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The social drama of everyday life

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On social categories in peer interaction

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Prologue

A boy is ridiculed with a high pitch mocking voice. A girl is insulted with reference to her alleged sexual behavior. A boy is marginalized because of his lack of language proficiency. How can we analyze and describe the underlying common-sense knowledge that substantiates these rather mundane events in the school context?

The question of members' everyday understanding and management of their social life-world has been a central issue in ethnomethodology, starting from Sacks' notorious interest in the common-sense knowledge that members routinely deploy to interpret and predict others' behavior (Sacks, 1992). This broad interest can be more closely specified around members' deployment of *categories* and their associated predicates and attributes: individuals daily re-construct and make sense of social action by displaying, ascribing, and negotiating membership to specific social categories ('women', 'bank clerks', 'Chinese people' and so on). Even though Sacks' insights gave way to a relevant milieu of studies (e.g., Jayyusi, 1984), until the early 2000s this stream of research remained rather peripheral within ethnomethodologically-oriented studies, which mainly revolved around Conversation Analysis (CA). Lately, a renewed interest in members' understanding and local use of social categories resulted in numerous studies on the topic, often under the common frame of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Stokoe, 2012; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015; see also the studies in Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). These studies share a concern with the empirical examination of members' orientation to social categories in interaction, focusing on the verbal, embodied, and material resources that people contingently deploy to construct themselves (or others) as members of a certain category (e.g., category bound to ethnicity, Whitehead, 2009, or gender, Stokoe, 2003).

Social categories in childhood and adolescence

This renewed interest was also sustained by studies on the common-sense knowledge and peer sociality of *children and adolescents*. Within this specific research domain, Ann-Carita Evaldsson's work was seminal in making children's and adolescents' understanding of social categories a viable topic of study in CA-oriented analyses (e.g., 2002, 2005, 2007). Evaldsson, together with other like-minded scholars, started focusing on the sequentiality and social relevance of children's and adolescents' orientation to social categories,

analyzing the daily re-construction of social identities and relationships in the peer group. These studies illustrated how the mobilization of membership categories in specific contexts of social action allowed children to negotiate and dispute their (mis)alignments to one another: in and through directives, assessments, teasing, storytelling, and other practices, children and adolescents resorted to both adult and peer-constructed social categories to re-negotiate their social selves and the overall order of the peer group (see Kyratzis and Goodwin, 2017 for an overview). These local uses of social categories were observed both in pretend play and in mundane interactions.

As regards *pretend play*, children were shown to resort to hierarchically ordered social roles (e.g., doctor-nurse-patient, mother-father-child, teacher-student) to sustain locally-constructed play frames. Notably, these social roles were often associated with category-bound ways of speaking, activities and rights. For instance, children enacted privileged and high-status roles (doctors, parents) through direct and unmitigated forms of requests, whereas they enacted lower status roles (patients, younger siblings) through more polite and indirect forms of request (Andersen, 1990; Cobb-Moore, 2012). In addition to category-bound ways of speaking, children invoked specific roles and social categories to assert the right to specific social actions, objects, or spaces. For example, children were shown to invoke the social category ‘nurses’ to claim the right to use a toy syringe (“I’m the nurse and the nurses getta do shots, remember?”, Sheldon, 1997, p. 235). As evident from the latter example, when children assert membership to specific categories they are not simply ‘playing’ with characters, but negotiating real-life asymmetries—for instance, asymmetries in the access to specific materials or in processes of decision-making that influence the unfolding of everyday life in the peer group (Goodwin, 2006; Butler & Weatherall, 2006; Bateman, 2022; Davidson, 2022).

Apart from pretend play, children and adolescents might organize their *mundane interactions* with reference to social categories that are relevant within a specific context of social practice. Bound to each of these categories is a set of attributes and norms, which might be mobilized to interpret and assess other peers’ behavior. For instance, boys might be negatively evaluated for not fulfilling the normative expectations associated with a certain idea of masculinity within the peer group culture (Evaldsson, 2021). These normative expectations also regard the overall morality of the peer group (i.e., the set of appropriate and inappropriate ways of behaving with peers). For example, adolescents have been shown to sanction another peer for calling on adults for help (ascribing her to the despised category of ‘snitches’; Evaldsson & Svahn, 2012) and primary school children were recorded targeting a classmate for not telling the truth (ascribing him to the category of ‘liars’; Nasi, 2024, p. 109f). On other occasions, children and adolescents make relevant social categories that are bound to ethnicity, mocking other peers for their (lack of) language proficiency (Evaldsson, 2005; Evaldsson & Cekaite, 2010), or recurrently blaming peers who are perceived as belonging to a racialized out-group category (e.g., Moroccan immigrants in Spain; García-Sánchez, 2014). These

