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and the search for adequate research designs –  
Membership Categorisation Analysis with and after  
Sacks**

by Dominik Gerst

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## **Praxeological foundations, sequential intertwining and the search for adequate research designs – Membership Categorisation Analysis with and after Sacks**

Richard Fitzgerald, William Housley. 2015. *Advances in Membership Categorisation Analysis*. London: Sage.

Since Harvey Sacks' foundation of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) as an ethnomethodological (EM) approach to "culture-in-action" (Hester/Eglin 1997), the analysis of the categorical organisation of knowledge, as well as the practical reasoning in interaction, has shown a paradoxical development. While little attention has been paid to the development of MCA compared to the increasing importance of its 'neighbouring' fields of sequential analysis or Conversation Analysis (CA) and EM in general, the continuous work of a steadily growing number of researchers with and on Sacks' basic ideas on categorisation lead to a profound stock of knowledge that signals its importance. The collection at hand "Advances in Membership Categorisation Analysis" documents the fine-grained analysis of knowledge-in-action and certainly will serve as a standard reference. The book brings together features of a comprehensive introductory monograph, as well as a loose state-of-the-art collection in an exciting way due to two tendencies: On the one hand, each of the seven chapters aims at introducing, discussing, applying and advancing another key principle or concept of the wide range of analytic tools developed in the course of Sacks' foundation of categorical and sequential analysis as well as subsequent work. On the other hand, all of the chapters (explicitly or implicitly) contribute to strands of discussion that constitute the field's search for self-conception and positioning.

The introductory chapter by William Housley and Richard Fitzgerald starts with positioning MCA within the multidisciplinary discussion about identity, whilst remarking that it is "more than the study of identities and identity work-in-action but [...] a convenient place to begin with" (p. 1). Recapturing Sacks' initial interest in membership categorisation as a situated practice that comes along with the ethnomethodological perspective of taking members' own understanding of society seriously, the authors present a pointed description of MCA as both an interest in „peoples' routine methods of social categorisation and local reasoning practices as a display and accomplishment of „doing“ society“ (p. 4) as well as „not so much a method of analysis but rather a collection of observations and an analytic mentality towards observing the ways and methods people orient, invoke and negotiate social category based knowledge when engaged in social action“ (p. 6). In the course of presenting Sacks' central concepts, Housley and Fitzgerald address two important points which play a crucial role in

the discussion about advancing MCA. On the one hand, they problematize Sacks' rhetoric surrounding, and tendency toward a decontextualized model that infiltrates his own praxeological standpoint, claiming that subsequent research in MCA clearly directs to the "contextualised underpinning of in situ occasionality" (p. 10). On the other hand, the authors elaborate MCA's foundational problem of the connection between categorisation work and sequential analysis that has been suffering from a more parallel than intertwined development. Thus they promote the idea of a multidimensional flow of interaction, "treating category work as flowing through the interaction as sequential and topical relevancies emerge and recede through various tasks" (p. 10). Finally, the chapter offers an overview of advances in the field that go beyond questions of categorisation and identity, e.g. focussing on geographical or non-personal categories and a mundane visual order, as well as studies that focus on specific communication formats such as social media and different audio and video technologies.

Chapter 2 by Rod Watson takes up reification – that is, "the analyst's attribution of a false substantiality of a social phenomenon" (p. 23) – as one misleading way in the analysis of membership categorisation. A "structuralist residue" (p. 24) in the work of Sacks (and EM in general), namely the influence of Componential Analysis, on the one hand served for the adaptation of central ideas such as EM's "competence model of membership" (p. 26) or the emphasis of the "situational" and "systematic nature of actions" (p. 27), but on the other hand brought along the tendency toward analytic essentialism. In contrast, adopting Sacks' praxeological stance means that "categorisation practices [are] both contextualised and contextualising" (p. 31), which brings Watson to discuss the relationship of sequential and categorical phenomena. Instead of treating categorisation as a separate domain, he argues for a praxeological solution that treats "turn-formed categories" and "category-formed turns" as "two sides of the coin" (p. 34). This view suggests more than an analysis of person-description or person-reference, namely a broader analysis of participation frameworks, recipient design and the reflexive determination of categories and context. Watson demonstrates that this could be especially fruitful in the context of worksite studies that have so far failed to take into consideration the categorical organisation of tasks in work contexts; this praxeological view would help „to explicate the division of labour as common-sense, *intersubjective* accomplishment“ (p. 36, emphasis in the original). In general, he proposes "a ‚family resemblance‘ model", which aims at escaping the fallacy of reification by considering that "categorisations show a criss-crossing network of similarities, overlaps and differences from case to case, from one ‚another first time‘ to the next, without ever being conterminous" (p. 38s.). Closing the chapter with methodological remarks, he emphasises that the 'status' not as a research method, but as an "analytic mentality" (Schenkein 1978)

whose flexibility towards phenomena reflects the vagueness of the phenomena, could best be yielded within the context of ethnomethodological ethnography. That is, a “single instance, or, at least, instance-by-instance analysis” (p. 46) leading to a “logical grammar” that differs from Sacks’ idea of a somehow reifying grammar of membership categorisation practices as it focusses on “practices in a given contexture” (p. 48).

