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Categories in Social Interaction: Unlocking the Resources of Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization for Psychological Science

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conversation analysis, membership categorization, research methods, categories, discursive psychology

Abstract

This article reviews two related approaches – conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorization analysis (MCA) – to sketch a systematic framework for exposing that and how categories and categorial phenomena are (re)produced in naturally occurring social interaction. In so doing, we argue that CA and MCA address recent concerns about psychological methods and approaches. After summarizing how categories are typically theorized and studied, we describe the main features of a CA approach to categories, including how this differs from conventional psychology. We review the core domains of research in CA and how categories can be studied systematically in relation to the basic machinery of talk and other conduct in interaction. We illustrate these domains through examples from different settings of recorded naturally occurring social interaction. After considering the applications that have arisen from CA and MCA, we conclude by drawing together the implications of this work for psychological science.

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INTRODUCTION

Categorization of self and other is pervasive in the psychological and social lives of humans. In conversational encounters, from interactions in ordinary domestic settings to institutions and workplaces, we categorize individuals and groups; places, spaces, and settings; events, objects, and actions – unavoidably, in myriad ways. We ubiquitously invoke, describe, and construct categories; we ascribe and resist them; we imply and deny them. Categorizing can be mundane and ordinary; it can be profound and spectacular. Categories are so pervasive that we could pick almost any case of spoken, embodied, visual, or written social text or interaction and find examples of people treating them as relevant to their actions.

Take this British broadsheet newspaper headline: “Migrants side by side in hotels with public” (*The Daily Telegraph*, October 30, 2022). Beneath the headline was a story about the then UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman’s plans to reduce “overcrowding at [an] asylum processing centre” by temporarily housing “migrants” at hotels. The next day, well-known former soccer player and pundit, Gary Lineker, posted on X/Twitter a screenshot of *The Daily Telegraph*’s front page with his own replacement headline: “Human beings side by side in hotels with fellow human beings.” In both cases, embedded in alternate descriptions of the situation, are categories of persons – “migrants,” “public,” “human beings”. The alternate headlines implicitly convey assertions about the relationship between groups of persons and their rights and entitlements to be “side by side” with each other as equals (“human beings,” “fellow human beings”) or not (“migrants” and “public”). The alternate ways of categorizing construct competing versions of the events being discussed and even different realities. There are no neutral categories: all engage in actions, and thus reveal a stance; a view; a ‘take’ on the ‘facts’ at hand. Lineker’s tweet went viral, with many further responses and rewordings – and recategorizations – from the banal to the egregious.

This brief example illustrates that, and how, categories matter to everybody, virtually inescapably, and independently of what academic researchers might have to say about them – theoretically, methodologically, or empirically. Indeed, people “do not have to consult a textbook before analyzing the world. *They just do it*” (Silverman, 1998, p. 86; emphasis added). The aim of this article is to review two related approaches to studying how people “just do it” – that is, how categories figure in social interaction: conversation analysis (CA, see sidebar entitled ‘Conversation Analysis’) and “membership categorization” (analysis) (MCA, see sidebar entitled ‘Membership Categorization Analysis’). Both have their roots in ethnomethodological sociology and specifically the work of Harvey Sacks and his collaborators, gaining traction across the social and human sciences, including in psychology where they found footing via discursive psychology, or DP (see Edwards & Potter, 1992; 2001, see sidebar entitled ‘Discursive Psychology’). Since categories have been a founding concern across a range of disciplines, it is not surprising that they were also a primary focus for Sacks. His approach to categories and social interaction,

Conversation analysis: an approach to analysing the systematic organization of interaction as an infrastructure for social life and institutions.

Membership categorization: how people use categories to structure actions, relations, and occasions in social interaction.

Ethnomethodology: the study of how social life and institutions are ongoing accomplishments of local processes rather than free-standing objective structures.

however, was distinct from those that prevailed in the social sciences at the time and continue to dominate to this day.

We start our discussion of this work in Section 2 by summarizing – briefly, since the landscape is vast – academic work on categories in general, and a conventional approach to categories in psychology in particular. In Section 3, we introduce CA (including its family relations in DP and MCA), describing its data and methods, as well as the main features of its approach to categories. In Section 4, we summarize the core domains around which CA has coalesced, and describe how categories can be studied systematically in relation to the basic machinery of talk and other conduct in interaction. We illustrate these domains through examples of recorded naturally occurring social interaction. In Section 5, we explore applications that have arisen from a CA approach to categories in social interaction before concluding, in Section 6, by drawing together the implications of this work for psychological science.

Discursive psychology:
the study of how people
deploy and orient to
psychological matters
in and for social
interaction.

CATEGORIES IN PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Even before contemporary academia began to theorize categories, the word ‘category’ (from the Greek, *katēgoria*) was used by philosophers as a concept and explanatory account for observable regularities and patterns. In contemporary social science, understandings of ‘categories’ rapidly coalesced around particular groups of people, including “the Big Three” of “sex, race, and age” (Stolier & Freeman, 2016, p. 141), plus ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion (e.g., Drew, 2021), nationality (e.g., Mendieta & Alcoff, 2003), and intersections of these (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). That these categorial groups have been a key focus in social science does not, of course, mean that they have been given undue weight. However, we seek to differentiate between the categories on which scholars most commonly focus and those which people use in everyday life. Often, as our examples will show, these are the same categories. But starting with ordinary people’s activities and orientations rather than those of researchers opens up possibilities for investigating new categories from their bottom-up construction, since language evolves constantly and neologisms – including categories – are added to the public lexicon on a daily basis (see, e.g., Ivanov et al., 2023). Thus, our approach focuses explicitly on *members’* (rather than *analysts’*) categories and categorial descriptions, objects, and actions.

For many psychologists, to categorize is psychological; a human cognitive ability and process through which people abstract, classify, and organize things as the basis for acting, behaving, and decision-making (Croft & Cruse, 2004). Across huge trajectories of research, psychologists have sought to understand how people self- and other- categorize in ways that are fundamental to understanding group membership and identity, inclusion/exclusion and in-group/out-group dynamics, prejudice, and so on (for overviews, see Haslam & Reicher, 2015; Reynolds, 2015). Experimental social psychologists Schaller and Nueberg (2012, p. 43) observe that “[h]uman beings are implicit organizers; we like to lump people into categories.”

They neatly capture a starting point for many kinds of research, as well as what laypeople do in everyday talk and texts. However, no single academic discipline, including psychology, owns the study of categorization and categories, or of related concepts such as self and identity. Entry points can be found across the social sciences and humanities (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Across these fields, categories are conceived in ways that often abstract them from their natural ecological niche in *interaction*, including viewing them as biological, essential, cognitive, computational, linguistic, communicative, or social – and subsequently theorizing and empirically studying them in associated and starkly divergent ways.

Categories are conventionally deployed by researchers as classificatory, conceptual, methodological, or explanatory resources. Specifically, categories are used for 1) selecting settings and/or people to study, and describing features of settings and people being studied; 2) studying identities or experiences, personalities, abilities, and other attributes shared by members of a group; 3) dividing populations to compare groups; and thus as predictors of and/or explanations for differential actions or outcomes between groups; 4) describing and accounting for relationships, conflicts, etc. between individuals or groups; and 5) theorizing social structures and politics. While many of these uses of categories have been criticized on a range of bases – from the ways they create and/or maintain ostensible ‘facts’ about difference (e.g., Crawford, 1995; Richards, 2012) to the way they mask “contingent and contextual relationships and obscuring the need to specify mechanisms” (Brick et al., 2022, p. 491; also see, e.g., Holth, 2001; Williams, 2023) – their uninterrogated use persists. Notably, categories are seldom studied where humans mostly use them: in conversation and other occasions of interaction.