ethnically-defined social categories are not only evoked in negative ways. For instance, adolescents have been shown to actively display their migratory background, claiming membership to an ‘alien’ social group and thereby indexing their hybrid identities (Corona et al., 2013). It is worth noting that these social categories might be bound to narratives and debates in the broader socio-cultural community (e.g., gender or ethnicity), but they might also be quite specific to a small community of practice. For instance, studies in the school context have shown how children orient to categories of competence and proficiency, negotiating their local identities and peer relationships on the basis of the local management of knowledge (e.g., who is ‘the most knowledgeable student’? Melander, 2012; Morek, 2015).

An empirical illustration

These lengthy reflections are best discussed with a concrete example. Let’s consider a stretch of peer interaction from Evaldsson’s research, first published in the journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction* (Evaldsson, 2007). Three girls, aged between 11 and 12, are interacting in a primary school in Sweden, negotiating the rights and responsibilities that are associated with ‘being a good friend’ in the peer group. A girl, Jackie, accuses her classmates Leena of untoward behavior (‘taking advantage of another girl’), prompting her to justify her actions and defend her membership to the category of the ‘good friends’.

Excerpt

- 9 Jackie å ↑Leena när du e- vi e me henne då
 10 utnyttjar hon Zaida o e me henne. ↑å då
 11 e hon inte längre me henne bara när vi har grupper (.)
 12 ↑när ni två e sams då kommer ni ba så här (.)
 13 “o hon gjorde de o hon gjorde de” bara för att ni vill att vi ska va-

**And ↑Leena when you are- we are with her, then
 she takes advantage of Zaida and is with her. And then
 she’s not with her any more only when it’s group work (.)
 ↑when you two are together then you two come like this (.)
 “she did this and she did that” only because you want us to-**

((lines not shown))

- 26 Leena [↑JA:: utnyttjar inte Zaida=
 [↑ I:: **do not take advantage of Zaida=**
 27 Jackie =Ni vill att vi ska va på nåns sida men vi e inte på nåns
 28 sida vi e [på varandras sida
 = **You two want us to be on somebody’s side, but we are not on
 anybody’s side [we are on one another’s side**
 29 Leena [↑NÄ:: ja utnyttjar inte nån för egentligen när ja kommer
 30 på morgonen så säger ja till Zaida “kom Zaida”

31 eller hur? Inte sant?
[↑NO:: I do not take advantage of anyone cause
 actually when I arrive in the morning I say to Zaida
 “come Zaida!” don’t I? right?

32 Zaida °ja°
 Yeah

33 Leena Ja där ser ni! ja utnyttjar inte henne

34 ja utnyttjar inte
 Yeah there you are! I don’t take advantage of her
 I don’t take advantage of her

Adapted from Evaldsson 2007, pp. 387-389

Jacky publicly accuses Leena of taking advantage of another group member, ascribing her to the negative category of the ‘bad friends’. Her extended turn and the management of the personal pronouns (Leena’s third person reference ‘she’, contrasted with the in-group pronoun ‘we’; lines 9 to 13) contribute to excluding Leena from the ratified participants and single her out for criticism. Leena emphatically counters this public accusation: through a pitch leap, a shift in pronoun, and a negation, the girl resists the negative category-bound activity of “tak[ing] advantage of Zaida” (line 26). In addition to the negation of the problematic conduct, which is repeated four times in rapid succession, Leena draws attention to her ordinary routine (*when I arrive in the morning I say to Zaida “come Zaida”*, line 30) and calls Zaida as a witness of her narrative (*don’t I? right?*, line 31). This mobilization of Zaida, the girl allegedly taken advantage of, is instrumental in underpinning Leena’s defense in front of the other girls. Zaida confirms Leena’s narrative (line 32), providing her with a powerful argument to restore her moral status and social identity: through her repeated denials and Zaida’s confirmation, Leena is able to position herself as fulfilling the category-bound obligations of a ‘good friend’ as a responsible and caring person who “performs routine friend-like activities” (Evaldsson, 2007, p. 390). Through the analysis of this and other excerpts, Evaldsson convincingly showed how the girls resorted to morally-laden categories (‘good friend’ vs ‘bad friend’) to negotiate their social selves and the network of alliances and antagonisms that crisscrosses the peer group. The significance of these analytical insights was *theoretical* and *methodological* at the same time.

