

Membership Categorization Analysis

In the previous chapter, we saw that Sacks's claim to offer an original perspective in social science was based upon his attempt 'to describe [the] methods persons use in doing social life' (Sacks 1984a: 21). This stands in contrast to the work of many social scientists, whose 'notion of what could conceivably happen' (LC1: 115) is likely to be drawn from their unexamined members' knowledge. Instead, for Sacks, we need to proceed more cautiously by examining the methods members actually use to produce activities as observable and reportable. As it turns out, among those methods are ways of generating categories in order to make sense of particular events.

At its simplest, we can see categories being generated in early parts of conversations between strangers. Here, as Sacks notes, we commonly find questions like 'What do you do?' and 'Where are you from?' (see chapter 1 above on 'pick-up' questions). Such questions invoke categories, like occupation and residence, which are what Sacks calls 'inference-rich' (LC1: 41). These categories allow us to find out a great deal about people.

For instance, the assassination of President Kennedy was still fresh in the minds of Sacks's students when he gave his lectures of autumn 1964 to spring 1965. As Sacks points out, people tried to discover the meaning of this event by invoking such categories: 'If you have access to a variety of materials from that time, you can see persons reporting themselves going through "Was it one of us right-wing Republicans?", "Was it one of us Negroes?", "Was it a Jew?", etc.' (LC1: 42).



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By posing such questions, people relied on their commonsense knowledge of how particular categories like 'Jew', 'Negro' or 'right-wing Republican' were tied to certain presumed characteristics or activities. These characteristics give you immediate explanations by making 'some large class of activities immediately understandable' (LC1: 337). Moreover, the process works the other way as well. When you spot some activity, you often know immediately the kind of person who might have done it (LC1: 338).

As Sacks suggests, such explanations are so powerful that they cannot be disproved simply by introducing one contrary case. For instance, knowing one 'generous' Scotsman will not demolish the common English assumption that 'all Scotsmen are mean'. In this sense, category-based explanations are what Sacks calls 'protected against induction' (LC1: 336).

Of course, it is always possible that when we invoke category-based explanations, other people may accuse us of 'prejudice'. One way to protect yourself against such a charge is simply to use a category and let others construct the explanation. In this way, if necessary, you can deny that you intended that explanation to be derived while knowing that that was *precisely* the explanation that people would derive.

For instance, Sacks shows how the Soviet Union used to publish the names of 'profiteers'. Given the state ideology, this would be a legitimate activity. However, people could see that these were Jewish names. Given this, people could produce an explanation: profiteering is the work of Jews because Jews seek to make money at the expense of the rest of us. Because the Soviet state did not actually say this, it could continue to deny that it was anti-semitic, while deflecting grievances at its own economic inadequacies (LC1: 338).

In chapter 1, we saw that such categorization is also present in much more innocent activities. People who feel suicidal and call telephone helplines (such as the Samaritans) often produce the following statement: 'I have no one to turn to' (1972a: 53-5) or 'I am nothing' (LC1: 67). The telephone counsellor then usually asks a series of questions such as 'do you have a spouse or partner?', 'do you have a mother or father?', 'do you have a best friend?' Sacks notes that these questions follow a regular sequence, beginning with persons who might be assumed to have the strongest obligation to help and ending with parties with far less obligation. Moreover, callers routinely imply that they too have posed themselves these questions and have posed them *in the self-same sequence*.

Using data from his Ph.D. dissertation on calls to a suicide prevention centre, Sacks points out that people may only become suicidal *after* they have reviewed various categories of people and found 'no one to turn to'. So a caller's statement 'I'm nothing' is not to be heard as having a purely psychological reference or as indicating some mental disturbance but as the outcome of a procedure 'arrived at properly and reproducibly' (LC1: 67) by suicidal persons. This suggests that both parties, despite their different stake in the issue of suicide, work with a common set of categories in order to offer explanations of why someone might consider taking their own life.

Recall also Sacks's example of a telephone conversation between a caller to a social welfare agency and an agency worker (chapter 1 above). In this case, the agency worker was able to work out a possible omission from the caller's account and, eventually, to obtain an admission from him about his violent behaviour towards his wife. Like the suicide counsellor, this agency worker did not need any special skills to work out what 'really' might be going on or even to read the caller's mind. In both cases, we glimpse a highly powerful apparatus which somehow allows us to come up with workable explanations of all kinds of social events.

Indeed one way of determining whether something happened is to see if we can come up with a convincing explanation for it. For instance, coroners may not deliver a verdict of suicide unless there is some evidence that the deceased person had a reason to take their own life (LC1: 123). In that sense, in everyday life, only those 'facts' occur for which there is an explanation (LC1: 121).

Now one might say that none of this is very original. It simply derives from what social scientists have long known and termed 'culture' or 'common knowledge'. The issue for Sacks, however, is whether such 'common knowledge' is 'just lists of items that persons know in common' (LC1: 23).

This certainly seems to be the version of 'common knowledge' that most ethnographers use. We can see this in the way in which many ethnographies tend to use lay categories as a tacit resource. Sacks notes, for instance, how the anthropologist Ethel Albert, whose account of Burundi society he so admires, none the less relies upon 'categories of actors formulated in terms that the society has of them or translations of that into categories of actors formulated in the names our society has, and categories of actions formulated in the same way' (LC1: 629).