In chapter 3, Elizabeth Stokoe and Frederick Attenborough introduce the concept of prospective and retrospective categorisation as “a key mechanism for the practical negotiation of th[e] search for ,right-ness” (p. 53) when it comes to selecting categories. In line with the main tenet of the collection, they attack the “artificial division of labour” (p. 52) of sequential and categorisation analysis, opting for a praxeological and sequential approach to MCA. Such a view makes necessary the specification of at least two points: On the one hand, Sacks’ observation of the inference-richness of categories should not be understood as categories literally storing knowledge, but rather as serving for a members’ resource for implicative work. On the other hand, analysts should not undermine the “defeasibility” of language by being “more specific about categorisation practices [...] than members themselves are” (p. 54). In the analysis of Facebook chats and neighbour dispute mediations, the authors show how members either work forwards or backwards from categories to (predicated) activities of that category, and how the going together “is achieved and is to be found in the local specifics of categorisation as an activity” (Hester and Eglin 1997: 46). A sensibility for proposition, development, rejection and negotiation of categories thus leads to the possibility of identifying recurrent practices “through which one speaker’s descriptions are turned into a membership category by another; how speakers move between description and categorisation, and how recipients may proffer categories as a way of proposing intersubjectivity” (p. 58). Stokoe and Attenborough then deploy this concept to the analysis of categories as resources in breaking and rolling news in the course of the 2011 Norway attacks. They show how prospective and retrospective categorisation in the course of the identification, redefinition, refinement and recasting of ‘what is happening’ forms a “trajectory of rolling news” (p. 68). The analysis of live broadcasting and newspaper articles provides an impressive example of how categorisation analysis can give insights into the emergence, negotiation and stabilisation of media discourses, as well as the production of ‘facts’. Finally, the authors propose “a ,categorial systematics’ approach to MCA [...] with the aim of uncovering the systematic centrality of categories and categorial practices to action” (p. 70). Such an approach questions the common view of the “disorderliness of category relevancies” (p. 52) whilst focussing on the comparability of categorial ordering work across settings.

In the same vein, Christian Licoppe elaborates in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter on the idea of a “categorical flow” (p. 71) as one layer of interaction by showing how MCA can be dealt with not only as a resource, but also as a topic within question and answer sequences. In the example of a judicial setting, precisely “the proceedings of a pre-parole judicial commission that hears long-term inmates in order to assess their dangerousness” (p. 71), he furthermore demonstrates how matters of categorisation are part of our deepest common-sense reasoning. Failing in categorisation work – in the context of questions that are produced to evoke categorically organised knowledge – is recognized in the example as being an incompetent conversationalist. Licoppe shows that descriptions about the inmate – such as “weak cognitive capacities” and “mental retardation” – are directly derived from the inmates’ conversational behaviour. The “foundational character of categorisation work” (p. 94) is strikingly visible as the inmates’ failing shows effects similar to Garfinkel’s ‘breaching experiments’ – “being found structurally incompetent with respect to MCA warrants being pronounced incompetent in nearly every domain of social life” (p. 96), which in this setting yield consequences that are serious for the inmates’ treatment.

Chapter 5 by Edward Reynolds and Richard Fitzgerald presents the aim of “developing levels of sophistication to understanding the relationship between membership categories and locally invoked associated features” (p. 99). Therefore, the authors discuss Sacks’ concept of category-bound activities and Watson’s elaboration as category-bound predicates, and conclude that these “catch-all terms” provide new insights, but lack analytic selectivity. They suggest “taking ‘tied’ to be the weakest, ‘most constructed’ relationship, ‘bound’ to be related in a more ‘permanent’ way and ‘predicated’ to be an implied relationship” (p. 105). By doing so, a systematic and “scalar descriptive adequacy in representing the different ‘strengths’ of relationship between categories and their features” (p. 105) could be achieved. To demonstrate the fruitfulness of this differentiation, they present a video-based analysis of instances of the interactive practice “enticing a challengeable” (p. 100) from varying conflict talk settings, showing the strong connection of sequence organisation, challenging practices and the categorical organisation of normativity accounts. Edwards and Fitzgerald remind us to take seriously “the consequential differences between subtle and nuanced relationships which participants may employ” (p. 121) when it comes to relating categories and features such as norms, and how an adequate elaboration of established concepts may help to develop MCA as a sensitive approach to (moral) reasoning.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, the concept of omnirelevance is discussed. Sean Rintel shows “participants invoking categories that reflexively treat the understanding of particular interactional movements as controlled by the context of the current activity” (p. 123) – along