In advancing a CA approach to categories and membership categorization, we shift the academic focus from *using categories to study people* to *studying how people use categories*. A key feature of categories in this regard is that they “are the store house and the filing system for the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people – that means ALL people in their capacity as ordinary people – have about what people are like, how they behave, etc.” (Schegloff, 2007b, p. 469). This association between categories and common-sense knowledge enables people to mobilize common-sense knowledge by mobilizing categories, and vice versa – whether doing so explicitly or tacitly – and thereby makes them a rich resource for action and interpretation. This is particularly so for categories of conventional social science interest, by virtue of the expansive stocks of common-sense knowledge associated with them, arising from their widespread use as bases for structuring societies, allocating resources, managing organizational problems, and so on. Indeed, they have come to be recognized by researchers and members alike as key features of social organization, and maintained as such on an ongoing basis, precisely because they ‘lie in wait’ for mobilization as resources across a virtually unlimited range of professional and everyday activities. In the moments in which categories are used in this way, they connect the local participants with a wide range of historically-sedimented uses of categories by others, thereby relying on and reproducing them as “quiet centres of power and persuasion” (Baker, 2000, p. 112).

While this may appear to be simply an account of the workings of stereotypes formulated in different terms, there are important conceptual distinctions between common-sense knowledge underpinning categorization practices versus conventional understandings

(both social scientific and common-sense) of stereotypes. These include a view of common-sense knowledge as socially shared but not necessarily personally believed or “bought into,” in contrast to stereotypes conventionally being treated as believed by individuals; the assumption (made by participants) that the common-sense knowledge they are using is accurate for the purpose at hand, until shown to be otherwise, in contrast to conventional understandings of stereotypes as necessarily inaccurate, or at least of questionable accuracy; and that although common-sense knowledge may be morally problematized, in many cases it is treated by participants as mundane and completely unproblematic, with its competent use being morally expected or required, in contrast to the conventional treatment of stereotypes as morally proscribed or complainable (see, e.g., McHoul, 2007; Schegloff, 2007b; Whitehead, 2018).

In order to “analyze the workings of categories, not to merely use them as they are used in the world” (Jefferson, 2004a, p. 118), we need ways to study how people use categories ‘in the world.’ This is a problem for psychology, and recognized as such by scholars of psychology, since it is a discipline that, while teaching students “from the first day of class that psychology is the science of behavior and that its ultimate goal is to describe and explain what people do,” it “pays remarkably little attention to the important things that people do” – instead using “introspective self-reports, hypothetical scenarios, and questionnaire ratings” (Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 396; also see de Oliveira & Baggs, 2023). Ten years after Baumeister et al.’s critique, Mehl (2017, p. 184) similarly argued that

[l]aypersons often think of psychologists as professional people watchers. It is ironic, then, that naturalistic observation, as a methodology, has a remarkably thin history in our field. ... At the same time, there are clear limitations to what self-reports can assess. ... the psychological scientist’s tool kit also needs a method to directly observe human behavior in daily life. ... naturalistic observation can bring behavioral data collection to where moment-to-moment behavior naturally happens.

It is ironic – and frustrating – that neither of these psychologists mentions CA as a corrective for the situation they critique. CA is a six-decades-old field of observational “cumulative science” (Stokoe, 2021, p. 348). It is both a method for capturing, transcribing, and analyzing naturally occurring social interaction and a theory of human sociality (e.g., Heritage, 2009; Schegloff, 1987), examining how “ordinary activities get done methodically and *reproducibly*” (Schegloff, 1992, p. xvii, emphasis added). Yet, even as psychologists press the importance of understanding conversation as “the primary means by which [social connection] is achieved,” they claim that “scientists know little about it – about how it starts, how it unfolds, or how it ends” (Mastroianni et al., 2021, p. 1; cf. Stokoe, 2021). Indeed, many of the primary preoccupations of psychological science – personality, attitudes, cognition, neurodiversity, and many others – emerge and have their primary consequences felt in human interaction. Moreover, as Levinson (2006, p. 39) notes,

Much of the speculation about the origins and success of our species centers on the source of our big brains, the structure of our cognition, on the origins of language, the

innate structures that support it, and on the striking cooperative potential in the species. These are genuine and important puzzles, but in the rush to understand them, we seem to have overlooked a core human ability and propensity, the study of which would throw a great deal of light on these other issues. It is right under our noses, much more accessible than the recesses of our brains or the fossils that track our evolutionary origins, and quite understudied. It is the structure of everyday human interaction.

Studying interaction across languages and cultures also offers a method for addressing contemporary crises in psychological science. These include critiques centered on the dominance of North American scholarship (e.g., Faye, 2012), and of psychology as a “WEIRD” science – that “psychological data are dominated by samples drawn from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) nations, and overwhelmingly, the United States” (Muthukrishna et al., 2020, p. 678). The WEIRD critique was prefigured by the articulation of a similar set of issues by critical psychologists, including about the replicability of key psychological research findings, that originally arose during the 1970s (e.g., Lewin, 1977; Moghaddam, 1987; Nelson & Kannenberg, 1976), before re-emerging in the 2010s, which Nosek et al. (2022, p. 721) describe on this basis as “psychology’s decade of crisis.”

These issues partially informed the relevance and recruitment of CA as a radically different approach in psychology to studying human social interaction. Discursive Psychology (DP) fundamentally challenged and respecified how psychologists understand, research, and theorize social interaction; the relationship between language and cognition; and how minds and worlds are conceived (Edwards & Potter, 1992; 2001). An early paper by Edwards (1991) developed a DP perspective on categorization under the title, “Categories are for talking.” We move now to outline this perspective as the psychological entry point into CA and MCA.

CATEGORIES ARE FOR TALKING

In the decades since Edwards and Potter (1992) pioneered DP, discursive psychologists have studied how language use, often in naturally occurring social interactions, builds action and constructs the world (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2016). In a direct challenge to much of what might be regarded as ‘mainstream’ psychology, and across the social sciences more broadly, Edwards and Potter (1992) advocated understanding that, and how, participants in interactions contend on an everyday basis with the full range of phenomena treated by conventional psychologists as objects of study. With its antecedents in the discourse and rhetorical approaches of the Loughborough Discourse and Rhetoric Group, or DARG (see Stokoe et al., 2012), discursive psychologists promoted their blend of ordinary language philosophy, social studies of science, social constructionism, ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis. Rather than a tool or pathway to accessing cornerstone psychological phenomena, including attitudes, attributions, identities, personalities, emotion, or memory, language is “a domain of public accountability in which psychological states are

made relevant” (Edwards, (2006, p. 41). For DP, with its methodological partner CA, the core purpose of language – in the broadest sense across all its modalities – is the production and maintenance of human sociality and intersubjectivity (Stokoe, 2020).