The problem with this approach, as Sacks points out, is that it

fails to give you any deeper understanding of how it is, in actual interactions, that people actually choose between (and invoke) particular categories. This meant that he was deeply suspicious about social science's claims to be an analytic approach, different from common sense. Sacks puts the issue succinctly:

Suppose you're an anthropologist or sociologist standing somewhere. You see somebody do some action, and you see it to be some activity. How can you go about formulating who is it that did it, for the purposes of your report? Can you use at least what you might take to be the most conservative formulation – his name? Knowing, of course, that any category you choose would have the[se] kinds of systematic problems: how would you go about selecting a given category from the set that would equally well characterize or identify that person at hand? (LC1: 467–8)

Sacks shows how you cannot resolve such problems simply 'by taking the best possible notes at the time and making your decisions afterwards' (LC1: 468). As he put it, in an extract I used in chapter 3: 'All the sociology we read is unanalytic, in the sense that they simply put some category in. They may make sense to us in doing that, but they're doing it simply as another Member' (LC1: 41–2, emphasis added).

The alternative that Sacks proposed means analysing what he calls 'the structural properties' of commonsense knowledge (LC1: 23). This involves using 'what any Member knows, to pose us some problems. What activity is being done, for example. And then we can see whether we can build an apparatus which will give us those results' (LC1: 487).

Following Sacks, then, our aim should be to try to understand when and how members do descriptions, seeking thereby to describe the apparatus through which members' descriptions are properly produced. The rest of this chapter is devoted to setting out the descriptive apparatus that Sacks sought to build. This is a *membership categorization* apparatus because it generates the categories that members of society use in their descriptions.

Membership Categorization

Much of this section will be concerned with definitions of the many concepts that Sacks introduces in order to understand the apparatus of membership categorization. However, because I am

aware that lists of definitions may be indigestible, I will begin with an example from which Sacks derived many of his concepts.

Consider this description in which the identities of the parties are concealed: 'The X cried. The Y picked it up.' Why is it that we are likely to hear the X as, say, a baby but not a teacher? Furthermore, given that we hear X as a baby, why are we tempted to hear Y as an adult (possibly as the baby's mother) (LC1: 248-9)?

In fact, Sacks looks at the first two sentences of a story by a child: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.' Why do we hear the 'mommy' as the mother of this 'baby' (LC1: 236)? Why do we hear the baby's cries as the 'reason' why the mommy picks it up?

Not only are we likely to hear the story this way, but we hear it as 'a possible description' without having observed the circumstances which it characterizes. Sacks asks: 'Is it some kind of magic? One of my tasks is going to be to construct an apparatus for that fact to occur. That is, how we come to hear it in that fashion.' No magic lies behind such observations. Instead: 'What we want to do then . . . is to provide for how it is that something that's done is recognized for what it is' (LC1: 236).

Returning to the way we read the child's story, Sacks observes that our reading is informed by the way we infer that the categories 'baby' and 'mommy' come from a collection of such categories which we call 'family' (LC1: 238). While the 'family' collection can include many categories (not just 'baby' and 'mommy' but also 'daddy', 'daughter', 'grandmother', etc.), some categories are or can be built as two-set collections, as with gender (male and female) or race (black and white) (LC1: 47-8).

Of course, not any set of categories will be heard as a collection. As Sacks says: 'We only talk about a collection when the categories that compose it are categories that members do in fact use together or collect together, as "male" and "female" go together' (LC1: 238).

Sacks notes that, as here, younger children's stories may have just one collection of categories - the 'family'. Young children apply this collection to virtually everyone, parents' friends coming to be called 'aunt' and 'uncle' (LC1: 368). However, for children, like any population, there are always at least two collections of categories available (1972a: 32). This means that young children can at least choose between, say, 'auntie' and 'woman' as a way of categorizing a female.

Of course, one only has to read accounts of the 'same' event in two different newspapers to realize the large number of categories that can be used to describe it. For instance, as feminists have

pointed out, women, but not men, tend to be identified by their marital status, number of children, hair colour and even chest measurement. Such identifications, while intelligible, carry massive implications for the sense we attach to people and their behaviour. Compare, for example, 'Shapely, blonde, mother of five' with 'Thirty-two-year-old teacher'. Both descriptions may 'accurately' describe different aspects of the same person. But each constitutes very definitely how we are to view that person (for instance, in the first, largely in terms of certain ways of constructing gender).

Each identity is heard as a category from some collection of categories. For instance, in the two versions above, we hear 'mother' as a category from the collection 'family'. By contrast, 'teacher' is heard as located in a collection of 'occupation'.

Sacks calls such a collection a *membership categorization device* (or MCD). This device consists of a collection of categories (such as baby, mommy, father = family; male, female = gender) and some rules about how to apply these categories. A definition of an MCD is as follows.

- *Membership categorization device* 'any collection of membership categories, containing at least a category, which may be applied to some population containing at least a member, so as to provide, by the use of some rules of application, for the pairing of at least a population member and a categorization device member. A device is then a collection plus rules of application' (1972c: 332).

What are these 'rules of application' to which Sacks refers? First, returning to the child's story, we can note that the characters are described by *single* categories ('baby', 'mommy'). So we are not told, as we might be, about, say, the baby's age or gender or the mommy's occupation or even hair colour. And this did not cause us a problem when we first saw 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.'

The intelligibility of single category descriptions gives us what Sacks calls *the economy rule*.

- *The economy rule* 'a single category from any membership categorization device can be referentially adequate' (LC1: 246).

Of course, single category descriptions are not confined to children's stories – sometimes categories like 'man', 'nurse' or 'pop star' are entirely referentially adequate. Nonetheless, the economy

rule gives us a very interesting way of addressing how children's socialization may occur. First, children seem to learn single names ('mommy', 'daddy'). Then they learn how such single categories fit into collections ('family') and come to understand various combinatorial tasks (for instance, man = daddy or uncle). So, even at this early stage of their lives, say before they are two years old, children have already learned 'what in principle adequate reference consists of' (1972a: 35) and, in that sense, entered into society/been 'socialized'.