In relation to theories of young people's sociality and mundane knowledge, the article showed the relevance of the nexus of broader discourses, ideologies, culturally-shaped categories, norms and expectations that play a role in everyday praxis. In order to provide significant accounts of children's and adolescents' sociality—accounts that are close to their own *emic* perspective and understanding—, this broader network of semiotic systems and diachronic features must be somehow considered: everyday practice in the peer group cannot be fully understood with a restricted focus on the contingent and

observable features of children's mutual engagement. In fact, a constant oscillation between local actions and broader systems (i.e., between the local and 'dislocal' nature of social interaction; Cooren, 2010) can provide a holistic understanding of children and adolescents' mundane reasoning and everyday experience of their life-world. For instance, the social categories that are relevant within a specific peer community, or the diachronic relationships between classmates, shape and constrain everyday practice without being necessarily topicalized or displayed by participants (on the topic, see Levinson, 2005). It is worth noting that this attention to broader systems should not lead us astray from the 'concreteness' and relevance of what children and adolescents actually do in their peer interactions. Thus, a *moderate holism* (Linell, 2009) is probably a balanced theoretical posture when approaching young people's mundane sociality: the broader discourses and ideologies that 'haunt' mundane activities are taken into account as long as they can be somehow grounded in concrete sequences of local actions and reactions.

This theoretical stance is bound to a methodological posture that allows the analyst to take into account these various non-local, non-immediately-visible entities that young people rely on to manage and make sense of mundane activities. As convincingly shown in Evaldsson's article, this posture combines the *micro-analysis of video recorded social interaction* with an *ethnographic perspective*. As regards the video recordings, the article illustrated how the details of children's mutual engagement made the difference in the daily reconstruction of their peer cultures and relationships (e.g., details such as words, pauses, intonation, gestures). The analysis of what young people precisely say and do is paramount to highlight how specific semiotic resources are contingently deployed to pursue a certain social aim. Despite its heuristic significance, this focus on the observable details of social interaction has some limits. For instance, the relevance of specific social categories in the girls' relational talk could not be considered without an ethnographic knowledge of the social categories that are routinely used and 'current' within that specific peer group. The analysis of membership categories, together with the category-bound activities and characteristics that are "habitually and conventionally associated" with them, necessarily relies on a certain knowledge of the broader sociocultural context in which they are locally mobilized and invoked (Evaldsson, 2021, p. 305). This knowledge can be acquired through a period of ethnographic fieldwork, i.e., a prolonged period of on-site observation that is instrumental in familiarizing with the social organization, developmental and relational trajectories, sociocultural norms and routines, and interpretative strategies of a specific social group (see Duranti, 1997 on ethnographic methods). The combination of this ethnographic knowledge and the detailed analysis of local inter-actions can provide empirically grounded analyses of peer sociality and cultures, constructing scientific knowledge that is close to children's and adolescents' emic understanding of their own life-worlds (Evaldsson, 2005).

Epilogue

So, let's go back to the examples that introduced this essay. If you are somehow in contact with children's and adolescents' everyday activities, you might be faced with a boy being ridiculed with a high-pitch voice (Evaldsson, 2002), with a girl being insulted for her alleged sexual behavior (Evaldsson, 2021), or with a boy being marginalized because of his lack of language proficiency (Evaldsson, 2005). These episodes can be best understood with reference to the peer culture and common-sense knowledge that underpin and substantiate young people's mutual engagement: the (negative) assessment of specific peers and the overall co-construction of social identities and relationships usually revolves around culturally shaped social categories. Notably, while these categories might be evoked to construct affiliative relationships and a cohesive peer group culture, they are at times mobilized to marginalize other peers and negatively assess their conduct. For instance, multiple children might publicly and repeatedly belittle a classmate for his/her inability to meet specific standards and expectations, leading to the solidification of a problematic social identity. In turn, these hetero-imposed ascriptions to a negative social category (e.g., 'sluts', 'liars', 'snitches', 'bad friends') might hinder a child's ability to construct meaningful social relationships in the peer group, possibly jeopardizing the possibility to participate in everyday activities and to qualify for membership in the peer culture. Considering these potential risks for social exclusion and their disproportionate impact on young people with limited interactional skills or impairments, it is important to be able to grasp and address the social significance of peer social categories—both as a scientific researcher and as an educational professional. An increased understanding of young people's category work can provide us with interpretative keys to monitor and possibly re-address trajectories of peer inclusion and exclusion. Ann-Carita Evaldsson's work provides us with a window into children's and adolescents' peer cultures and own understanding of social relationships—let's use this knowledge to further our scientific and professional understanding of their social worlds and co-construct educational environments in which the possibility to re-address and question a negative category ascription is always granted.

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