sole reason for their presence and the sole source of entertainment.

This said, it seems necessary to point out the other side of the coin. To this point the analysis has focused upon the more 'negative' aspects of the program's presentation. While the points made above retain their validity, there are also positive points to the show's presence that have not received full attention herein. (Indeed, despite our focus, we accept the possibility that the show may indeed do more *good* than *harm*. However, we have made an attempt to point out the harm that it might do.) First, and most obviously, the show has increased the visibility of the elderly on television. The cultivation paradigm is not favored within the approach of this paper, but there is considerable evidence that an increase in television visibility will lead to increased estimates of a group's presence in society, and hence possibly increased vitality accorded that group in individuals' subjective assessments (cf. Giles et al., 1977; Harwood et al., forthcoming). For a disadvantaged group such as the elderly, almost anything which helps to push them onto public and social agendas arguably has merit.

In addition, there is some evidence that the 'entertaining' context in which the characters are portrayed in *The Golden Girls* might be beneficial to people's conceptions of the group as a whole. Traditional behavioral theories (Skinner, 1974) would predict that given the reward (laughter) that viewers are receiving in the context of the stimulus (elderly individuals), the viewers would come to like the stimulus more. In the context of the analysis previously presented, and the difficulty of predicting when 'liking' of the characters in the show will lead to positive attitudes towards the elderly as a whole, this is a somewhat naïve approach. However, within a paradigm that rejects uniform and unitary effects of the mass media, multiple viewer orientations must be accepted. Many viewing the show

may pay minimal attention to the dialogue. At a low level of processing of the show, and with viewers for whom this is a primary element of contact with the elderly, such responses are not far-fetched. The notion that different viewers may process a sitcom presentation more or less centrally or peripherally again has implications for a developing sophistication in media effects research (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981).

Further, there are elements within the show that would be applauded by many contact theorists. For instance, Rose and Blanche are good indicators of how the show attempts to cut across age boundaries by invoking other social categories; such cross-cutting has been recommended by contact theorists as a way of breaking down stereotypes (Pettigrew, 1971). Rose is a stereotypical 'airhead' or 'bimbo' and is referred to as such by her companions. These terms are generally reserved for certain younger women, and hence her characterization may serve to identify her with a younger group of individuals. Similarly, Blanche fulfills another female substereotype as the 'insatiable sex-fiend'—an image generally reserved for a type of younger woman. There are therefore 'positive' elements to these cross-cutting portrayals of the individuals on the show. As a caveat to this, it seems important to question the wisdom of replacing one (agist) stereotype with another (sexist) one. While such sexist portrayals are not the focus of the current analysis, it appears that much of the dialogue on the show derives from sexist portrayals of the characters. This kind of 'trade off' between prejudices would not be the optimal path toward the reduction of ageism.

We have taken an in-depth look at a particular image of the elderly—that of *The Golden Girls*—in order to consider the underlying messages of that image, and its possible repercussions for viewers of the show. The most important conclusion emerges from the discussion of the links between the portrayals of age in the show and the show's humor. This message was noted by one commentator early in the show's history:

> A little too much of the humor is directed at ridiculing certain signs of aging, from having hair in one's ears to incontinence. (*New York Times*, 14 September 1985: 46).

The current analysis has attempted to flesh out this rarely made criticism of the show, while extending it. It has been shown that humor and age marking often coincide, and that quite frequently humor is derived explicitly from age markers. In addition, the quantitative analysis presented has suggested that only a small amount of non-humorous age marking occurs within the show. As a whole, this is seen as having one important implication for the viewing experience. The level of age marking means that group-based attributions for behaviors are more likely than in instances where age is less salient (Hewstone and Brown, 1986). Given the humorous nature of age portrayals on the show, any emerging positive perceptions of the elderly from the show (e.g. active, likable, mentally quick) are subject to 'discounting' effects. In other words, the fact that counter-stereotypical behaviors are amusing is tantamount to the accept-

ance that they are unlikely. Far from debunking myths of aging, *The Golden Girls* may well be contributing to those myths by presenting entertaining accounts of the alternative to them. If the alternative to a senile, lonely and boring elderly population is laughable, then we are left with our original conception as the only 'serious' option.

In the context of the findings of Harwood (1992), these results gain an increased importance. It appears that *The Golden Girls* has an appeal which extends to demographic groups very different from the characters on the show. For at least one population of viewers (college students), viewing the show is an activity that is embedded in a broader life experience of very low contact with the elderly. As such, any messages being conveyed about the elderly have less chance of being 'moderated' through non-mediated contact with elderly individuals. For a number of young adults, and especially young women, the show may constitute a primary source of contact with the elderly.

Two groups of viewers would seem to be of particular interest in future empirical media effects analyses concerning relationships between viewing the show and attitudes towards the elderly, as well as less tangible issues such as uses and gratifications associated with the show (Bleise, 1982; Katz et al., 1974; Rubin and Windahl, 1986). The two populations would be heavy viewers of the show, and the elderly. Those who view the show on a weekly basis, identify it as a favorite show and/or watch the reruns that are available on a more frequent basis would be an interesting population to examine. The population of elderly viewers is also worthy of examination. (Note, as pointed out by Mundorf and Brownell, 1990, many of these would also fall into the heavy viewers' category.) The effects of the show on the population being portrayed are arguably more interesting than the effects on others. An examination of elderly identity, as experienced while watching the show, would aid an understanding of the emotional responses of elderly viewers to ingroup representations on television (Mares, 1991).