A second rule of application of MCDs suggests that once one category from a given collection has been used to categorize one population member, then other categories from the same collection *may* be used on other members of the population. Sacks refers to this as *the consistency rule*. It is formally defined as follows.

- *The consistency rule* 'If some population of persons is being categorized, and if some category from a device's collection has been used to categorize a first Member of the population, then that category or other categories of the same collection may be used to categorize further members of the population' (1972a: 33, emphasis added; see also LC1: 225, 238-9, 246).

The import of the consistency rule may be seen in a simple example. If we use an abusive term about someone else, we know that a term from the same collection can be used on us. Hence one of the reasons we may avoid name-calling is to avoid the development of this kind of slanging match.

However, any category can belong in more than one collection. For instance, as Sacks points out, 'baby' can belong to the collection 'stage of life' ('baby', 'child', 'teenager', 'adult') as well as the 'family' collection (LC1: 239). 'Baby' also used to be a term of endearment heard in Hollywood movies; here it belonged to a different collection ('romance?').

Sacks suggests a 'hearing rule' (LC1: 239) or consistency rule corollary (LC1: 248) which provides a way for members to resolve such ambiguities. When a speaker uses two or more categories to describe at least two members of a population and it is possible to hear the categories as belonging to the same collection, we hear them that way. That is why, in the story with which Sacks begins, we hear 'baby' and 'mommy' in relation to the collection 'family'.

- *Consistency rule corollary* 'If two or more categories are used to

categorize two or more Members to some population, and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, hear them that way' (LC1: 247).

The consistency rule and its corollary have explained why we hear 'mommy' and 'baby' as part of the same 'family' collection but it remains to be seen 'how "the mommy" is heard as "the mommy of the baby"' (LC1: 247). The answer stems from the way in which 'the family' is one of a series of collections that be heard as constituting a 'team', that is, as part of the same 'side'. In this respect, 'mommy' and 'baby' belong together in the same way as, say, 'defender' and 'striker' in a football team. Sacks suggests that one of the central properties of teams is what he calls *duplicative organization*.

- *Duplicative organization* We treat any 'set of categories as defining a unit, and place members of the population into cases of the unit. If a population is so treated and is then counted, one counts not numbers of daddies, numbers of mommies, and numbers of babies but numbers of families – numbers of "whole families", numbers of "families without fathers", etc.' (1972c: 334; see also LC1: 225, 240, 247–8).

Duplicative organization helps us in seeing that 'mommy' and 'baby' are likely to be heard as part of the same 'unit'. But a further rule suggests that this is not just likely but required (in the sense that if you saw things differently then your seeing would appear to other members to be 'odd'). This rule is *the hearer's maxim for duplicative organization*.

- *The hearer's maxim for duplicative organization* 'If some population has been categorized by use of categories from some device whose collection has the "duplicative organization" property, and a Member is presented with a categorized population which *can be heard* as co-incumbents of a case of that device's unit, then hear it that way' (LC1: 248).

Given that the MCD 'family' is duplicatively organized, the hearer's maxim shows us how we come to hear 'the mommy' as not anyone's 'mommy' but as 'the mommy of this baby' in the child's story (LC1: 248).

However, 'mommy' and 'baby' are more than co-incumbents of a team; they are also a pair of positions with mutual rights and

obligations (such as the baby's right to be fed but, perhaps, obligation not to cry all the time). In this respect, mothers and babies are like husband-wife, boyfriend-girlfriend and even neighbour-neighbour. Each party has certain standardized rights and obligations; each party can properly expect help from the other.

Sacks refers to such groupings as *standardized relational pairs* (SRPs). SRPs in turn are found in *collection R*.

- *Collection R* A collection of paired relational categories 'that constitutes a locus for a set of rights and obligations concerning the activity of giving help' (1972a: 37).

One aspect of the relevance of such paired relational categories is that they make observable the *absence* of the second part of any such pair. In this way, we come to observe that a player in a sporting team is 'missing' or, more seriously, treat non-incumbency of, say, a spouse as being a criterion of suicidalness (see the discussion of suicide earlier in this chapter, pp. 75-6, and Sacks 1972a: 38-40). Such absences reveal what Sacks calls the *programmatic relevance* of *collection R*.

- *Programmatic relevance* 'if R is relevant, then the non-incumbency of any of its pair positions is an observable, i.e. can be proposedly a fact' (1972a: 38).

Just as *collection R* consists of pairs of categories who are supposed to offer each other help, there are also categories of 'experts' who offer specialized help with particular 'troubles'. When paired with some 'troubled' person (such as a client), they constitute what Sacks refers to as *collection K*.

- *Collection K* 'a collection constructed by reference to special distributions of knowledge existing about how to deal with some trouble' (1972a: 37).

Collection R and its programmatic relevance allow someone to analyse their situation as, say, properly 'suicidal'. *Collection K* then allows such a person to know who can offer dispassionate 'advice'.

Collection K implies something about the proper activities of particular categories of people like professionals and clients. This helps to resolve one further issue in our reading of the child's story.

Why do we have no trouble with the description: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up'? To put it more pointedly: why might it look odd if the story read: 'The mommy cried. The baby picked it up'?

The answer, of course, lies in the way in which many kinds of activities are commonsensically associated with certain membership categories. So if we know what someone's identity is, we can work out the kinds of activities in which they might engage. Similarly, by identifying a person's activity (say, 'crying'), we provide for what their social identity is likely to be (in this case, a 'baby').