In advancing the view that “categories are for talking,” Edwards (1991, pp. 517-518; emphasis in original) set out DP’s key principles. First, “[c]ategorization is *something we do*, in talk, in order to accomplish social actions (persuasion, blamings, denials, refutations, accusations, etc.).” Second, “[r]ather than starting with the abstracted content of categories and then theorizing about how they are used, discursive psychology recommends starting with situated usage, and the aim of analysis is to explicate ‘what is being done.’” DP thereby played a crucial role in importing the rich seam of (largely sociological) conversation analytic research into psychology, providing a solution (although CA and DP predated these criticisms) to the methodological limitations of psychology described above by Baumeister et al. (2007), Mehl (2017), and Mastroianni et al. (2021).

CA is not just a method, however, but “a recognizably distinct approach to the analysis of social life” (Heritage, 2009, p. 300). Despite being unfamiliar to many psychologists, its foundational papers are some of the most highly cited in any academic discipline (Stokoe, 2018). CA’s roots include the work of Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman, who Heritage (2009, p. 301) credits with “inaugurat[ing] the study of everyday life as a research focus in its own right.” In developing CA in collaboration with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, Sacks’s aim was to develop an observational science of social action that could be grounded in the “details of actual events” (1984a, p. 26). CA therefore uses audio and/or video recordings of everyday interactions as data and, with constant improvements and technological innovation, captures increasingly complex interactional environments (Hoey & Webb, 2024). This is in stark contrast to widely-used “surrogates for the observation of actual behavior” (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984, p. 2), namely interviews, focus groups, surveys, simulations, and experiments – although the fusion of CA with experimental psychology is also increasing (see De Ruiter & Albert, 2017; Robinson, 2024).

To ground analysis in the “details of actual events,” CA uses a standardized system for transcribing recorded data, developed by Gail Jefferson (see Jefferson, 2004b). The Jefferson transcription system uses a modified orthography to represent the prosodic, paralinguistic, pace, placement, and perturbation resources through which people compose and make sense of talk, and has been augmented to include embodied conduct and multimodality (for an overview, see Hepburn & Bolden, 2017). Software tools, iterated alongside technological advances, have been developed for automated transcription (e.g., ‘Gailbot;’ Umair et al., 2022) and to support the early stages of analysis, which transcription constitutes (e.g., ‘DOTE;’ McIlvenny et al., 2022). Crucially, recorded and transcribed interactional data provides a unique basis for grounding analytic claims in the participants’ own understandings, as displayed in their conduct. As Sacks et al. (1974, p. 729) note, “[t]he display of those understandings in the talk of subsequent turns affords both a resource for the analysis of prior turns and a proof procedure for professional analyses of prior turns-resources intrinsic to the data themselves.”

Jefferson transcription system: a standardized system for transcribing the produced details of talk and other conduct in audio/video-recorded interactions.

CA has developed into a powerful method for analyzing and theorizing social interaction (Robinson et al., 2024). It initially focused on developing a systematic framework for analyzing collections of cases that explicate the procedural infrastructure of interaction (e.g., Sacks & Schegloff, 1979; Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1996a; Schegloff et al., 1977), as well as using findings from such analyses to examine how single episodes of interaction unfold (e.g., Schegloff, 1987). Although its origins were in English language data, CA research is conducted across multiple languages, including at scale, enabling researchers both to identify universal features of social interaction and specify features of cross-cultural variability with precision (e.g., Schegloff, 2006; Sidnell, 2009; Sidnell & Enfield, 2012; Stivers & Enfield, 2009). Moreover, many of its foundational findings about the organization of social interaction, which we describe in the next section, have been replicated using quantitative analyses of large multi-language datasets, thereby demonstrating their cross-cultural universality and applicability (e.g., Dingemanse et al., 2015; Enfield et al., 2013; Rossi et al., 2023; Stivers et al., 2009). This replication and extension of foundational CA findings are particularly significant achievements considering the WEIRD critique and crisis of replicability faced by conventional approaches to psychology, as described above.

CA's methods pose interesting questions and challenges regarding replication and reproducibility in research, which we introduce here but return to in the final section. CA is not readily categorizable as either a qualitative or quantitative method – it is neither and both. While CA may work with large datasets, they are not required to do analysis, because the methodic order of interaction is manifest not only in aggregate but on each of its occasions. Schegloff (1992, p. xlvi, emphasis added) explains this with regards to sampling:

Taking up the methodological relevance of sampling, Sacks points out that it depends on the sort of order one takes it that the social world exhibits. An alternative to the possibility that *order manifests itself at an aggregate level and is statistical in character* is what he terms the ‘order at all points’ view (lecture 33, p. 484). This view, rather like the ‘holographic’ model of information distribution, understands order not to be present only at aggregate levels and therefore subject to an overall differential distribution, but to be present in detail on a case by case, environment by environment basis.

For this reason, CA is antithetical to traditional senses of replication: there is no such thing as an interactional component being an outlier, and thereby excludable from a dataset. Instead, ‘deviant cases’ that apparently depart from patterns observed in ‘typical’ cases are examined for how they came to be produced as such by the participants, and what this may reveal about the broader patterns from which they appear to depart (see, e.g., Schegloff, 1968).

We thus make a fundamental distinction between the way categories are deployed, on the one hand, by academics in their research (*analysts’ categories*) and, on the other, by (lay)people (*members’ categories*). That is, instead of using categories to study the social world, we adopt the resources for seeing how *participants* in social interactions use and self-administer categories. This approach is grounded in Sacks’s work on membership categorization, and intersects with the related field of study dubbed “membership

categorization analysis” by Eglin and Hester (1992, p. 247). It is important to emphasize that Sacks and others developed this work as a set of empirical observations of members’ methods (i.e., what people themselves do) in relation to categories, and the resources they use in deploying them. He thus underscored the importance of analyses of their uses by participants being “in each and every case, a matter to be *decided empirically*” (Sacks, 1966, p. 16; emphasis added). Notably, however, Housley and Fitzgerald (2015, p. 6) describe MCA as “not so much a fully worked out methodology,” thus tacitly acknowledging the potential for the development of a more “fully worked out” set of methodological tools. In contrast, CA has been more “developed” and “prolific” than membership categorization (Eglin & Hester, 1992, p. 247; also see Stokoe, 2012b), including in detailed specifications of its methodological principles and practices (e.g., Robinson et al., 2024; Stivers & Sidnell, 2013). In the following section, we sketch out the main contours of this work.

CATEGORIES AND THE “GENERIC ORDERS OF ORGANIZATION IN TALK-IN-INTERACTION”

Research in CA has developed a cumulative set of findings regarding the procedural infrastructure for social interaction. As noted above, CA has also developed an expanding array of comparative research projects across languages and cultures, but research on the machinery of social interaction has (generally) paid less attention to the ways in which who the participants are to one another – and specifically how they categorize one another – contributes to their understanding of their local contexts, actions, and activities. Research in MCA, by contrast, has primarily focused on showing how categories, and common-sense knowledge with which they are associated, come to be used in shaping single occasions of interaction, paying less attention to the forms of organization the participants use to conduct their encounters, or how collections of cases might reveal previously unnoticed aspects of how categories are used and oriented to in interaction. The integration of CA and MCA involves conducting analyses that attend to both categorial features of talk-in-interaction and to the set of “generic orders of organization in talk-in-interaction” (Schegloff, 2007a, p. xiii) on which many of the foundational advances in conversation analytic research over the past six decades have focused. Schegloff (2007a, p. xiv; emphasis in original) describes these generic orders as follows:

- (1) the “turn-taking” problem: who should talk next and when should they do so?
How does this affect the construction and understanding of the turns themselves?
- (2) the “action-formation” problem: how are the resources of the language, the body, the environment of the interaction, and position *in* the interaction fashioned into conformations designed to be, and to be recognizable by recipients as, particular actions – actions like requesting, inviting, granting, complaining, agreeing, telling, noticing, rejecting, and so on – in a class of unknown size?
- (3) the “sequence-organizational” problem: how are successive turns formed up to be “coherent” with the prior turn (or *some* prior turn), and what is the nature of that coherence?