That said, in terms of an agenda of 'improving' representations of a group, it is the effects on individuals who are somehow more negatively disposed to the elderly to start with that may be most interesting. To this extent, some form of pretesting would be an interesting adjunct to any 'effects' work. How do individuals who differ in their prior conceptions of the elderly differ in their responses to the show?

The analysis also has a number of implications at a more general level, for the study of mass media effects and the study of intergroup contact. First, it has been demonstrated that the examination of texts within the mass media is a crucial counterpart to more conventional effects research. A sophisticated study of mass media effects can only benefit from a fuller understanding of the nature of what is causing the effects. Indeed, attempts to understand 'effects' processes are inadequately informed without commentary and discussion on the nature of the 'independent variable'— the show itself. It is argued that a socially grounded discourse analysis is a productive and informative way of approaching such texts. Such a discourse analysis might well have a further role to play in the examination of

the effects themselves. Specifically, static measures of attitude change might be complemented by more dynamic discoursal measures of attitudes obtained through and by talk within and about the program (Lalljee et al., 1984; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

Two primary messages emerge from the study regarding Intergroup Contact Theory (IGCT) (Hewstone and Brown, 1986). First, this paper is the first explicitly communication-based investigation to utilize IGCT. The analysis has revealed problems for the theoretical approach in terms of operationalizing the construct of 'intergroupness' for any particular encounter. The extent to which an encounter is perceived as intergroup is ultimately largely dependent upon talk that occurs within that encounter, and such talk is a dynamic variable. Hence, perceived intergroupness will vary within an encounter as well as across participants. Modifications to IGCT are recommended in terms of placing encounters on a continuum of 'perceived intergroupness', and consideration of measures to investigate this is urged. A further development has been the extension of IGCT to the media realm. Such an extension is useful in terms of opening the theory up to a broader level of application, and hence a wider population in terms of attitude change. Similarly, the application of the theory with regard to the elderly is a move towards exploring the viability of the theory in new areas.

A final theoretical implication of the current analysis lies in its examination of humor. Current 'molecular' models of humor were deemed inadequate for the examination of humor within the current analysis. As a result, a number of recommendations have emerged for theory-building in the humor area. First, multiple loci of humorous effects should be considered by any such theory. Second, the different levels on which humor can occur should be considered in more detail. It may be primarily 'textual', or it may be bound up in a body of knowledge that includes characters or events far removed from the apparent 'cause' of the humor. Third, individual and situational differences in the experience of humor should be given more detailed treatment than has been the case to this point. From such considerations a more general and broadly applicable theory of humor 'beyond the punch line' will emerge.

A large body of future research is suggested by this analysis. Perhaps most important, further examination of claims made regarding 'positive' group portrayals in the media is urged. This would lead to a solid, empirically grounded body of knowledge that would outline acceptable modes of presentation for various groups in the media. A further recommendation is for the increasing examination of media texts, and especially, in this context, those concerning the elderly. To develop recent works in a more 'interpersonal' context (N. Coupland et al., 1991b), examination of portrayals of intergenerational communication in the media would further our understanding of socialization into intergenerational encounters in general.

Finally, and to end on a practical and policy-oriented note, some recommendations for television production emerge from this analysis, and should be briefly considered. First, it is hoped that producers would now seek out

sources of humor other than age. At some level, using age as a resource for humor may serve positive functions for the elderly viewer (in terms of coping and the like); however, a more varied approach to humor is recommended. Second, the presence of elderly characters in other genres is encouraged, since it is only through such presence in a variety of situations that a differentiated view of the group will be propagated in the public. In contrast to making recommendations to producers, Dale Kunkel (pers. comm., December 1991) argues that production values will change only in the wake of consumer pressure. Hence the dissemination of analyses to the viewing public may result in more substantial improvements in programming than would dissemination to media elites.

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NOTES

1. The focus for this paper, therefore, is the 'younger' audience of the show. This is not intended in any way to deny the additional importance of examining elderly viewers' responses to the show.
2. The differences between the current typology and the heuristic of J. Coupland et al. (1991) are unsurprising given the different contexts in which they were developed. The interactions in *The Golden Girls* are primarily peer-elderly (although interesting intergenerational concerns are raised when we think of interactions including Sophia), while those examined by Coupland et al. were primarily intergenerational (young–old). The marking of age identity in these different settings will undoubtedly serve different functions. In addition, the current analysis is concerned with interactions that are scripted (and hence not produced in spontaneous interaction involving the elderly).
3. First, the degree to which an utterance marks age is in question (and is not amenable to straightforward investigation). Similarly, what may appear to mark age to one person at one time may not to a different person or at a different time. Second, the unit of analysis is inherently variable. Sometimes a single

utterance may contain a number of age markers, while at other times it may require a number of utterances to achieve a single marker.

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