Sacks refers to activities which imply identities as *category-bound activities* (CBAs). His definition is set out as follows.

- *Category-bound activities* 'many activities are taken by Members to be done by some particular or several particular categories of Members where the categories are categories from membership categorization devices' (LC1: 249).

CBAs explain why, if the story had read 'The X cried. The Y picked it up', we might have guessed that X was a baby and Y was a mommy. Crying, after all, is something that babies do and picking up (at least in the possibly sexist 1960s) is something that mothers did. Of course, as Sacks points out, no description is ever completely unambiguous. For instance, 'crying' is not confined to 'babies' and an adult can sometimes be called a 'baby' (LC1: 584).

Members employ their understandings of category-bound activities to recognize and to resolve such ambiguities. Above all, everyday understanding is based on the assumption that, as Sacks puts it, 'they' (that is, some category of people) do such things (LC1: 179). As we already noted, such an understanding was skilfully used in Soviet news items about 'profiteers'.

Sacks shows how what we know about CBAs allows us to construct what he calls 'a search procedure' when some problematic occurrence appears to have occurred. For instance, he shows how, at the end of 1963, the claim that the possible assassin of President Kennedy was a 'communist' clinched the case for many people – after all, assassination of capitalist leaders appears to be category-bound to the category 'communist infiltrator'. In this way, CBAs allow us to 'tie' certain activities to particular categories. As Sacks puts it: 'if somebody knows an activity has been done, and there is a category to which it is bound, they can damn well propose that it's been done by such a one who is a member of that category' (LC1: 180).

So even though we know that people other than babies do cry, we are unlikely to say 'the baby cried' if we mean 'the baby of the family'. In this way, the selection of a category makes many potential ambiguities 'non-arisable' (LC1: 585).

However, on the face of it, when we observe an activity, there could be ambiguity as to the category to which the activity might be bound. Take the case of a 'confession'. As Sacks points out, we know that *both* Catholics and criminals often 'confess'. Have we observed a Catholic or a criminal?

We see at once that, in everyday life, there is rarely such an ambiguity. For, of course, we all know that a Catholic confessional 'looks' very different from a criminal confessing (LC1: 584-5). So if we read about a 'confession', the surrounding features of the story (for example, as part of a 'criminal' story) will tell us immediately how we are to understand it. And all this happens without any sense of problem or ambiguity.

For instance, we do not have any problem with seeing a struggle between two adults (a man and a woman) and a younger person as a 'family fight' (LC1: 90-1). Ambiguity about this interpretation is much more likely to appear when parties subsequently review an incident. It may be that in a legal context, what unambiguously appeared to be merely a 'family fight' can be transformed into a 'kidnap'. At the time of the incident, however, witnesses properly treat things as 'normal' partly because they assume it's not their job but the police's to note crimes (LC1: 92). Thus we *invoke* our knowledge of category-bound activities and standardized relational pairs as ways of resolving incongruity.

Returning to our child's story, 'baby' is also a member of a class which Sacks calls '*positioned*' categories (such as baby ... adolescent ... adult) in which the next category is heard as 'higher' than the preceding one. This creates the possibility of praise or complaint by using a higher or lower position to refer to some activity. So an adolescent can be described as acting in a very 'adult' way or as acting just like a 'baby'.

- *Positioned categories* A collection has positioned categories where one member can be said to be higher or lower than another (as with baby ... adolescent ... adult) (LC1: 585).

The fact that activities are category-bound also allows us to praise or complain about 'absent' activities. For instance, a baby that does not cry where it might (say at a christening) can be

properly praised, while an older child that does not say 'thank you' when passed some food or given a present is properly blamed (LC1: 585). In both these cases, certain activities become remarkable because of the way their presence or absence is tied to a stage of life. Stage of life is important not only, say, around the dinner table but also in the compilation of official statistics. As Sacks points out, statisticians, like the rest of us, know that, for instance, being unmarried or unemployed are not usually descriptors appropriate to school-age children (LC1: 68).

As we have seen, because of the category-bound character of many activities, we can establish negative moral assessments of people by describing their behaviour in terms of performing or avoiding activities inappropriate to their social identity. For instance, it may be acceptable for a parent to 'punish' a child, but it will usually be unacceptable for a child to 'punish' a parent.

Notice that, in both cases, 'punish' serves as a powerful picture of an activity which could be described in innumerable ways. Social life, unlike foreign films, does not come with subtitles attached. Consequently, how we define an activity is morally constitutive of it. So if, like other sociologists, Sacks is talking here about norms, unlike them (and members) he is not treating norms as descriptions of the *causes* of action. Instead, he is concerned with how 'viewers use norms to provide some of the orderliness, and proper orderliness, of the activities they observe' (1972a: 39).

How viewers use norms takes us back to the way we read 'the baby cried'. For instance, babies can be boys or girls. Why then, might not a 'cry' be reported as, say, 'the boy cried'? The answer, says Sacks, lies in a *viewer's maxim* for category-bound activities.

- *Viewer's maxim* 'If a Member sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one sees it being done by a member of a category to which the activity is *bound*, see it that way' (LC1: 259, emphasis added).

Through the viewer's maxim, we can understand why we would see a 'baby' rather than 'a boy' crying, since a 'baby' is a category that we treat as having 'a special relevance for formulating an identification of its doer' (LC1: 259).

Finally, why do we treat it as unremarkable that the story reports as the next activity: 'The mommy picked it up'? As we have already seen, part of the answer lies in the way in which we hear 'mommy' and 'baby' as part of a 'team'. In this respect, duplicative organization is relevant here. In addition, however,

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picking a baby up is likely to be heard as a norm such that where a baby cries, a mother properly picks it up. In this regard, we have, therefore, a *second viewer's maxim* as defined below:

- *Second viewer's maxim* 'If one sees a pair of actions which can be related by the operation of a norm that provides for the second given the first, where the doers can be seen as members of the categories the norm provides as proper for that pair of actions, then (a) see that the doers are such Members, and (b) see the second as done in conformity with the norm' (LC1: 260).