- (4) the “trouble” problem: how to deal with trouble in speaking, hearing and/or understanding the talk so that the interaction does not freeze in place when trouble arises, that intersubjectivity is maintained or restored, and that the turn and sequence and activity can progress to possible completion?
- (5) the word-selection problem: how do the components that get selected as the elements of a turn get selected, and how does that selection inform and shape the understanding achieved by the turn’s recipients?
- (6) the overall structural organization problem: how does the overall composition of an occasion of interaction get structured, what are those structures, and how does placement in the overall structure inform the construction and understanding of the talk as turns, as sequences, etc.?¹

In addition, the period during which Schegloff (2007a) was writing saw the identification (see Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Raymond & Heritage, 2006) of what we can now list as a further “generic problem” of interaction, namely,

- (7) the epistemics problem: how are relative rights to knowledge displayed and managed in sequentially organized activities?

As Schegloff (2007a, p. xiv) further notes, these interactional problems give rise to a corresponding set of generic “organizations of practice” that are constitutive of conversation and other forms of talk-in-interaction. Schegloff (2007a, pp. 263-264) also provides the following concluding reflections on how these organizations of practice “fit together,” proposing that they

operate together all the time to inform the participants’ co-construction of the observable, actual conduct in interaction that is the *prima facie*, bottom-line stuff of social life. Only by observing them all together will we understand how the stuff of social life comes to be as it is. Only by understanding them one by one will we get into a position to observe them all together.

A crucial feature of these organizations of practice is that, together and separately, they are what Sacks et al. (1974, p. 699) describe as both “context-free” forms of organization that are nevertheless “capable of extraordinary context-sensitivity” in any specific occasion of their use.² That is, on the one hand, their basic features can be recognized as such independently of “one or another aspect of situatedness, identities, particularities of content or context;” and on the other hand, their realization in particular cases and moments is sensitive to “a wide range of situations, interactions in which persons in varieties (or varieties of groups) of identities are operating” (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 699; also see Lerner,

¹ Note that the ordering of this list is not designed to imply anything about the relative importance of these “problems.”

² Sacks et al. (1974) made this characterization specifically with reference to turn-taking, but it has since been shown to be similarly applicable to the other organizations of practice described here.

2003). Thus, as Schegloff (2007a, p. 260) puts it, “the general always in real life...presents itself infused with its particulars, and it is not thoroughly understood without them.”

One major and well-established systematic basis for context specificity in relation to generic organizations of practice for interaction is participants’ orientations to institutional matters and settings (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Another – and perhaps *the* other – is how people may categorize themselves and each other. This is by virtue of how categories can be mobilized prospectively and retrospectively to achieve accountability; solve dilemmas or problems in relation to the distribution of social resources; allocate and manage entitlements and responsibilities; and anticipate and make sense of conduct, including in relation to goals, motives, projects, etc., and in terms of the valence of actions (e.g., as positively or negatively oriented), and whatever emotional colorings may infuse these. We can thereby observe that *all actions can be inspected for how they are designed by reference to particular categories of actor and/or recipients, and/or how features of their design can be taken up as such by recipients*. Consequently, participants composing and making sense of actions must contend with the “types of persons in a culture’s inventory, by reference to which are composed a society’s understanding(s) of ‘the sorts of people’ there are, what they are like, how the society and the world work – in short, its culture” (Schegloff, 1996b, p. 465). Categories thereby constitute a pervasive basis for context-sensitivity in the uses and realizations of the generic orders of organization in talk-in-interaction, and an integral part of “how the stuff of social life comes to be as it is.”

This approach offers a framework for empirically examining features of the reciprocal or “mutually constitutive” (Watson, 1997, p. 54; cf. Schegloff, 2001) relationship between categories and both basic conversational and institutional organizations of practices for talk-in-interaction. That is, it promotes examination of how these organizations of practice constitute systematic bases for the emergent (re)production of categories; while at the same time considering how categories serve as systematic resources for participants’ uses of the organizations of practice, and for managing prevailing contingencies in relation to them, in particular cases. This leaves intact foundational CA findings of both mundane conversation and institutional interactions. It also provides opportunities to specify some features of “categorical systematics” (Stokoe, 2012a, 2012b) that are produced in and through participants’ interactional conduct, and by reference to which interaction is organized.

While research that integrates attention to the generic organizations of practice and categorial matters in this way is in a relatively early stage of development, numerous studies have provided markers of its prodigious potential. An early line of research in this regard highlighted the significance of intersections between categories and word selection, especially in relation to person reference, as reflected in Schegloff’s (1996b, p. 464) recognition of the “deep importance” of “all the category terms for types of persons in a culture’s inventory.” That is, explicit uses of category terms in referring to persons can mobilize common-sense inferences about both the speaker and the person(s) they are referring to, thereby contributing to what is being done interactionally in a turn at talk (also see, e.g., Kitzinger, 2005a, 2005b; Stivers, 2007; Whitehead & Lerner, 2009, 2022). In another key contribution, Schegloff (2001) examines how participants come to see instances of overlapping talk as associated with categorial – and especially gender-based –

asymmetries. He describes features of the relationship between categories and turn-taking and in doing so addresses widespread myths and oversimplifications about gender and interruption reinforced by earlier research grounded in category differences approaches that perpetuate what Cameron (1997) earlier referred to as the ‘correlational fallacy,’ whereby particular linguistic practices are attributed spuriously to speaker category (also see Kitzinger, 2008; Speer & Stokoe, 2011).

In a study demonstrating the pervasive relevance of epistemics, Raymond and Heritage (2006) show that sequentially sensitive practices for managing rights to knowledge provide a systematic basis for members to display tacit orientations to their relative membership in categories when assessing non-present persons. They thereby elucidate some systematic intersections between features of categories, epistemics, action formation, and sequence organization. Subsequent studies have further examined the reflexive relationships between speakers’ category memberships and features of the production and interpretation of actions in particular sequential environments, including accusation, complaint, invitation, offer, question, and request sequences (e.g., Liu, 2023; Rossi & Stivers, 2020; Sterphone, 2022; Stokoe, 2009; Whitehead, 2013). Intersections between categorial systematics and repair³ have also been a rich source of research, with a number of studies (e.g., Bolden, 2014; Bolden et al., 2022; Egbert, 2004; Huensch, 2017; Raymond, 2019) examining how categories are oriented to and/or mobilized by participants in relation to occasions of trouble in speaking, hearing, or understanding, and thereby also offering further insights into categorial features of word selection, action formation and sequence organization. Together these studies, and many more, contribute to understandings of the interactional organization and reproduction of many of the categories of conventional social science interest, while also attending to a range of less commonly-studied – and especially setting-based – categories, such as ‘host,’ ‘guest,’ and ‘game player,’ that participants may treat as being of primary relevance for unfolding courses of action and activities (also see, e.g., Sacks, 1992; Whitehead et al., *frth*; Zimmerman, 1998).

