In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe (Eds.) (1998). Identities in Talk (pp. 15-33). London: Sage.

2 The Relevant Thing about Her: Social Identity Categories in Use

Derek Edwards

One of the central themes in this book, from the introduction onwards, is how social identity categories are handled *in use*. The classical treatment of this is Harvey Sacks's (1979, 1992) 'hotrodder' study, together with related bits of analysis and his remarks on 'membership categorization devices' (see also Hester and Eglin, 1997a; Jayyusi, 1984; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). Sacks examined how a group of 1960s 'teenagers' (the label is contentious), in group therapy sessions, talked around issues of who they were and what they did. 'Hotrodder' was a term they used for themselves, a word derived from ownership and activities with customized cars (hotrods). But the deployment of the term 'hotrodder', as a description of people, was effectively a way of drawing boundaries around who did and did not count (for a current speaker, in the current talk) as legitimate members of that category. Among the features of the uses of this word, were how it was aligned with various other terms (e.g., descriptions of cars and activities), and how it contrasted with alternatives (e.g., 'teenager', which was an adult's, outsider's, description).

Sacks's general concern was with how conversational participants *use* descriptive categories of this kind, and apply membership criteria, as a way of performing various kinds of discursive actions. His approach contrasts with how such categories figure in other kinds of social science, as *analysts' categories* of people, according to which the analyst offers explanations of what they do, what they say, and how they think. This shift, towards treating categorizations of that kind as topics under investigation (participants' resources for doing descriptions and explanations) rather

than as analysts' explanatory resources, is a key feature of ethnomethodological work (Wieder, 1988) that figures also in discourse analytic studies of group identity (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). So Sacks's focus on *members' categories* was part of an empirical investigation of how verbal categories are actually used in conversation, and those uses included defining and policing group membership. For example, the notion that 'hotrodder' could be considered 'a revolutionary category' (Sacks, 1979, 1992) depends on this notion of *members' categories*. They can be part of 'doing rebellion, the first feature of which is that one sets up a category you administer yourself' (Sacks, 1992, Vol. I: 174). More obvious examples of that include the promotion of racial (Sacks's example) and gender politics. According to Sacks, 'we could say that what dominant groups basically own is how it is that we see reality, and that there's an order of revolution which is an attempt to change how it is that persons see reality' (ibid.: 398).

Of course, category usage is an endemic feature of discourse, and whereas rebellion is not always the thing at issue, there is generally *something* at issue. Discourse is pervasively rhetorical (Billig, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992), which is to say, oriented to alternative possible ways of describing things – to argument, contention, and agreement (see Heritage, 1984a). So Sacks's work on *social* categories was part of a larger concern with the conversational business done by *all* words, and as such it can be contrasted with currently popular cognitive and social psychological approaches to categorization. For example, the cognitive psychology of categories and metaphors (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1978) is dominated by perceptual-cognitive assumptions about the prelinguistic origins of language and mind, rather than seeking to discover the kinds of discursive actions that verbal categories may be designed and deployed for. For various discourse-based critiques and alternatives to those cognitivist assumptions, with regard to categorization and social psychological theories of it, see Billig (1985), Condor (1988), Edwards (1991, 1995a, 1997), Jayyusi (1984), Potter and Wetherell (1987), and Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995).

In social psychology the major approaches to social and personal identity categories are 'social identity theory' (Tajfel, 1982a) and its more cognitivist derivative, 'self categorization theory' or 'SCT' (Turner, 1987). These are extensions of basic cognitive category theory (Wetherell, 1996), with origins in Bruner's (1957) early work on perceptual categorization (see Tajfel, 1980), and drawing more recently on Rosch's (1978) perceptual approach to 'natural' and 'basic' categories. Rather than discussing SCT in detail here (let alone the more historically situated social identity theory of Tajfel – see Billig, 1996), I intend to pursue the nature of identity categories empirically, using conversational materials. But some features of SCT are worth highlighting, to provide a critical edge to the discursive approach I shall take (and to trail a theme that re-emerges in the chapters by McKinlay and Dunnett, Widdicombe, and Wooffitt and Clark).