Through this second viewer's maxim, viewers provide the 'proper orderliness of the activities they observe' in at least two ways: (1) explaining the occurrence of one activity given the occurrence of the other; and (2) explaining the sequential order of the two activities (first one, then the other) (LC1: 260).

Most readers, I suspect, will by now be pretty sated with concepts. I therefore want to slow up the pace somewhat and offer some illustrations and applications of these concepts that Sacks himself uses. Later, I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on the *status* of the MCD apparatus that Sacks describes. In particular, I will explain why, despite any apparent similarities, MCD work has little resemblance to anything that anthropologists or sociologists might refer to as 'culture'.

Applications

To readers used to dealing with conventional social science concepts (such as 'power', 'cognitive dissonance', 'norms'), MCD analysis can present a tricky problem. The problem arises because we are tempted to use MCDs, like these other concepts, in order to understand things *better* than members. However, for Sacks, the MCD apparatus is entirely a members' apparatus. This means that it exists not as another social science concept but only in and through the way in which it is demonstrably used by lay members.

Members do not have to consult a textbook before analysing the world. They just do it. One way of getting a clearer understanding of this is to look at how Sacks discusses the *functions* of membership categorization for resolving members' problems. Take the case of being a host at a party where we have to introduce a number of guests (*n*). How do we introduce an *n*th person where that person is not the first?

Here Sacks tells us we have a simple solution: use the consistency rule (LC1: 326). So if we have introduced earlier guests by their first names or by their titles and/or occupations, we can do the same for the *n*th person. Indeed, if we do anything else, we may need to invoke a special warrant if we do not want to puzzle (or insult) our other guests!

But what if you are dealing with a single person and hence the consistency rule does not apply? If that person is engaged in some activity, one obvious solution is to retrieve the category bound to that activity. For instance, one sees a cricketer take a catch and might then ask: 'Who is that fielder?'

But how do we properly invoke a category where the only activity being done is identifying itself? One solution is to be found in a piece of data:

- A: ((a little girl)) Who's that?
 B: ((her mother)) That's Rita. Remember when you went to the party last week and met Una? Well that's Una's mother (LC1: 326)

B's solution is to treat Rita 'as the second person of a pair for which the first [Una] is known' (LC1: 327). Of course, as Sacks points out, such standardized relational pairs are not always available when you are searching for a single person category. But note also how, in this data extract, B seeks to offer more than just a name (Rita). As Sacks suggests: 'a name is not treated as an adequate identifier, but when *any* category, perhaps, is offered, the identification *is* treated as adequate. If the world works that way, that's extraordinarily lovely' (LC1: 327).

Sacks eventually seems to have recognized that this 'loveliness' (appealing to a standardized relational pair in order to identify someone) could not be a *universal* solution to the problem of single person identification: as Schegloff points out, not any SRPs would do (for instance, stranger/stranger would not work) and the categories chosen have to be recognizable to the person asking for an identification (Schegloff in LC2: xxxvii-xxxviii).

None the less, even posing the question raised a number of fascinating issues about how membership categories are resourcefully used by members in the most mundane situations. To get his students to analyse how 'the world works' in these kinds of ways, Sacks instructed them to observe how strangers exchanged glances. After this exercise, he pointed out how strangers might

shrug their shoulders and smile at a woman smoking a pipe or at a 'couple' composed of a worn old man and a young pretty girl.

In both cases, the exchange of glances between strangers seemed to mark 'incongruity'. And this incongruity was observable through the viewers' use of the MCD apparatus. So, in the first example, in the USA at least, pipe-smoking is category-bound to 'male'. In the second example: 'What one is doing is employing the procedure by which persons properly come together and finding that this does not produce these two persons as a *pair*' (LC1: 90, emphasis added).

Given this perceived incongruity, one can then search for appropriate category-bound activities such as being 'a dirty old man', 'gold-digger', etc. MCDs can thus work as ways of identifying and resolving incongruity.

Until now, you may have got the impression that because membership categorization allows people to make sense of people and events, Sacks is implying that everything always proceeds smoothly in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. First, we have already seen, in the example of Soviet identification of profiteers, how categorization can just as easily serve to maintain racism as to preserve harmony. Second, the use of quite innocent knowledge of category-bound activities can unintentionally allow horrible crimes to be committed.

For instance, in the case of the young British boys who murdered the child Jamie Bulger, witnesses who had seen Jamie holding the hands of his two assassins reported that they had assumed they were watching a child with his two older brothers. Similarly, as Sacks notes, people working in organizations, faced with possibly life-threatening events, do not take remedial action themselves but report what they have seen to the next person up the hierarchy (LC1: 64). This is because in organizations categories are organized into hierarchies. So people assume that they need to refer to another category to confirm some act or to take some action.

The kind of ordered sequence we find here is replicated, in a less dramatic way, in two examples discussed earlier in this chapter. First, in calls to a suicide prevention centre, Sacks revealed how professionals and clients appealed to collections R and K in a remarkably ordered sequence. In the second example, a worker at a social agency could work out that if, in a family dispute, the police had been called, then the husband is likely to have hit his wife ('did you smack her one?', he asks) (LC1: 114). In both cases,

the parties use the MCD apparatus to produce what Sacks calls 'presumptively correct descriptions' (LC1: 118).
 Moreover, such descriptions are not just invoked for the user but are produced in such a way as to be appropriate to the hearer or reader. In this respect, categories are 'recipient designed' (LC1: 790-1). For instance, as we saw in chapter 1, there is a place in the Book of Genesis where Abraham is referred to as 'Abraham the Hebrew' (LC1: 171). Since Israelites would know about Abraham's ethnicity, biblical scholars have suggested that this implies that this section of Genesis was not written by a Jew.