Related lines of research have examined features of the interactional organization of various “isms” (racism, [hetero]sexism, classism, ageism, etc.) and other social problems, including violence. Prominent in this regard is a set of studies examining how participants manage and mobilize features of “preference organization” in relation to action sequencing in responding to and resisting actions they thereby treat as racist, sexist, heterosexist (Land & Kitzinger, 2005; Robles, 2015; Stokoe, 2015; Tadic, 2023; Whitehead, 2015). Other contributions include Joyce et al.’s (2021) analysis of how the sexist practice of “mansplaining” is constituted through practices relating to epistemics, action formation, and sequence organization; Edmonds and Pino’s (2023) examination of how practices for misgendering trans people can be used in the formation of actions, and how trans people can form up actions to resist these practices; Joyce and Sterphone’s (2022) description of turn-taking and sequence organization practices used by bystanders who challenge racist actions produced by antagonists in public disputes; Stokoe’s (2010) analysis of how male suspects accused of assaulting women mobilize gender categories in denying violence; and Whitehead

³ Repair is the domain of practices used to manage “the ‘trouble problem’” described above as the fourth generic organization of practice in interaction.

et al.’s (2018) demonstration of how categories typically treated as “risk factors” for violence (e.g., gender, race, and class) are used by participants as resources for producing and interpreting actions across different stages of the overall structural organization of violent conflicts. Studies such as these differ from conventional psychological and social scientific approaches to social problems by examining how they are contended with in everyday interactions rather than locating them primarily in the minds of individuals or in the structures of society (also see Whitehead & Stokoe, 2015).

In what follows, we provide empirical illustrations of the distinctiveness of the CA approach to categories we have described in this section. A first case, transcribed as Extract 1⁴ below, shows the opening moments of a call to a holiday company in which the caller (C) categorizes herself during the course of seeking assistance from the salesperson (S).

Extract 1: Holiday booking

- 01 S: G’d evenin’ Rindley Leisure Hotels, you’re speaking to
 02 Diane.=↓How c’n I help.
 03 C: Uh- good evenin’ Diane. .hh I’m trying to- um. (0.3) I’m
 04 a lady of a certain age and going online’s giving me a
 05 headache.
 06 S: Mhm he heh, [heh,
 07 C: [h I don’t know what I’ve pressed now.
 08 S: Uh heh heh [heh
 09 C: [(I’m trying) t’do a booking, could you check
 10 the availability for me ((*continues*))

Conventional social scientific approaches might use what we see in this interaction as a catalyst for research on such matters as age differences in uptake and uses of technologies, old(er) people’s experiences of using relatively new web-based technologies, and/or possible ways of (re)designing online platforms to make them more user-friendly for old(er) people. That is, such approaches might, as we have noted above, deploy categories as *analysts’* resources in, for example, selecting people and topics to study, explaining differences between categorically-identified groups, and designing evidence-based interventions to improve outcomes for specific categories of people.

In contrast, the conversation analytic approach focuses on how ordinary *members* of society use, manage, self-administer, or otherwise contend with categories in everyday naturally occurring interactions, and in relation to the “generic orders” described above. In line with this, we can observe how the caller describes herself in a category-relevant way, as “a lady of a certain age” (lines 03-05), using this specific word-selection to claim membership in this idiomatic category and thereby implying – but not directly stating – self-categorization as ‘old.’ Crucially, we can observe how she *uses* this age self-categorization as a resource for forming up the action of requesting in accounting for calling to seek assistance from an institutional representative rather than “going online” (line 04). However, in doing

⁴ Also see the analyses of this extract in Flinkfeldt et al. (2022), Whitehead et al. (2024), and Whitehead et al. (frth).

so, the caller also contends with its intersection with the gender category in which she concurrently claims membership: While it is evident that age is the primary sequentially relevant category – the caller is accounting for her need for assistance by reference to her age, rather than proposing herself to be a ‘helpless woman’ – she nevertheless uses a category formulation that takes into account gender-based prohibitions on naming age. In this way, she manages self-justification without veering into self-deprecation: Said baldly, “I’m an old lady and...” risks being treated as self-deprecation, and thereby as making relevant a disagreeing response (e.g., “you don’t sound old to me;” see Pomerantz, 1984; Speer, 2019). More generally, participants’ uses of such formulations for categories may be designed to respect, acknowledge, or violate normative constraints that make the use of explicit category terms delicate, or even prohibited.

Having examined how the caller uses self-categorization in describing herself as “a lady of a certain age,” we can note there are potentially many ways this description could be understood. For example, it is the title of a song, a prepositional phrase, a euphemism, a catchphrase or idiom. It is defined in the Urban Dictionary (2009) as an “[i]ronically polite term for a woman who does not want her actual age known, e.g. one who is close to or just over the menopause.” Bishop (2018) refers to it as “over 60 at least.” Instances of the phrase can be found in literature and other forms of discourse, and analyses thereof in research on language, gender and age(ism) (e.g., Caldas-Coulthard, 2010). Instead of looking to such sources, we have focused on what Edwards (2006) calls the “rich surface” of the interaction, which is visible, or treated as such, by participants themselves. We can further note that “a lady of a certain age” is positioned after the caller has begun to articulate her reason for calling (“I’m trying to-”), before cutting off, hesitating (line 03), producing this self-categorization (line 04), and then returning to the request she had projected (lines 09-10). By using repair to introduce the self-categorization parenthetically in this way (also see Mazeland, 2007; Schegloff, 2007a), she positions it as an element of her request rather than (for example) elevating it to the basis for her call – as she might have done had she self-categorized in this way at the call’s outset. By responding with the receipt “Mhm,” followed by laughter (line 06), the salesperson shows her understanding that the caller’s use of these categories here is designed in relation to her project of seeking assistance, rather than (for example) being done in pursuit of a similar self-disclosure. As these observations suggest – and consistent with our discussion above of the “proof procedure” provided by interactional data – the resources and methods the participants use to compose the occasion provide analysts with resources for adjudicating between possible alternative analyses.

The gender and age categories used by the caller in Extract 1 are, of course, among categories of conventional social science interest described earlier and widely used by scholars as analytic resources. However, as this extract demonstrates, such categories are available for a wide range of everyday non-specialist uses, to everyone else. And their use may involve participants orienting to normative expectations that may be overlooked when categories are administered ‘from above.’ Analysts’ categories may therefore map onto members’ categories, although perhaps not in the kinds of ways analysts could easily imagine or anticipate.

We explore these matters further in Extract 2⁵, which provides an empirical illustration of how a gender category gets used and thereby reproduced as a basis for action and interpretation in a different type of interactional encounter. Moreover, it opens a window into some of the ways participants can resist uses of these categories. The relevant setting-based category for this interaction is ‘psychology student,’ with the participants tasked with carrying out a collaborative writing activity in which, as a group, they must produce descriptions of people in a series of photographs. However, the participants (S1-S4 in the transcript) solve an organizational problem in managing the task at hand by using a gender category.

Extract 2: University small group work

01 S1: D’you reckon she’s an instructor then.
 02 (0.2)
 03 S1: Of some sort,
 04 S2: Is somebody scribing. who’s writin’ it.=
 05 S1: =Oh yhe:ah.
 06 (0.8)
 07 S3: Well you can’t [r e a d m y]=
 08 S1: [She wants to do it.]