Like Sacks and conversation analysis, SCT is concerned with group membership as a members' concern, a matter of how people categorize *themselves* (thus, 'self categorization'), rather than something imposed on them by other people's definitions:

> a psychological group is defined as one that is psychologically significant for the members, to which they relate themselves subjectively . . . that they privately accept membership in, and which influences their attitudes and behaviour . . . it is not simply a group one is *in*, but one which is subjectively important in determining one's behaviour. (Turner et al., 1987: 1–2; original emphasis)

Despite the shared concern with people's own categorizations of themselves and of others, SCT and conversation analysis (CA) immediately part company in their analytical stances towards it. The quotation from Turner signals some immediate differences. For Turner, self categorizations, however they may be expressed, are in the first place essentially psychological, subjective, private mental processes, that exert a determining influence on thought and behaviour. They are therefore amenable to, and approachable in terms of, experimental variables and their effects. On the other hand, for Sacks, self categorizations, like categorizations of other people and of everything else, are discursive actions done in talk, and performative of talk's current business. So the best way to examine them is to find how they are used, and what kinds of discursive business they do, on and for the occasions when they are deployed. Further, there is no explanatory primacy given to *self* categorizations, as a psychological starting point for how everyone sees the world.

The difference between CA and its discourse analytic (DA) relatives on the one hand, and SCT on the other, is not merely a matter of catering for variability (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Both approaches recognize that a person may categorize him- or herself (or other people or things) differently, from one situation to another. The difference lies in how this variability is conceived and investigated, and the difference is, once again, a profound one. According to Turner,

> the functioning of the social self-concept is situation-specific: particular self-concepts tend to be activated ('switched on') in specific situations producing specific self-images . . . as a function of an interaction between the characteristics of the perceiver and the situation. (Turner et al., 1987: 44)

Note the terms 'activated', 'switched on', 'producing', and the mechanical, rather than social, sense of 'interaction'. This causes-and-variables kind of terminology locates SCT firmly within the theoretical and methodological traditions of experimental psychology, and sends us in pursuit of factors and circumstances, mental mechanisms and situational variables. Although Sacks (1992) also used terms such as 'machinery' and 'device' as metaphors

for conversational interaction, his analyses of talk were ethnomethodological rather than cognitivist and causal, and far from mechanical: see Edwards (1995a) on this, and Coulter (1990) for some uses of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis in generating a critique of standard psychological theory and method. In contrast to SCT, CA and (related kinds of) DA approach 'situational variability' as an *intrinsic feature* of talk and social action, in the sense that talk is always action-performative, designed for its occasions, reflexively constituting the sense of those occasions (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970; Heritage, 1984a), and rhetorically oriented. Rather than categorizations being switched into activity by situations, discourse works to define events, and make relevant its situations, by the kinds of categorizations it deploys. If this sounds rather abstruse, and the switchboard model easier to grasp, the cure is to set theory aside for a while and start dealing with some conversational materials, and examine how they work. I shall return briefly to contrasts with SCT later.

The title of this chapter, 'the relevant thing about her', is inspired by a discussion by Harvey Sacks (1992) of a fragment of data from the same group therapy sessions as produced the 'hotrodder' talk. We can use it as a point of departure before looking at some other data. 'Dan' is the therapist.

(1) (Sacks, 1992, Vol. I: 597, line numbers added)

1	Ken:	So did Louise call or anything this morning?
2	Dan:	Why, didju expect her t'call?
3	Ken:	No, I was just kinda hoping that she might be able to figure
4		out some way t-to come to the meetings and still be able
5		t'work. C'z she did seem like she d-wanted to come back, but
6		uh she didn't think she could.
7	Dan:	D'you miss her?
8	Ken:	Well in some ways yes, it's- it was uh nice having- having
9		the opposite sex in-in the room, you know, havin' a chick in
10		here.