A similar example of recipient design, also discussed in chapter 1, is a group therapy session in which participants use the term 'hotrodders' to describe themselves. For hotrodders, the aim is to produce and ride in fast cars. Hence when challenged about your car, to say it's 'the hottest thing in town' serves as a *password*, that is, it affirms a prototype 'good motive', serving to maintain group solidarity (LC1: 116). So, as with Abraham, this description is addressed to others.

Sacks shows how alternative descriptions like 'kids in cars' can be used by adults. Conversely, 'hotrodders' is not owned by adults. So, if adults use this term, they are constrained by members' knowledge about what it takes to be a member, that is, not every car is a hotrod, not every teenager in a car is a hotrodder (LC1: 173).
 In much the same way, as we saw in chapter 1, these kids' problem with who 'owns' descriptions extends to scientific disciplines. One of Freud's problems was that so many people consider themselves experts in psychology. So, like 'kids in cars', Freud invented new terms and tried to enforce how they were used (LC1: 202).

Moreover, any category (including such new terms as 'psycho-analysis' or 'hotrodder') is not just haphazardly invoked, anyhow and anywhere. Instead, recipient design means that members pay detailed attention to the implication of using a particular category in a particular place. For instance, in a therapy group transcript containing the hotrodders data, a participant called Ken remarks 'we were in an automobile discussion.' The transcript shows how this utterance occurs after the introduction of a new member to the group. As Sacks shows (LC1: 300-1), Ken's categorization of the preceding activity can be heard as an *invitation* by:

- 1 describing a category-bound activity;
- 2 implying a category that it is bound to ('teenage boys'); and
- 3 through the consistency rule, implying that the new member of

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As Sacks observes, Ken might equally have produced a *rejection* by proposing a category relevant to the pre-present persons but not to the entrant (LC1: 301–2). In another context, we can hear a rejection in the following example:

a man comes home [and] his wife is there talking to a friend of hers. She says, 'We're discussing the sewing circle.' It's a rejection. He says 'Oh excuse me.' That is to say, that thing is bound to 'adult females' and he's a male. It provides for them as members, and not for him. (LC1: 302)

The force of both Ken's and the wife's remarks arises in their positioning immediately after a new person is available as a co-conversationalist. This underlines the point that categories are not somehow plucked out of space according to certain timeless 'rules'. Instead, categorizers and categorized closely attend to the positioning of categories.

This has two important implications. First, it suggests the inescapable link between MCD analysis and conversation analysis (CA). For instance, Sacks's MCD work on invitations and rejections is, as we shall see, inseparable from his CA work on 'pre-invitations' (LC1: 304–5). Second, as I argue below, it emphasizes that membership categorization analysis, in Sacks's hands, is very different from how most sociologists and anthropologists use concepts like 'norms' and 'culture'. Instead, MCDs are local, sequentially organized devices designed and administered by members.

MCDs as Local Devices

In chapter 3, we saw that Sacks approached 'culture' as an 'inference-making machine': a descriptive apparatus, administered and used in specific contexts. The issue for Sacks was not to second-guess members but to try to work out 'how it is that people can produce sets of actions that provide that others can see such things ... [as] persons doing intimacy ... persons lying, etc.' (LC1: 119).

Given that many categories can be used to describe the same person or act, Sacks's task, as we have seen, was 'to find out how they [members] go about choosing among the available sets of categories for grasping some event' (LC1: 41). Of course, Sacks does

not mean to imply that 'society' determines which category one chooses. Instead, he wants to show the active interpretive work involved in rendering any description and the local implications of choosing any particular category.

A particularly telling example of this is to be found in Sacks's analysis of a *New York Times* story about an interview with a navy pilot about his missions in the Vietnam War (LC1: 205-22, 306-11). Sacks is specially interested in the navy pilot's answer to a question in the extract from the newspaper's report:

'How did he feel about knowing that even with all the care he took in aiming only at military targets someone was probably being killed by his bombs?

"I certainly don't like the idea that I might be killing anybody," he replied. "But I don't lose any sleep over it. You have to be impersonal in this business. Over North Vietnam I condition myself to think that I'm a military man being shot at by another military man like myself." (LC1: 205)

Sacks invites us to see how the pilot's immediate reply ('I certainly don't like the idea...') shows his commitment to the evaluational scheme offered by the journalist's question. For instance, if the pilot had instead said 'Why do you ask?', he would have shown that he did not necessarily subscribe to the same moral universe as the reporter (and, by implication, the readers of the article) (LC1: 211).

Having accepted this moral schema, Sacks shows how the pilot now builds an answer which helps us to see him in a favourable light. The category 'military man' works to defend his bombing as a category-bound activity which reminds us that this is, after all, what military pilots do. The effect of this is magnified by the pilot's identification of his co-participant as 'another military man like myself'. In this way, the pilot creates a standardized relational pair (military man/military man) with recognizable mutual obligations (bombing/shooting at the other). In terms of this pair, the other party cannot properly complain or, as Sacks puts it: 'there are no complaints to be offered on their part about the error of his ways, except if he happens to violate the norms that, given the device used, are operative' (LC1: 206).