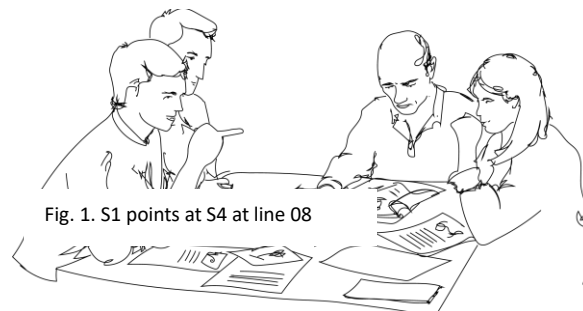


Fig. 1. S1 points at S4 at line 08

09 S3: =
 10 S4:
 11 S1: We:ll secretary an’ female.
 12 (0.3)
 13 S4: .Hh heh heh heh
 14 (0.4)
 15 S3: It’s uh:.,
 16 S4: Yeah: I’m wearing glasses I must be the secretary.=
 17 S2: =I think- (.) we’re all agreed she’s physical.
 18 (0.2)
 ...
 27 S3: Make a good start.
 28 S4: Heh heh heh .hhh (.) .hhh Okay what’s her name.
 29 (0.5)

⁵ Also see the analyses of this extract in Stokoe (2006), Stokoe (2008), Stokoe, Huma, et al. (2021), and Whitehead et al. (frth).

...

104 S4: Am I wri:ting (then.)

105 S1: Yes: go on.

...

123 (0.3)

124 S3: <Are you getting all this down.=Come on.

125 (1.6)

126 S1: You've gotta learn this shorthand before you get into

127 the- (0.4) the job market.

The extract begins with S1 offering an initial contribution to the task, as he speculates as to the occupation of the woman in the photograph they are looking at: “an instructor” (lines 01-03). This observation, however, occasions a registering that to meet the task demands one member of the group must write down their ideas: S2’s query, “is somebody scribing,” immediately followed by a further query, “who’s writin’ it” (line 04), initiates a new sequence prompting a search for the party who will undertake this element of the task. In this way, the resulting search is positioned as ancillary to the main activity – indeed, it is produced as an “afterthought” (also see Raymond & Lerner, 2014), and aligned with as such by S1’s response (line 05). As we shall see, this positions the person who takes on the “scribe” duties as assisting the other participants, and thus as being accountable to them, rather than engaging on an equal footing in the main activity.

Following S2’s initiation of this activity, other participants seek to manage their possible selection into the role of scribe: S3 offers an account of why he cannot do so (lines 07-09), and S1 nominates S4 using a pointing gesture (also see Goodwin, 2003) and claiming to report her desire to take up the task – “she wants to do it” (line 08) despite S4 offering no indication of this. The use of the pronoun “she” selects S4, as the only woman in the group, for this task. S1 thereby exploits a person reference practice (see Schegloff, 1996b) as a tacit method for using gender as a basis for selecting S4 – in a context where the setting-based category ‘psychology student’ does not provide a basis for differentiating between them since all are co-members of this category.

S4’s laughing response to S1’s claim attempts to treat it as a non-serious transgression rather than an accurate reflection of her willingness to serve as scribe – and thereby tacitly resists S1’s proposal. S1 evidently registers this resistance on S4’s part, as he offers a “well”-prefaced justification of his nomination of S4 (line 11). In doing so, he offers the category ‘secretary’ as a replacement for ‘scribe,’ treating this category as stereotypically linked to the gender category ‘female,’ while making this connection out to have been something he has just noticed in the moment, rather than his selection of S4 being motivated from the outset by an effort to target her as a woman. We further note that S1’s turn, in providing a categorial basis for who will serve as scribe, mobilizes a stereotype to exclude him and the other male

group members from possible incumbency in that position in a way the setting-based category ‘psychology student’ does not.

While S4 concedes to her nomination by picking up her paper and pen, thereby aligning herself with the role and carrying out its preliminary activities, she continues to resist S1’s use of gender in nominating her. For example, she finds a different basis for distinguishing her from the other group members as the ‘secretary,’ tying this category to wearing glasses (line 16). However, once serving as scribe has been treated as an afterthought and tied to gender, this provides an ongoing resource for the other members to continue to treat her as an appropriate recipient of directives, admonitions, and advice (lines 27, 105, 124, and 126-127) that, although apparently designed as teasing or non-serious, unequivocally position her as a subordinate (also see Stokoe, 2008).

Thus, across this extract, participants managing a setting-based task tied to their membership in the ‘psychology student’ category also mobilize a gender category that offers the most readily apparent basis for differentiating their participation in an evidently devalued part of the task. Their use of, and resistance to, this category arises in activities initiated and conducted through sequences of action, introduced through word selection and person reference practices, and subsequently revisited and reinforced as they make their way toward the completion of the overall activity.

In Extract 3⁶, taken from an encounter with the police regarding a disturbance in a convenience store, participants’ orientations to the relevance and consequentiality of their visibly available membership in racial categories (Black and white) emerge in the opening moments of the interaction. The encounter was occasioned by a Black civilian (who does not appear in the extract) calling 911 to report a white woman causing a disturbance and using racial epithets.

Having been called, arriving officers routinely claim rights to talk first as a basis for beginning to pursue a policeable project (Meehan, 1989; Raymond et al., 2022), seeking to establish control over the scene by (for example) separating the parties and securing subjects of interest. In this case, however, as soon as the officers enter the store, where they encounter a Black male civilian (C1) and a white heterosexual couple (C2 and C3), the former seeks to establish his membership in the setting-based ‘witness’ (and later ‘peacekeeper’) category before the police ever say a word. In this way, C1 exploits an opportunity to take a turn at talk, producing a first action that invites a response as a way of opening the encounter – bringing into play features of the generic orders of turn-taking, sequence organization, and overall structural organization in the course of managing category-related matters. By mobilizing these forms of the organization of interaction, C1 places the other participants in a situation of choice: They can either respond to his turn or leave its claims unaddressed by pursuing some other course of action as an alternative way of beginning the encounter. In what follows we first examine how C1 seeks to shape his participation in the encounter, and then consider how the other participants take up that project or seek to pursue an alternative to it.

⁶ Also see the analyses of this extract in Raymond et al. (2023) and Whitehead et al. (2024).

We begin our analysis in the very opening moments of the encounter, with C1 starting to speak the moment the officers enter the store (line 01). The practices he uses to begin and compose his turn, and the pre-emptive project it launches, reflect his understanding that he will need to overcome officers' presumptions – based on his status as a young, Black male – that he is one of the antagonists. That is, his conduct seeks to counter the racial biases he thereby treats as bound to the 'police officer' category.

Extract 3: Police encounter (SPD7455@20090331021633)

((As two officers walk in))

- 01 C1: >Hey.=Honestly sir.< (.) I have no issues=
 02 PO1: =Let's go out[side.
 03 C2: [These guys are cool.
 04 C1: This guy- I- hon[estly- honestly=
 05 C3: [He's cool. He's,
 06 C1: =I'm the- I'm [the one that's keeping th[uh peace sir.
 07 C2: [those dudes out there, [
 08 C3: [He's- he's
 09 C1: I'm fine.
 10 PO1: First of all you're coming outside too
 11 C1: Okay. [No (). fine sir
 12 C3: [Hey he's cool though. Please believe me man.