Sacks focuses on Ken's switch from a named person ('Louise') to a generalized gender category (line 9: 'the opposite sex . . . *a chick*') to account for his concern for her absence, and to specify in what restricted sense he might 'miss her' (lines 7–8). 'Chick' is one of a variety of colloquial gender categorizations available to this group (1960s California teenagers), such that its choice signals something further about what the speaker is doing than merely his choice of a gender category. Sacks does not pursue that issue, and its possibly sexist implications; indeed, he understands the remark as, locally and for them, part of a compliment.

The feature that Sacks highlights is that, by using the generalized gender categories 'opposite sex' and 'chick', Ken effectively forestalls any inference that his concern might have been personal. As Sacks puts it, 'he wasn't

going to say he likes her or anything like that' (1992, Vol. I: 60). The gender categorizations work on the basis that Louise, as the only girl in the group, is uniquely, if impersonally, identifiable by gender, and that gender is picked out by Ken as the *relevant thing about her*. Further, Sacks examines how it functions as a 'safe compliment' categorization, in that it attends to the possible perceptions of other group members, who are all male. He imagines how something like 'it was nice having someone smart in the room' might invoke unfavourable implications for the rest of the group, smartness being one of 'a whole range of categories which also *can* apply to any other person in the room' (ibid.; 60; original emphasis).

We might add that 'in the room' and 'in here' (line 9) further specify the range of that relevance, to the meetings they are taking part in, rather than any more general, context-independent, sexual, or personal interest Ken might have had in Louise. So the way in which 'identity' categories work, at least in this example, is that by selecting one rather than another, speakers can perform and manage various kinds of interactionally sensitive business, including their motives and reasons for doing things and saying things. Further, the nature of relevant contexts or 'situations' is also talk's business, being categorized, specified, or invoked, as a way of defining and restricting the range of that relevance. As always, for both persons and situations, if they did not *have to be* described that way (or described at all), then the way they *are* described can be examined for what it might specifically be doing.

Married with Kids

Picking up from Sacks's example, I shall explore some ways in which person and situation categories work in discourse. My data are also a series of therapy-oriented talk sessions, but involving a married couple taking part in relationship counselling. 'Connie' and 'Jimmy' are a working-class Irish couple living in England, both aged 35 and with three children. The audio-taped data are taken from the first two sessions which they attended. Their counsellor is a middle-class Englishman. Conventionally, in introducing a data set of this kind, I have started to specify various 'identity' categories for these people. The assumption behind doing that is that information of this kind is relevant in some way to our understanding of what is going on, that it is the kind of thing we need to know, the kind of explanation-relevant demographic information routinely provided in ethnographies, surveys, interview studies, experiments, and so on. They are also the kinds of categories that SCT generally deals with: 'the self defined as male, European, a Londoner, etc.' (Turner, 1987: 29).

But before we go along with these conventions, and give this kind of information some kind of explanatory relevance, two cautions are in order. The first is that, in the analysis of discourse, what we are interested in is the

possible relevance of categories of this kind *for them*. As with Sacks's 'Ken' and 'Louise', we are interested in whether, and how, categories of this kind may figure as resources that *they* use in producing accounts and descriptions. Secondly, we should be wary of calling even this rather neutral and routine-looking stuff 'information' (see also Edwards, 1997). Given that they are potentially available for doing discursive 'business', categories such as gender, age, parental and marital status, nationality, etc., are not merely factual, or even value-laden observations that have an automatic relevance to people's conversational activities. The analytic task is to find if, when, and for what, they may have such relevance (Schegloff, 1992b). Indeed, rather than starting with a pre-defined or conventional list of such items, what we need to do is find whatever it is that participants do invoke, and how they use it.

In the body of the chapter I am going to offer some analyses of data that come from counselling sessions, and a word is in order about their provenance. The sessions were audio-recorded by the counsellor, with the knowledge and consent of his clients, whose permission to use the recordings for research purposes was rewarded by having to pay only half the usual fee for counselling. Each session lasted about an hour and runs to around 35 single-spaced pages of transcript. I know nothing of any of the three participants (and have never met them) outside of what is said on tape. Person and place names have been altered. As for notation, the general CA conventions are listed on pages viii–ix in this volume, and in addition I use asterisks to denote a high, 'squeaky' tone of voice.