Notice also that the pilot suggests 'you have to be impersonal in this business.' Note how the category 'this business' sets up the terrain on which the specific SRP of military men will shortly be used. So this account could be offered by either pair part.

However, as Sacks argues, the implication is that 'this business' is one of many where impersonality is required. For 'if it were the case that, that you had to be impersonal in this business held only for this business, then it might be that doing this business would be wrong in the first instance' (LC1: 208). Moreover, the impersonality involved is of a special sort. Sacks points out that we hear the pilot as saying not that it is unfortunate that he cannot kill 'personally' but rather that being involved in this 'business' means that one must not consider that one is killing persons (LC1: 209).

But the pilot is only proposing an SRP of military man-military man. In that sense, he is inviting the North Vietnamese to 'play the game' in the same way as a child might say to another 'I'll be third base.' However, as Sacks notes, in children's baseball, such proposals can be rejected: 'if you say "I'll be third base", unless someone else says "and I'll be ..." another position, and the others say they'll be the other positions, then you're not that thing. You can't play' (LC1: 307).

Of course, the North Vietnamese had indeed rejected the pilot's proposal. Instead, in shooting at him they proposed the identification of the pilot as a 'criminal' and defined themselves as 'doing police action'. As Sacks observes, these competing definitions had implications which went beyond mere propaganda. For instance, if the navy pilot were to be shot down then the Geneva Conventions about his subsequent treatment would only properly be applied if he indeed were a 'military man' rather than a 'criminal' (LC1: 307).

Even if there is consensus about how a person or an act is properly described, some latitude remains and people may try to avoid the normally category-bound implications of certain activity descriptions. For instance, Sacks discusses the American South where, according to some whites, even when blacks engage in activities appropriate to anybody, they are not to be seen as 'anybody, but as 'blacks-imitating-whites'.

Moreover, this attention to descriptive categories occurs even in far less politically charged situations where we are talking to strangers and there is no apparent battle over which category to use. Sacks mentions the case of people telling interviewers doing surveys that they watch less television than they actually do. He comments: 'It's interesting in that they're controlling an impression of themselves for somebody who couldn't matter less' (LC1: 580).

Sacks argues that this happens because we can be held responsible not only for our descriptions but for the *inferences* that can be drawn from them. Given the way in which activities are

category-bound, we all have an interest in the inferences others will draw about the sort of person who would say such a thing about themselves or others.

Moreover, as I have already stressed, descriptions are not just assembled for ourselves but are recipient designed for others. In chapter 1, I gave a relevant example of this in relation to Sacks's discussion of 'naming'. Using descriptions like 'Joe', 'Tom' or 'Harry' allows hearers to search for someone already known. In this way, we help others infer certain things from our descriptions by indicating whether the hearer should seek to use them to find some person already known to them. These type 1 descriptions (first names) are different from type 2 descriptions (like 'a guy' or 'someone') where we signal that the description should *not* be used by the recipient to find out who is being referred to (LC2: 445).

As we also saw in chapter 1, naming is an issue for people doing introductions. When speakers name someone, they create a series of impressions not just about the persons being named, but also about themselves and their audience. In this sense, our attention to the implications of choosing names shows the extent to which we are aware of the importance of appearances.

A further interesting example of the effect of how we name people arises in Sacks's discussion of a young woman talking to a male audience in a therapy session. The woman tells a story in which she implies that she had sex with a 'guy'. But her story begins:

One night- (1.0) I was with this guy that I liked a real lot. (LC2: 453)

Sacks notes how 'guy that I liked a real lot' alerts hearers that such a story does not mean that she is available to anyone. In this sense, the woman's story is 'defensively designed', that is, oriented to the possibility that a hearer might say: 'That's not what happened really, is it?' (LC2: 505). Such stories can thus be heard as 'fragile' because they can be seen as 'ordering materials out of alternative versions of what happened, such that a recipient could, from the materials nonetheless left in there, pick away at it as to whether what happened is other than your *version* of it' (LC2: 505, emphasis added).

Hearably 'fragile' stories are an excellent example of how members use the MCD apparatus to build and to challenge particular versions of reality. Central to such stories is the way they construct (or reconstruct) particular identities that can be associated with the activities they describe.

As a further example of this process which he calls 'identification reformulation' (LC2: 126), Sacks offers the story of a student called Nancy. In this extract, Nancy is talking to Agnes about a meal she had with students in her class at college:

N: ... so a bunch of us went over, and there were three of us gals and five or six fellas. And then one of the girls had to leave, about half an hour later 'cause she had to go home and let her roommate in. And uh, one of the other girls had to leave for something. And there I sit with these young fellas. I felt like a den mother.

A: Are you the oldest one in the class?

N: Oh by far. (LC2: 126)

Sacks invites us to notice how, in the first sentence, gender is relevant to Nancy's account and how Nancy also gives the approximate number of 'gals' and 'fellas'. As Sacks points out, in social activities relative numbers of each gender can be hearably relevant. For example, equal numbers can turn into pairs (LC2: 127).

However, as it turns out, the gender-relevant issue that Nancy wants to raise is what it means when she is left alone with the men? Now how will it look to an observer? A solution is to provide an identification reformulation which will legitimate the co-presence at a social event of one woman and several men. Her comment 'I felt like a den mother' provides just that legitimation as it reformulates the identities of those present away from any sexual undertones and firmly places all parties in a family SRP (mother:sons).

Although Sacks does not point this out, we might also note that Nancy's identification reformulation in terms of 'den mother' is presaged by her earlier reference when she is left alone with the men to 'all these *young* fellas'. Here we might infer that Nancy is making a point about her being much older than the 'fellas' since, if she were the same age, they might not be recognizably 'young'. Indeed, this is precisely how Agnes monitors Nancy's account, asking: 'Are you the oldest one in the class?'