The timing and composition of C1's turn address two elements of the encounter's opening: his understanding that the arriving police officers are entitled to speak first, and that they will likely assume his involvement in the dispute unless he does something to avert this. For example, despite being the first to take a turn at talk, the opening components of his utterance are louder than the surrounding talk and produced at an accelerated pace – two practices speakers use to preempt or subvert potentially competitive talk (Schegloff, 2000). Moreover, in using this rushed turn-beginning to address the officers, C1 treats recruiting their reciprocity as a prerequisite for further action. These elements of C1's turn beginning thereby reflect an orientation to his diminished entitlement to speak.

Once he can see that he has won his bid to take a turn in in the clear, C1 slows the pace of his talk to disclaim his involvement in the dispute (line 01). Then, when one of the officers tells him to "go outside" (line 02) instead of taking up his claims, C1 further characterizes his role in trying to resolve the dispute, as a means of establishing how he should be treated. That is, in asserting that he is "the one that's keeping thuh peace" (line 06), and thereby claiming membership in a setting-based 'peacekeeper' category, C1 specifies an alternative basis for his presence at a scene of trouble that the police have been called to resolve – one that claims alignment with their project, rather than acquiescing to their apparent positioning of him as part of those troubles.

Taken together, these practices suggest a concerted effort by C1 to claim membership in the setting-based 'witness' category before the officers can act on (any presumed) categorial biases that might lead to his categorization as a suspect. In doing so, C1 addresses

what he orients to as the “deficit of credibility” associated with his “provisional status” as a Black person (and possibly, more specifically, his status as a young Black male) in a “white space” (see Anderson, 2015, pp. 13-14). C1 thus resists the inferences associated with being categorizable as a member of these categories that he evidently anticipates his interlocutors will otherwise treat as providing for his membership in the setting-based ‘suspect’ category. We can thereby see how the intersection of participants’ situated uses of generic organizations of practice for talk-in-interaction and the anticipated relevance of a range of categories place C1 in a situation of choice: he can either act to preemptively establish his status as a witness, or, attempt to challenge or dispute the officers’ treatment of him as one of the involved parties if they go first.

Once C1 has produced a turn addressed to the arriving officers (thereby selecting them as next speakers), whoever speaks next cannot avoid taking a position regarding the competing relevancies set in motion by C1’s turn – namely, the officers institutionally grounded rights to “take control” of the scene and C1’s pre-emptive claims of innocence. Although PO1’s first turn (line 02) follows C1’s, by producing it ‘as if’ he was the first to speak he takes a position on the status of C1’s claims, asserting his right to speak first. The directive he produces further heightens the situation of choice established by C1’s talk: the other co-present civilians can either respond to the officer’s directive or address C1’s claims. Notably, C2 and C3 take-up C1’s project by addressing the officers with supportive assessments (lines 03, 05 and 12). Moreover, their talk reveals that they share C1’s understanding of the officers’ likely racial biases and thus the precarity of his situation. Indeed, in speaking on behalf of C1 – and doing so without any apparent concern that they might be viewed as suspects or that their protestations might be treated as “resistance” warranting the use of force (cf. Sacks, 1984b) – they appear to be acting on the privileges (e.g., the presumption of innocence and credibility) associated with their visible membership in the racial category ‘white.’ Their assumptions in this regard prove to be well-founded: after an officer uses pain compliance techniques to forcefully escort C1 outside (not transcribed), C3 casually walks out with another officer, and a third points to C2 (whose conduct prompted the call and who has trailed behind them, unescorted) to ask, “is she involved too?”, thereby displaying an openness to the possibility of her innocence that has not at any time been extended to C1.

The cases we have examined here illustrate that, for participants, categories are used as resources for social action in ways that are sensitive to both proximate and distal contexts. In relation to the former, we have seen how both explicit and tacit uses of categories are unavoidably deployed in particular interactional moments, and how these moments are organized by reference to participants’ uses of the generic organizations of practice for interaction described above. And yet, our analyses also reveal that, in just the ways categories are used, participants invoke particular distal contexts associated with what is known-in-common by members of a culture about the categories at hand, and these distal contexts thereby enter and shape interactions in these moments. This approach can thus provide psychological science with ecologically valid foundations for studying how persons encounter and contend with the systematic consequentiality of how they and others might be categorized in everyday life. This includes categorization in terms of the categories of

longstanding interest for scholars (in these cases, gender, age, and race), but also whatever local, setting-based categories (e.g., ‘salesperson,’ ‘customer,’ ‘psychology student,’ ‘police officer,’ ‘suspect,’ ‘peacemaker’) participants may also – or instead – be using to organize their activities.

APPLICATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

In this section, we draw out some of the applications of the conversation analytic approach to categories described in the previous sections for domains outside academia. Conversation analysis has demonstrated its applied benefits for many years, with a strong track record in delivering practical and policy interventions in institutional settings including education, law, healthcare, defense, policing, medicine, politics, and media (e.g., Antaki, 2011; Lester & O’Reilly, 2018). Moreover, there are several decades of CA-influenced research in the domains of work-related technology, design, “situated action” (Suchman, 1987), “technomethodology” (Dourish & Button, 1998), and other approaches to human-computer interaction, including research conducted directly in and for technology companies (Blackwell et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2018; Rintel, 2013). Some of this research includes membership categorization as a key focus, especially in studies of human-robot and human-assistant interaction in conversational AI (e.g., Albert et al., 2019; Krummheuer, 2016). The relevance of CA and MCA is clear when we consider that voice assistants, chatbots, and other interfaces are designed for particular categories of ‘users’ (referred to, in these industries, as ‘personas’), while being shot through with problematic category-relevant biases (e.g., Bedi, 2019; Venkatraman, 2020). At the time of writing, the rapid development and widespread use of large language models has thrust conversational technologies into the spotlight, and conversation analysts are working alongside industry partners to identify common ground as well as challenge how ‘conversationality’ is understood and leveraged in product development (see Stokoe et al., 2024).

Analyses of the interactional organization of ‘-isms’ such as those illustrated by Extracts 1-3 have informed the development of evidence-based approaches to communication training and intervention, such as CARM, the ‘Conversation Analytic Role-play Method’ (Stokoe, 2011, 2014). One CARM workshop started out as a response to a request from community mediators to run training on how to respond to ‘hate speech’ in the communities with which they worked. To best meet this need – and to move away from traditional role-play or experience- or scenario-based training – Stokoe developed workshops in which facilitators and workshop participants could collaboratively examine some of the same recorded interactions used as data for studies on ‘-isms’ in interaction. For example, Extract 4⁷ comes from a mediation session in which three parties in a dispute are co-present (Macy, Gary, and Henry), with two mediators (Joe and Lucy). This extract is over halfway through a 90-minute session, and the ostensible cause of the dispute is a shared garden space which has been, according to Gary and Henry, “colonized” by Macy’s plants. Here, Macy is explaining what she sees as the root of the problem.

⁷ Also see the analyses of this extract in Stokoe (2015) and Whitehead et al. (frth).