In the data extracts that follow, I examine how a variety of kinds of 'identity' arise and are made relevant in, and to, the interaction. Following that, picking up the 'relevant thing about her' theme, I focus more specifically on various contrastive uses of the categories 'girls', 'married women', and other related descriptions. First, let us examine a sequence (extract 2) early in Jimmy and Connie's first counselling session, in which the counsellor, having obtained from Connie and Jimmy some initial descriptions of their marital problems, elicits various identity categorizations that presumably have some relevance to the business at hand, such as (generally speaking) relationship troubles and counselling.

(2) (DE–JF:C2:S1:p.4. Note that each extract is prefaced by a code specifying the data set and the place of the extract within it. Here 'DE–JF:C2:S1:p.4' specifies data transcribed by D. Edwards and J. Fong, couple 2, session 1, page 4.)

```
177   Counsellor: ↑Oka↓y so, (0.5) for me list↓enin:g, (.) you've
178               got (0.5) rich an:d, (.) complicated lives, I
179               nee:d to get some histo[ry to put-     ]
180   Connie:                            [Yyeh mmm,=]
181   Jimmy:      [Mmm. (.) Ye:h. (.) Oh ye:h.   ]
182   Connie:     [=Yeh (.) that's (.) exactly wha]t [ih °um° ]
183   Counsellor:                                    [i- i-    ] uh
```

184		(.) to begin ↓to make some sense of it. ˙hhh so:,
185		(0.2) hh↑how old ↓are you no:w?
186		(.)
187	Connie:	I'm thirty fi:ve,
188		(0.6)
189	Jimmy:	Thirty five.
190		(0.4)
191	Counsellor:	Right. And you::'ve >been married< how many years:,
192	Connie:	Just °twelve years now.°=
193	Jimmy:	=Thirteen years [in September.]
194	Connie:	[Thirteen years] in September.=
195	Counsellor:	=°Okay.° ˙hhh And you have how many children.
196	Connie:	Three children.
197		(0.7)
198	Counsellor:	And they are::
199		(0.7)
200	Connie:	[One iss]
201	Jimmy:	[twelve]
202		(0.3)
203	Jimmy:	[Eight]
204	Connie:	[just] eleven, (0.3) one is (0.2) just seven, (.)
205		and the other eight.
206	Counsellor:	El- eleven:, ei[ght, (.) and seven.]
207	Connie:	[eight and seven.] Yeh.=
208	Counsellor:	=Fine.
209		(.)
210		The eldest i:s ↑boy gir:l,=
211	Jimmy:	Bo[y.
212	Connie:	[Boy.
213	Counsellor:	Boy:,
214	Connie:	°David.°
215	Jimmy:	>Boy girl boy.<
216		(0.4)
217	Counsellor:	>Boy girl boy. So the< eight year old's the girl.
218		(0.8)
219		°Okay.° ˙hh Married tw↑elve yea::::rs, (0.3) an::d-

Note how the counsellor sets up the provision of various kinds of identity categories. First, there are some relevant identities for the current interaction, as a counsellor–client encounter, and in fact these have been partly established well before this point. The session starts (in line 1, not given here) with the counsellor switching on the tape recorder and checking whether his clients have 'been to Relate before'. And of course, my own labels for them identify them as 'Connie' and 'Jimmy', and the other participant as 'counsellor'. It is worth dwelling on this for a moment before looking at the transcribed details. The names 'Connie' and Jimmy' identify the couple personally and informally, whereas the 'counsellor' appears merely in role. So the couple's personal identities are implicationally relevant to the analysis, whereas the counsellor's personal identity, as

someone with a life history and set of personal concerns, is irrelevant. His role says (according to my transcript) all we need to know about him. These are not arbitrary choices of description, but rather, they reflect the materials under analysis, the bases on which the participants talk to each other.

