RESISTING CATEGORISATION
AN ORDINARY MOTHER

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In this paper we use membership category analysis to examine the way an interviewee utilises category work in order to resist the possible accusation of being a bad mother and instead posit her mothering as ordinary. Through our analysis we explore the interational work of ascribing and resisting categorisation organised through claims and counter-claims making procedures routinely grounded in descriptions and accounts, and embedded in shifts between individual and categorial actions.

INTRODUCTION

The act of social categorisation is a routine procedure in understanding, making sense of and engaging in the social world. We ordinarily and necessarily understand each other and our world by grouping and identifying people, things, places, ideas and so on, together in culturally defined types, and routinely assume a reciprocal understanding of those types when interacting with others. By focusing on the way members display their social knowledge within interaction, membership categorisation analysis (MCA) explores the way members’ common sense is locally organised through a complex but methodical organisation of social categories, the mapping of predicates to these categories, and the grouping of these categories into devices. Furthermore, the work of social categorisation has consequences for the local context, as it may serve to define the actions of individuals in categorial terms which are used to provide explanations for social action. In this way
...categorising an individual necessarily invokes a common-sense categorial framework through which perceptions, judgments and consequences can flow. Indeed, this awareness of the consequentiality of categorisation can be seen in the work participants do at times to resist categorisation. Research in conversation analysis (CA) and membership category analysis (MCA) has taken up the question of resisting categorisation in a range of contexts: youth facilities (Osvaldsson 2004), youth subcultures (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995), ethnicity and ethnic identity (Day 1998; Leudar and Nekvapil 2000), age (Nikander 2002), physical competence (Parry 2004), marriage breakdown (Cuff 1993), political, ethnic and religious affiliation (Roth 1998), shelter residency (Juhulia 2004) and discriminatory views (Roth 1998).

In this paper we explore an instance where resistance to category membership is at issue, and consider how category resistance is organised and activated within the interaction. In the data presented below an interviewee attempts to resist the category of being a ‘bad mother’ and feeling guilty about it. In our analysis we focus on the reasoning practices the interviewee uses to shift her actions from being the predicates of the category ‘bad mother’ to, rather, the recognisable and routine category-bound actions of the category ‘ordinary’ mother. Through this we highlight the delicate category work engaged in, that both reveals the possibility of a ‘version’ (Cuff 1993) of herself as a ‘bad mother’ and resists that possible categorisation. Our discussion thus explores the work of categorisation through resistance to membership of a possible social category that displays an awareness of the consequences that might flow through such category membership. Through our analysis we draw attention to both the awareness of the import of social categorisation through the interaction methods brought to bear in resisting, as well as the situational and local specifics of category work in which the negotiation between individual and social categories is an irredeemably context-specific and locally negotiated feature of interaction.

**COMMON-SENSE AND CATEGORIAL METHOD**

Membership categorisation analysis (MCA) was first proposed by Harvey Sacks, (Sacks 1974; Sacks 1995) and developed by subsequent authors (McHoul and Watson 1984; Watson 1997; Hester and Eglin 1997; Jayyusi 1984; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002; Fitzgerald and Housley 2002). Sacks demonstrated the process of commonsense categorisation through his example of a child’s story ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up’ (Sacks 1974). The power of Sacks’ descriptive apparatus is illuminated by the analytic consideration of how we hear and make sense of the story as one in which a mummy...
picks up her baby in response to that baby crying. For Sacks, our understanding of this story is generated through recognising the social categories ‘baby’ and ‘mommy’ as related, or tied, to each other through the organisational device ‘family’. Through this common-sense recognition procedure a set of expectable attributes (or predicates) may be associated with the categories referenced (i.e. baby’s cry, mothers comfort their children) and linked together within the organisational device ‘family’. This constitutes the actions as not only expected but also directed at each other, i.e. this baby’s crying is for its mother, and the mummy’s action is because her baby is crying. Thus, the way we hear the story is that it is the mother of the baby who picks up the baby, and she does so because her baby is crying, when in fact no such necessary connection is explicit in the two sentences. That is to say, we make sense of the story through applying our common-sense knowledge about the way social categories act and interact in the world (Sacks 1974). Clearly in routine sense-making some categories such as ‘mother and baby’, ‘husband-wife’, ‘boyfriend-girlfriend’ ‘go together’ such that to invoke one is to implicitly evoke the other (Jayyusi 1984). Moreover, these Standard Relational Pairs (SRP) are tied together by taken-for-granted responsibilities and obligations, such as for example mother and baby, wherein each expectably behaves towards the other in particular routine ways. Likewise the attributes of each are paired in complementary or opposing fashion, for example mothers pick up crying babies, girls are made of sugar and spice, boys are made of puppy dogs’ tails.