Extract 4: Barbra Streisand

01 M: But uh: can I say this[:: uh: when we[:: moved- first]=
02 J: [Yeh?
03 G: [Um: it's DANgerous]=
04 M: =[move]d i:n, and uh: (1.2) I:: remember (0.3) ~uh::~=
05 G: =[Joe.]
06 M: = having a word with Gary about something he accu:sed
07 me of being uh- (0.5) like a Barbra <Strej:sand.>

In the CARM workshop, the audio recording and transcript are stopped at this point. Participants then discuss questions about what kind of accusation this is, examine evidence in relation to their observations, and consider what – if they were the mediator – they may say in response. Of particular interest here is Macy's claim (lines 01, 04 and 06-07) that Gary had a problem with her before she did anything to the garden, and thus that his issues with her arise out of his prejudice rather than her actions. In support of this claim, she reports that Gary "accu:sed me of being uh- (0.5) like a Barbra <Strej:sand.>" (lines 06-07). Note her use of the indefinite article 'a' to produce, in this case, a well-known celebrity's name as a category, apparently as a method for accomplishing off-record what it would be plainly offensive, and specifically antisemitic, if stated more directly. Macy thereby also retains Gary's effort to avoid a more straightforward expression of antisemitism, and thus his understanding that his conduct is objectionable.

At this point, Macy has not explicated what she assumes Gary to have meant in saying she was "like *a* Barbra Streisand," but she treats Gary's use of it as designedly offensive or problematic by claiming he "accused her" of this incumbency. However, Macy goes on, as shown in lines 08-09 below, to unpack what she takes to be the features of the category "a Barbra Streisand" being ascribed to her by Gary:

08 M: which meant I must be aggressive: (0.5) Jewish, (0.3)
09 which I am neither,

This unpacking reveals her concern that others may not see its connotations and relevance for the action of complaining. Thus, by Macy's account Gary sees her as "aggressive" and "Jewish," while for Macy, Gary is antisemitic. This is the work that the reported categorization, and its disavowal, is doing in and for this occasion (also see Stokoe, 2015). In CARM workshops, most participants say that their response at line 10 would topicalize the categorization and explore it further, including asking Gary for his account. This is what actually happens next:

10 (0.4)
11 M: Um::
12 (0.4)
13 L: I- I think- [I'm not- I'm not sure that this is helpful
14 J: [Is this helpful?

Following a number of delays, hitches, and mitigations (lines 10-12) that foreshadow their disalignment from the preceding action, the mediators simultaneously question whether the course of action Macy has initiated is “helpful” (lines 13-14). In doing so, they decline to address her accusation, instead closing off the sequence in favor of returning to a discussion of the garden and what might happen to the plants. The participants in CARM workshops use this case as the basis for further discussion, including about the nature and purpose of mediation itself. What CARM sessions thereby offer, in contrast to abstracted and individualized survey responses, is that mediators – sometimes from the same organization – are able to discuss actual cases, and see actual mediator responses, and discover that not everyone shares an understanding of what counts as an ‘ism,’ how they should be dealt with if they happen in mediation sessions, or whether the organization shares an ethos about the purpose of mediation. CARM’s effectiveness as a method for changing communication practice has been evaluated and demonstrated across multiple sectors: for example, a study by Stokoe and Sikveland (2021) found that it improved 1) the ability of British police negotiators to bring suicide crisis negotiations to a successful outcome; 2) the ability of dispute resolution services, government, and court services, in the UK and USA, to engage clients more effectively; 3) patient satisfaction at GP surgery receptions in England, and 4) client experience and economic success of digital technology products and services in global organizations. CARM has also been evaluated by other researchers in other contexts (e.g., Church & Bateman, 2019; White et al., 2021) including in a feasibility randomized controlled trial in teacher education (Sikveland et al., 2023), thus demonstrating some of the range, scope, and impact of applying findings from studies of categories in social interaction across the academy and beyond.

CONCLUSIONS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF CA AND MCA FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

The primary aim of this paper was to sketch a systematic framework for exposing that and how categories and categorial phenomena are (re)produced in naturally occurring social interaction. We also aimed to connect the domains of conversation analysis and membership categorization to psychological science. In so doing, we have shown how CA and MCA address a range of concerns raised by psychologists themselves about their methods and approaches, such as Mehl’s (2017, p. 184) call, discussed earlier, for the psychologists’ toolkit to include methods that can “directly observe...where moment-to-moment behavior naturally happens.” We conclude by considering five implications of our paper for continuing this conversation.

First, we have noted that, when it comes to understanding categories, it is typical in psychology and the social sciences to leverage them (often uncritically) as researchers’ resources. We argue that starting out “knowing” which categories will be relevant to whatever aspect of human sociality is under investigation is an act of “theoretical imperialism” (Schegloff, 1997, p. 167) that risks creating and perpetuating rather than dismantling stereotypes.

Second, in addressing psychology's failure to directly observe behavior, and deal with issues such as ecological validity, Mehl (Mehl, 2017; also see Mehl et al., 2001) developed the "Electronically Activated Record" or EAR method which "intermittently records snippets of ambient sounds while participants go about their lives" (p. 184). Related to our first point, one key EAR-based study (Mehl et al., 2007) showed that, contrary to the stereotype that women are more talkative than men, women and men spoke roughly the same number of words per day. However, while Mehl's method "can provide ecological, behavioral criteria that are independent of self-report," and "help study psychologically important subtle and habitual behaviors" (Mehl, 2017, p. 186), CA and MCA have already contributed enormously to our understanding of these things and more. Why is this work not better known amongst psychologists?

Regarding the stereotype of the talkative woman, an earlier critical review of 56 studies of verbosity in mixed-gender interactions had already found a very mixed picture with no evidence to support the stereotype (James & Drakich, 1993). This review was the product of interdisciplinary research (in this case, between social psychology and linguistics), and speaks to a third issue. For all psychology's current focus on addressing its WEIRD problems, it must also address its near-sightedness when it comes to recognizing both where theory, method, knowledge, and critique have already been developed inside (e.g., in discursive, critical, or feminist psychology) and beyond (e.g., in CA, MCA and across the social sciences) psychology, particularly North American psychology.

Fourth, regarding WEIRD problems, Newson et al. (2021) proposed a "WILD" solution: that research and researchers should aspire to be "Worldwide, but also In Situ, Local, and Diverse" and to take "researchers out of the confines of comfortable laboratory walls to work with all kinds of populations in the real world." At least one way to realize the WILD solution – or treat it as already somewhat realized – is to conduct research using CA to study people's methods for interacting.

Finally, mixed into WEIRD discourse is the reproducibility crisis, with studies failing to replicate and several now-notorious cases of research misconduct together comprising a crisis that challenges the integrity and legitimacy of experimental psychology (e.g., Nosek et al., 2022; Świątkowski & Dompnier, 2017). As we discussed above, one way of thinking through this crisis is to consider not just the problems with lab-based studies of narrow groups of participants but with what actually happens in laboratories themselves in the production of data (cf. Latour & Woolgar, 1979). As Dingemanse et al. (2023, p. 1) point out, "[t]hat social interaction matters is recognized by any experimentalist who seeks to exclude its influence by studying individuals in isolation." And its influence has been exposed, for example, by analyses of experimenter-participant interactions in classic psychology experiments (e.g., Gibson, 2019; Hollander & Turowetz, 2023) and in standardized survey interviews (e.g., Lavin & Maynard, 2001; Maynard & Schaeffer, 2006), which reveal the 'softness' of ostensibly 'hard' data (Stokoe, Antaki, et al., 2021).

Much of what psychological science has examined using experimental methods depends on studying humans, culture, and society outside of the primary ecological settings in which they act, develop, and live. De Oliveira and Baggs (2023) call for a 'rewilding' of psychology. We suggest that psychology – should it embrace the decades of research in CA

and MCA – will discover a rich resource of local, ecologically valid, in situ, diverse, at scale, and comparative knowledge about human sociality in the wild.

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