The 'defensive' design of both Nancy's story and the earlier account of a young woman about 'a guy that I liked a real lot' helped to pre-empt a potential challenge to their moral status. In these cases, then, such a challenge was not actually made. However, as Sacks points out, such challenges can arise in at least two different ways. First, a hearer of a story can offer a direct challenge, for instance asking 'Why did you do this?' and the storyteller will then know that there is something they have to

defend (LC2: 22). Second, a hearer can offer a candidate 'reason' for what you say which Sacks refers to as a 'correction-invitation device' (LC2: 21-5).

In the following police interview, A is a police officer and B is a woman who has called the police about her fourteen-year-old daughter who has not been coming home at night. I have marked challenges as [C] and correction-invitation devices as [CI].

- A: Do you have a gun at home?
 B: A forty-five
 A: You do have a forty-five.
 B: Uh huh, loaded.
 A: What's it doing there. Whose is it. [C]
 B: It's sitting there.
 A: Is it yours? [CI]
 B: It's Dave's.
 A: It's your husband's huh
 B: I know how to shoot it.
 A: He isn't a police officer. [CI]
 B: No.
 A: He just has one
 B: Everyone does, don't they? (LC1: 21)

The difference between the two forms ([C] and [CI]) is noted by Sacks:

If you say to somebody 'Why did you do this?' then what they are being asked to present is something they may well know they have to defend. And you set up a different situation when . . . you're not asking for an account they have to defend, but you're 'inviting a correction'. (LC1: 22)

From a police point of view, Sacks suggests, the use of the correction-invitation device is usually to be preferred. First, because its aggressive character is not so obvious, it can lull a suspect into providing fresh material because its offer of one member of a class (as, in the interview above, a 'police officer') might elicit another more incriminating alternative. Although this does not happen here (B does not say 'No he's a such-and-such'), I shall return shortly to B's final line in this extract.

The second reason why the police prefer correction-invitation devices is that, by offering hypothetical answers, they can trap suspects into a vicious circle where it is difficult for them to avoid incriminating themselves. As Sacks notes, in murder investigations,

police interviewers may avoid directly asking a suspect whether they are the murderer. Instead 'they say "Did you hit him with a tire iron?" And the guy says "No", and then they say "Well what did you hit him with?" where the guy hasn't admitted yet that he did it' (LC1: 22).

However, as we have seen, correction-invitation devices do not guarantee that a police suspect will offer an incriminating version of their activities or identity. Moreover, as Sacks notes, a very powerful device that storytellers can use in the face of potential or actual challenge is to be found in the extract above. Indeed, Sacks refers to B's 'everyone does, don't they?' as 'one of the most fabulous things I've ever seen' (LC1: 23).

B's question serves to cut off her accountability (for the presence of a gun in the household) by claiming generality. If, indeed, such situations are general, no further account can be called for. In the same way, but even more strongly, invoking a proverb can terminate a topic (Drew and Holt 1988: 411; Silverman 1997a: 138-9) since resisting a proverb is a sure way to make interaction break down (LC1: 25) (see chapter 1 above).

Both correction-invitation devices and direct challenges make use of members' knowledge of certain things that are known about any category, for instance, people of a certain age or gender. Such categories are used routinely (particularly within families) as a means of social control. For instance, mothers may say, as Sacks suggests: "'Remember you're a such-and-such" (a lady, an American, a Negro, a Catholic, etc.). That is, any action you take is exemplary' (LC1: 42).

But, once again, the organization of descriptions is subject to continuous, mutual interpretive work. So, if you want to escape such category-bound implications (for instance about your age), you can counter by accounting for why the category should not be read in this way here ('I'm forty-eight but . . .') (LC1: 44). However, people use sayings like 'boys will be boys' to serve as 'anti-modifier modifiers', asserting that, in the last instance, the category is omnirelevant (LC1: 45, 587).

The precise relevance of a category is also established by categorizing the categorizer, that is, if B categorizes C as 'old', you might categorize B in order to decide how *you* would categorize C.

Concluding Comments

The examples that we have just been considering demonstrate that membership categories are far from being the inert classificatory

instruments to be found, say, in the more rigid forms of content analysis or in Bales's categorizations of 'interaction process' (see chapter 2 above). By contrast, membership categorization devices are local members' devices, actively employed by speakers and hearers to formulate and reformulate the meanings of activities and identities.

However, Sacks had little interest in *positioning* his ideas within a social science lexicon. As we saw in chapter 4, he recommended his approach as offering a method anyone could use. In this sense, his lectures offer a toolbox rather than a museum exhibition. Consonant with this position, chapter 7 will be mainly concerned with how subsequent social scientists have *used* categorization analysis. There, I shall follow Watson (n.d.) in arguing that Sacks's work on membership categorization is wholly consonant with his analysis of the sequential organization of conversation. (The reader unfamiliar with conversation analysis (CA) will by then have read chapter 6 to help with an understanding of the import of this observation.)

At this stage, however, it is worth remarking that many of the examples we have just been looking at are susceptible to a combination of CA and MCD analysis. For instance, correction-invitation devices fit fully with Sacks's discussion of conversational 'repair' (see pp. 122-3 below). And the organization of storytelling points to the importance of how tellers and recipients of stories obtain the floor by 'tying' their talk to a previous turn (pp. 117-18). In both examples, CA and categorization analysis help us to home in on the precise accomplishment of what Sacks refers to as 'order at all points'.

However, to appreciate this argument, we must examine in some detail Sacks's account of conversation analysis. As already noted, this is the task of chapter 6.

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