Importantly, we apply this knowledge locally, within each local situation of interaction (Hester and Eglin 1997), as clearly there is no essential or a priori connection between descriptions of social categories, their behaviour or their interaction. Rather, baby and mummy are seen to belong together in this instance, but may belong to other organisational devices at other times, depending on the local specifics of their relevance. Given that any one person can be legitimately understood in terms of several categories in several devices at any one time, the question guiding Sacks’ analysis is: how then do members know which categories and what relations are relevant at this time. Developing his method further, Sacks observed that two ‘rules of application’ are routinely at work in sense-making, describing them as the ‘economy rule’ and the ‘consistency rule’.

The economy rule refers to the practical process by which ‘if a member uses a single category from any device then he/she can be recognised to be doing adequate reference to a person’ (Sacks 1995: 221). The consistency rule states that ‘if a member of a given population has been categorised within a particular device then other members of that population can be categorised in terms of the same collection’ (Sacks 1995: 221). Building on this Sacks then derived a corollary known as the ‘hearers maxim’, which states: ‘if
two or more categories are used to categorise two or more members of some population and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection then: hear them that way’ (Sacks 1995: 221). The rules of application therefore work as practical sense-making registers, such that, for example, once the category ‘baby’ is heard, ‘mommy’ is relevantly heard to be grouped in the same device as ‘baby’, and the device ‘family’ groups these categories in routine common sense. Categories, then, are collected within occasioned organisational devices that form a major part of the commonsensical framework of members’ methods and recognisable capacities of practical sense-making.

Since Sacks’ initial outline the method has been developed in a number of ways (see Hester and Eglin 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002), one of which is to reveal that categorisation procedures can be seen to establish a practical and occasioned moral order (Jayyusi 1984; Fitzgerald and Housley 2006) where actions are accounted for and/or rendered accountable though normative assessments in terms of the obligations and expectations of a moral order. For example, mothers should pick their crying babies up and may be held accountable for their actions vis-à-vis their crying babies. In this way individual actions can be seen to be accountable through reasoned categorial ordering through the production of accounts which transform individual actions (including non-actions, and expected action) into categorial actions. Here, then, we explore the way a participant’s reasoning and category practice is used in the transformation of individual actions into categorial actions and vice versa, with a focus on the work to which these transformations are being put.

**CL: DOING BEING ORDINARY**

The work of ‘being ordinary’ can take many forms (Sacks 1995; Day 1998; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995; Juhulia 2004; Roth 1998; Osvaldsson 2004). In the data below the client (Cl) is taking part in an interview with a counsellor (Co) which is part of research about the experiences of mothers of children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In this example we examine the ways the category system is achieved such that Cl produces an account of herself as ordinary through deployment of methodical reasoning practices which account for her mothering in terms of ‘what everybody knows’ or ‘what any reasonable person would do’. For Cl, this is achieved, among other things, through reformulating behaviours associated with one category (bad mother) as, in fact, ‘ordinary’ (not bad mother) when seen as part of an alternate category system, as well as attempting to reformulate her own actions through individual and categorial reasoning that seeks to challenge assumed category-predicate relations.
In the following discussion we look at the way Cl achieves these category manipulations through various actions including pronoun shifting, the use of qualifiers, extreme renderings and parody, as well as the construction of actions as involuntary/unknowing. These language moves are interwoven in Cl’s response to the question posed by Co:

**Extract 1: What is a bad mother?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Co:</th>
<th>Cl:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>(1.0) what is a bad mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td>(.5) well I yell and scream and probably hit your children and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td>chase them around the house with a wooden spoon (.5) probably being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td>a little bit over protective (. ) i might do that in a way and don’t even</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td>know I’m doing it (. ) that’s probably being bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>(1.0) I wonder if you look on the things that you do as bad because</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jenna is not able to manage herself (. ) i wonder if it would be bad if</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
<td>she was a regular kid (. ) i wonder if that makes you feel guilty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td>I just feel bad because i’m aware of the inner child and we need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td>nurturing (. ) then again they can be little rat bags (. ) they can be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>manipulative (. ) you have to put up the barriers and raise the standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
<td>and say wait a minute i don’t have to put up with that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At line 31 Cl is asked by the Counsellor to describe the category predicates of the category Bad Mother. The first move she makes is to individualise that category in terms of her possible membership:

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Initially Cl seemingly adopts the category of ‘bad mother’ through her actions of ‘yell and scream’, before then distancing herself from membership through a pronoun shift and parody of the predicated actions. The pronoun shift (‘I’ to ‘your’) then serves to deny her possible membership in that she does not acknowledge herself as acting in that way, whilst also parodying the actions through invoking an extreme (pantomime) category. From this humorous category she then offers a further predicate of being overprotective, suggesting that ‘she might do that’, that is, she resists the initial category membership through parody and pronoun shifting before then offering a further predicate of being ‘overprotective’ which she ‘might’ be but is unaware when she is. This new predicate of overprotection is in contrast to the previous predicates of ‘hit and chase’. It is offered as a predicate of a ‘too-caring’ mother, an overprotective mother, and therefore a different category of ‘bad’ mother. This is akin to the device of the ‘I work too hard’
response to the job interview question ‘what are your faults?’ It presents a hearably positive trait in a pseudo-negative way. In this case the fault of the overprotective bad mother is to care too much: in effect she is not ‘bad’ at all. Further, the predicate of overprotectiveness is qualified through ‘probably’ and ‘little bit’, and then weakened and downgraded further as somewhat involuntary and unmarked: (Lines 34–35) ‘I might do that in a way and don’t even know I’m doing it.’

In this exchange a set of questions are set up around whether the action of being overprotective is in fact ‘bad’, or rather, ‘being bad’, and whether it is a conscious or premeditated action. Through her description of the predicates of a bad mother Cl adds details to the category initially offered by the counsellor, before then proposing further predicates and actions which would not fit with the category offered. Thus with the suggestion of an (extreme) version of a ‘bad mother’, the actions admitted to subsequently are presented as incongruous with this now established category. Furnishing the category of ‘bad mother’ in which her actions do not fit renders her actions as not those of a bad mother, although they may be ‘bad’ in some people’s eyes. Furthermore, by being equivocal about her actions Cl also heads off the possible implications imputed to a premeditated action, of knowing the actions were bad at the time of doing them, and suggests instead that she was not aware and did not even consider at the time the possible negative interpretation of her actions by others. Indeed upon comparison of the predicates of bad mother offered and her own actions, she is in fact ‘ordinary’, so normal and ordinary it does not even enter her awareness (‘I might not know’). In effect she claims she is not so much a ‘bad mother’ as an ‘overprotective mother’ (itself not such a bad thing, and a possible predicate of all ‘good’ parents). Then, even further, rather than being an overprotective mother, she is really a mother who is sometimes overprotective but is unaware she is being so.

Cl’s initial strong statement of the predicate (‘yell and scream’) and membership (‘I’), although now complicated and qualified, remains ‘on the table’ (as evidenced by further moves by both Cl and Co). The counsellor’s response to Cl raises the possibility of Cl feeling guilty in the business of mothering her child ‘I wonder if that makes you feel guilty?’ (Line 38). However, Cl does not agree to feeling ‘guilty’, but rather to ‘just’ feeling ‘bad’. That is, she resists the offered feeling of guilt by replacing it with feeling bad, although she does not feel ‘bad’ about her treatment of her child, but rather she has an awareness of the context of her actions. So whereas in the previous utterance, Cl resisted membership of one category of bad mother and constructed a different category with predicates of overprotectiveness, here she resists Co’s offer of feeling ‘guilt’ by replacing it with her own mental state of feeling ‘bad’ about something else. Through this
she maintains control of her own membership category of overprotective mother, and resists possible other category work by the counsellor derived from accepting the predicate of ‘feeling guilt’ about her daughter. At this point Cl moves from resisting category membership offered by Co to creating her own category to which she and others belong. One aspect where this is particularly noticeable is through the pronoun shifts which serve to account for her actions as categorial rather than individual:

- I feel bad...
- I’m aware...
- We need nurturing
- They can be
- They can be
- You have to
- I don’t have to

Firstly, Cl’s own individual account of her feelings, awareness and knowledge is established: ‘I feel’, ‘I’m aware’. The ‘I’ who feels bad and is aware is then incorporated into a general or universal ‘we’: the ‘I’ is a member of the category ‘we’ who needs nurturing. Presumably all persons are members of the universal ‘we’ who have an inner child that needs nurturing, including Cl. The individual predicates are then incorporated into a general or universal category ‘we’: the individual category relevances are reworked as categorial relevances by which her personal behaviour and feelings are rendered as categorial, as reasonable, as expected.