In the recorded sessions the counsellor is not named, and nor are details of his personal life discussed; he talks as counsellor, and constitutes himself in that role, relative to them, each time he speaks (e.g., 'for me listening' and 'I need to get some history', lines 177–9, as well as in how he generally addresses them, informs them about his methods of counselling, asks questions, directs the flow of discussion, tells them about payment, and so on). In contrast, Connie and Jimmy are referred to by those names, by each other and by the counsellor, and it is their personal lives, not his, which are opened up for examination. In fact, 'Connie' and 'Jimmy' are pseudonyms, and other specific identifying information has been altered. Not only does that protect their lives from unethical intrusion, but it also says something about our analytic interests. We are interested in how persons talk about themselves, often in intimate detail. But it does not matter to us who they actually are. The names 'Connie', 'Jimmy', and 'counsellor', reflect our analytic interests and also something of theirs, preserving both how they address each other (in these recorded sessions), and also the asymmetry of their social interaction.

With regard to the talk itself, note that it is the counsellor, as an interactional participant, who specifies the categories of interest and also their explanatory relevance: he accounts for his requiring these details of their marital status and history, in order for him to 'make some sense' (line 184) of their 'rich and complicated lives' (line 178). Their complicated lives, and his making sense (rather than *his* complicated life and their sense of that), are descriptive orientations to the business of counselling, to what they are all doing here, talking to each other in the way that they do. It is the counsellor who introduces the various categories (length of marriage, age of children, etc.) as a resource for his understanding (line 184), for putting what they have already begun telling him (prior to extract (2)) into some kind of narrative, and possibly explanatory context ('history', 'make sense' – lines 179–84). The details that he asks for appear to be of a routine kind, and not much is made of them in extract (2). But things *do* get made of them, and we shall look at a few.

Before we do that, consider what *kinds* of 'sense' they *may* provide. This is quite easy to imagine. Being married or not, for example, might provide grounds for claims, stories, and complaints, based on marriage vows and responsibilities, commitments, expectations of fidelity, and so on. Their ages, both absolute and relative to each other, are potential bases for explaining shared or differential interests, expectations, and kinds of relationships. Length of marriage provides possible grounds for narrating circumstances prior to troubles, a relationship's history, causes and consequences, such as maybe having married at a young and inexperienced age,

or not yet having given it enough time, and so on. Children and their ages provide for adducing additional kinds of commitment, neglect, differential responsibilities, household divisions of labour, extra strains on the marriage, reasons for staying together, and so on. We can invent all kinds of possibilities and, of course, it is our understanding of such possibilities that make these kinds of materials coherent and analysable, for participants as much as for analysts. But the analytic task is not to produce idealized and presumptive stories of this kind, nor to use them as a 'given' basis for analysts' explanations, or psychological models, of what people do or say. Our task is to examine what it is, if anything, that people do with these kinds of categorizations.

Consider a few details from extract (2): the fact that Connie and Jimmy have children, the way Connie corrects Jimmy with regard to the children's ages (lines 201–5), the fact that the counsellor picks up Connie's corrected version as the one to go with (lines 206–8), and again how the counsellor picks up and repeats the fact that they have been 'married tw↑elve yea::::rs,' (line 219), with emphatic and drawn-out emphasis. First, Connie's correction of Jimmy and its uptake by the counsellor: these start to identify her (for them and us) as the one who owns best knowledge of the children. This is therefore, however minimally, a way in which demographic details such as having children, their ages, and parental identities, can start to be specified in particular ways and made discursively relevant.

There are other, more explicit ways. A few moments prior to extract (2) Connie had been providing, at the counsellor's prompting, a sketch of the troubles that brought them to seek counselling. Her story includes extract (3), concerning a time when Jimmy had 'walked out on' her.

(3) (DE–JF:C2:S1:p.2)

67		Connie:	An:d that'ss (.) when I RANG I actually ra:ng
68			because I was on my ow:n.
69			(1.0)
70	→		coping with my children ↑y'know?
71			(0.7)

So the children here are Connie's (emphatically 'my children', line 70), and being left to cope with them 'on my ow:n' (line 68) features as part of a specification of her troubles with Jimmy, of his part in those troubles, and of her need for help.