with an application in the setting of technologized interaction, namely computer-mediated video calls. MCA is neither interested in the search for a given context, nor maxims to define the relevance of a context from the analyst's perspective, but in "member's own deployment and analysis of categorical devices as organisationally defining an interaction as of an overall kind or context" (p. 124). Omnirelevance, then, describes a device that may be invoked and thus be made organisationally relevant at any point in the conversation "by drawing attention to who-we-are-and-what-we-are-doing" (p. 125). Rintel further shows that the concept can be gainfully applied to the analysis of repair in technologized interaction, as on the one hand MCA should be interested in how technology and its organisational problems are treated as an interactional resource and concern; on the other hand, omnirelevant devices can be used "to resolve interactional ambiguities, such as the need for and manner of a repair" (p. 133) and to re-establish conversational continuity. Based on the analysis of instances of distortion in couples' video calls, he convincingly shows how two different omnirelevant devices, namely technology and relationship, are treated as "organisational counterpoints – if one is at issue the other is not – but also counterparts – they must both be relevant for one to be foregrounded while the other is backgrounded" (p. 137f.). Furthermore, the examples show how different trouble sources (video or video/audio) are matched with different methods "with respect to the *expressive* needs of the couples' talk" (p. 138, emphasis in the original), and how repair and the employment of omnirelevant devices can be used as a resource for intimacy-raising practises such as "teasing".

The last chapter by William Housley and Robin James Smith is well placed at the end of the collection, as it connects MCA with a broader discussion about an 'epistemic reflexivity'. The authors identify an increasing interest in the (ethnomethodological) analysis of social scientific practice that – reinforced by the reflexive turn in contemporary social science which seeks to clarify the conditions of scientific reasoning – finds its most ambitious form in the "social life of methods" approach. Noticing that there are relatively few studies that deal with the production of interpretable and code-worthy data, as well as "the actualities and specificities involved in the practical interactional business of realising social science method and measurement" (p. 153), they want to show that "the social life of methods is routinely built on the situated, practically occasioned and accomplished social life of membership categorisation and related practices" (p. 153). Therefore, Housley and Smith demonstrate how the important scientific practice of coding as an act of discovery rather than construction in the setting of a research team meeting – a setting which "renders visible many of the practices of coding which are usually ,black boxed"" (p. 155) – involves the tasks to "accomplish a 'shared perspective'" in relation to the chosen method in action as well as the achievement of a "coding perspective" (p. 154) through conversational mechanisms that

marks a difference to their everyday use. The difference then is achieved by a correspondence test according to what Housley and Smith call the “coder’s maxime,” which builds on “frequency as a principle” (p. 170) and thus forms the basis of consistency. Finally, taking a methodological stance, Housley and Smith argue for a “cumulative paradigm of empirical research” (p. 155) that brings highly granular “methodographic” (p. 155) analyses – that is, the comparative analysis of specific methods and features – and local case studies from different settings together, framing future studies in the field.

To conclude with some general impressions, it is worth emphasising that all contributions argue for carefully paying attention to the links of membership categorisation and sequential analysis, pointing out what has been called the foundational character of membership categorisation. Furthermore, under the auspices of a praxeological understanding of MCA, the authors share a consensus of avoiding decontextualizing analyses, which goes hand in hand with a shared but differently weighted accentuation of the ethnomethodological and consequently sociological roots. The identification of MCA as, above all, an analytic mentality comes along with varying strategies to combine this attitude with research designs that focus on single practices (“methodographic”) in specific contexts (“logical grammar”), or across contexts (“categorical systematics”) that may or may not constitute a “cumulative” or “comparative paradigm”. All of these efforts demonstrate the crucial relationship to the foundations of Harvey Sacks – while his work still serves as an inexhaustible resource, the book clearly shows the demand for highlighting the elaborations and developments of established as well as new concepts and principles. One of the strengths of the collection lies in the numerous fine-grained analyses of (non-) interactional data, including a variety of settings, participation frameworks and media. All these examples prove that taking categorisation practices into account should be of interest for not only CA, but a variety of research domains, e.g. discourse analysis. Finally, as the book claims to present advances in the field, it enables thinking about what the analysis of membership categorisation still lacks. Two points may be outlined here: On the one hand, MCA still primarily concentrates on membership – that is, social categorisation. Comparatively few studies focus on spatial categorisation, and hardly any studies deal with temporal categorisation. Especially the intertwining of these three dimensions could be a topic of future inquiry. On the other hand, it is astonishing that debates about categorisation respectively classification in other domains of the humanities and even sociology have to this date received little attention within MCA. As especially the work of Sacks serves as an inspiration in broader discussions about societies’ categorical foundation (e.g. Bowker and Star 1999), it is likely that MCA vice versa may benefit from approaches to categorisation and classification that seem to be rather incompatible with an ethnomethodological perspective.

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### **Dominik GERST**

is a PhD student of cultural studies at the Viadrina Centre B/ORDERS IN MOTION, European-University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). His main research areas are conversation analysis, borders, sociology of knowledge, linguistic landscapes.

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