However, there is another category of persons. In building the category around her, Cl also establishes a related or relational pair partner for the ‘overprotective mother’, ‘they’. ‘They’ are little rat bags and are manipulative. In the context of this account ‘they’ are hearably children, or more specifically ‘they’ could be the children of this context, that is, children with ADHD. Whoever ‘they’ are, ‘they’ are quite ordinarily ‘manipulative ratbags’ at times. ‘They’ do not have a claim to nurturing; rather ‘they’ are to be protected against, barriers can be put up, and they do not have to be ‘put up with’. When being ratbags, children are displaying predicates not of ‘we’ but of ‘they’. Their behaviours invite from mothers ‘putting up barriers’ and ‘raising standards’, not over-protecting. In the next categorial move, with another pronoun shift, the behaviours of ‘putting up barriers’ and ‘raising standards’ are established, as reasoned in the face of the ratbaggy ‘You have to …’ with ‘you’ acting to establish this as ordinary, that is, what anyone
would do. Finally, in another pronoun shift, these categorial relevances are cycled back into an individual account of Cl’s behaviour ‘I don’t have to put up with that’ (Line 42). In normalising the child’s behaviours she normalises her own response. Cl’s behaviours can now be read within the moral categorial order of a normal sensible person not putting up with manipulative behaviour. The ‘yelling and screaming’ of Cl’s first utterance has now been formulated as a justifiable and normal action of ‘putting up barriers and not putting up with that’ in the face of ‘their’ behaviour.

**SUMMARY**

In this paper we have used the methodology of MCA in order to examine the categorial work involved in resisting possible category membership of others and the work of creating a category. In this we have sought to highlight the routine work of negotiating membership through the process of working between individual actions and social categories which are irredeemably local and context-specific, as Cl’s account moves between the individual (I) and categorial (you and we) in the process of resisting offered categories and predicates, whilst presenting her behaviour as routine predicates of the category ‘ordinary overprotective mother’.

In exploring the notion of resisting category membership the analysis also included the use of cognitive states (feelings) as part of the interaction where such mental states were negotiated as possible predicates of category membership. The reporting or use of cognitive states within interaction connects with recent discussions around the import of reported mental state in the analytic work of conversation analysis (CA), ethnomethodology (EM) and discursive psychology (DP) (Potter 2006; Edwards and Potter 2005; Edwards 2006). Above, we highlighted the way Cl resisted the ‘feeling’ of guilt about her actions towards her daughter and instead offered that she felt ‘bad’ about ‘nurturing the inner child’. That is to say, part of her resistance to the possible category ‘bad mother’ was organised through resisting the emotional action offered by the counsellor. What is interesting here is the way membership categories may include mental states as predicates of membership, and even that these cognitive predicates may be assumed to be present or operative by dint of membership of the category. For example, with the category parent, ‘love’ for one’s child is assumed and becomes news when this is not the case, or that ‘passion’ is assumed as part of the category ‘artist’ who may lose their passion/interest and so explain their lack of artistic work. In response to the turn of DP towards the specialised analysis of such cognitive references for CA we point out, in line with Lynch and Bogen (2005) and Lynch (2006), that all such ascribed mental states are
irredeemably social. What goes on inside the head is unknowable, and so activities such as the imputation of cognitive states (in this case feelings) can be understood only as part of the vast array of practical methods reflexively utilised by members in the course of situated action and the accomplishment of local social organisation (Housley and Fitzgerald, forthcoming). In this sense the ascription of ‘inner states’ is part and parcel of what is known in ethnomethodology as the ‘documentary method of interpretation’, which can be understood as a ubiquitous orientation by members in the search for underlying patterns, and hence explanations that can provide accounts for social action. This highlights the way categorial resources available to hand are used and deployed in the negotiation of local social meaning, and that far from this being a unique situation, in which unique interactional strategies are used, the reasoning practices engaged above display routine methods found in other situations, both informal and formal. Indeed the sorts of reasoning practices around the process of negotiating membership of the category ‘bad mother’ highlights the ordinary mundane way category work forms an essential part of practical social knowledge in going about the world.
Transcription notation is adapted from Gail Jefferson as detailed in Atkinson and Heritage (1984). These conventions denote lapses in time, overlapping talk, pace and in some instances pitch, pronunciation and stress. We have only included those symbols used in the transcriptions:

Numbers in Parentheses: e.g. (1.0) denote the approximate duration of pauses or gaps between utterances in seconds or tenths of seconds.

Point in Parentheses: (.) indicates a ‘micro-pause’ of less than two tenths of a second.

Letters, words or activities in double parentheses: ((cough)) sounds, words or activities that are distinct or difficult to locate to a particular interlocutor(s).

Full Colons: ( : : ) denote an extension in the vowel or consonant sound in the utterance of a word.

Emphasis: (CAPITALS) indicates specific emphasis and change in volume. Underlined word: ( as we said) indicates pitch change.

Equals signs: = identifies a ‘latching’ between utterances, whereby utterances follow each other rapidly after a preceding utterance.

How Bad Mother came to be a pertinent category is itself an interesting point. We do not examine that in detail here, however several turns preceding the extract in this exchange occurred:

Co = counsellor; Cl = Client

1. Co: how long have you been separated from your husband
2. Cl: (1.0) about four years
3. Co: is he (.) supportive of you with Jenna
4. Cl: well at first he used to tell me it was me (.) and i was a bad parent (.)
5. that she didn’t have anything wrong with her
6. Co: so:: what was the advice he gave you.
7. Cl: (0.5) he’d just say it’s your problem she’s not like this with me (.)
8. but I think she can be (.) when they just have them for the weekend
9. and they take them out on the boat (.) they haven’t had them long
10. enough (.) he’s probably more supportive now than what he’s ever been
11. (0.5) at first he wasn’t and was probably in a state of denial (.) now he’s
12. able to see there is some problem there
13. Co: (0.5) is: he: supportive that she’s on medication
14. Cl: i think so (.5) once again (.) that’s the down side of him (.) you never
15. get too much out of him (.) he’s just passive (.) i often think he might
16. have it (.) you know the passive type (.) you can talk to him and he
17. wouldn’t even know you were talking to him because he’s watching
18. sport any thing that moves on t v (.) i often think whether he has it
19. Co:  (.5) it sounds like he's like his father (.) he can be over focussed
20. Cl: yes that's right (.) they usually are (.5) he can totally focus when he's
21. doing his job and have his head over all these figures all day (.)
22. but other things he won't hear what you're saying (.) his mother
23. used to call him the absent minded professor (.) i said to him a
24. while ago your mother used to call you the absent minded professor (.)
25. did she (.) he didn't even know
((further discussion about the time, not transcribed))

... 26. Cl:  i'm on scare time (.) mothers of ADD kids are always on scare time=
27. Co: =what's scare time
28. Cl:  ten minutes fast
29. Co:  why do you do that
30. Cl:  i need that ten minutes extra because Jenna is hard to organise
31. Co:  (1.0) what is a bad mother
32. Cl:  (5) well i yell and scream and probably hit your children and
33. chase them around the house with a wooden spoon (.5) probably being
34. a little bit over protective (.) i might do that in a way and don't even
35. know i'm doing it (.) that's probably being bad
36. Co:  (1.0) i wonder if you look on the things that you do as bad because
37. Jenna is not able to manage herself (.) i wonder if it would be bad if
38. she was a regular kid (.) i wonder if that makes you feel guilty
39. Cl:  i just feel bad because i'm aware of the inner child and we need
40. nurturing (.) then again they can be little rat bags (.) they can be
41. manipulative (.) you have to put up the barriers and raise the standard
42. and say wait a minute i don't have to put up with that
43. Co:  (.5) so you do have standards and expectations of her
44. Cl:  yes (.) i think that's something that she needs (.) i told the
45. school yesterday these are the things she needs (.) she needs a
46. teacher with routine a teacher who's consistent (.) she doesn't respond
47. well to inconsistency (.) she likes to feel as though she belongs
48. but she needs some one who is firm and who has routine (.)
49. i'm probably the worst mum in the world because I get her to
50. school late some times.

REFERENCES