Marital status, and length of time married, also figure as rhetorical resources, and not merely as background factual information. An example of this occurs in the talk that continues after extract (2). The counsellor picks up the notion that they have been married twelve years, and immediately uses that to locate an event they had mentioned earlier, concerning a 'pub incident' involving a big argument and Jimmy eventually 'walking out'.

(4) (continuing from (2))

219 Counsellor: °Okay.° ˙hh Married tw↑elve yea::::rs, (0.3) an::d-
220 ˙hhh the time of the first walk out, after the pub
221 incident? ˙h wa::s t↑wo years ago did you sa↑:y?
222 Connie: Two years but now we:'ve had (.) problems,
223 [( )]
224 Jimmy: [Well] LONG before that we've had things where I've (.)
225 uh I'm going. I'd get in the car- an' [go.]
226 Counsellor: [Ten] years.
227 You've been walking out. *((sniffs))*
228 Connie: No[:. No]
229 Jimmy: [YEH yeh-]

The topic of what counts as a fully fledged 'walking out', and how long Jimmy has been doing it, becomes a hotly contended one in their talk, and we see only the start of it in (4). The counsellor sums it up: twelve years marriage (line 219), two years since the first walk-out (line 221), corrected to perhaps ten (line 226). We can imagine that this first formulation, that their troubles may be of only two years' duration, starts to generate possibilities for when and therefore how their troubles may have started, for what caused them, and who was to blame. Additionally, the notion that there may therefore have been many years of marriage before their troubles started, provides further possibilities for narrative accounts and potential bases for solutions; such as, it was okay once, so it can be again. But any such line of reasoning is quickly cut short, first by Connie (line 222) and then by Jimmy (line 224), who upgrades Connie's 'problems' to the status of earlier instances of 'walking out'. In fact, this develops into a major bone of contention between them, with Connie defining the marriage as basically good, solid, and just what she wanted (prior to his 'affair'), while Jimmy emphasizes the constant rows and (verbal) 'fights' they have had since the beginning, and how he has been walking out, or on the verge of it, all along (see Edwards, 1995b). Extract (4) includes the start of that contention (lines 228 and 229) within the counselling sessions. We can see from these materials how even the most ostensibly obvious, factual, trivial, demographic kinds of person-identifying categories can be invoked, worked up, played down, and otherwise used by participants as part of the discursive business at hand.

Girls and (Married) Women

In order to explore some of the rhetorical subtleties of identity category usage in the couple counselling materials, I shall focus on various uses of the terms *girl* and *woman*. Logically and semantically, these words might be thought to refer to distinct categories of people, younger versus older,

although where exactly the boundary is drawn may vary. One such boundary is marriage. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (on CD-ROM, 1992) defines *girl* as 'a female child; commonly applied to all young unmarried women', and lists various related and combined senses glossed as 'sweetheart' and 'prostitute'. *Woman* is given as 'an adult female human being'. I am not proposing that dictionaries tell us what people mean by the words they use, on any particular occasion. But we can start with the idea that *girl* and *woman* are separate categories with fuzzy and permeable boundaries, carrying potentially useful conventional associations with age, marital status, and potential sexual availability. The thing of interest here is some specific instances of how they were applied to the same individuals, and how such applications performed and managed discursive, rhetorical business, in signalling, in some bit of talk about someone, what I have called 'the relevant thing about her'.

Prior to extract (5) below, Connie has been telling of how Jimmy had left her on her own, 'coping with my children' (see extract (3)), and how she had subsequently found him 'living with someone else', another woman. Connie attributes Jimmy's walking out to his relationship with this other woman. For his part, Jimmy blames the walking out on various aspects of Connie's long-term behaviour. In extract (5), Connie cites Jimmy's affair as the prior and true cause (line 83) of his leaving.

(5) (DE–JF:C2:S1:p.2)

75		Connie:	(. . .) So (.) I'm here really to- (1.0) I dunno:
76			I just want to ta:lk to somebody, 'n (0.8) see:
77			why it happened, 'n (0.5) ↑things like that y'know?
78			(0.8)
79		Counsellor:	To explore what happened.=
80		Connie:	=To explore: what happened exactly y'know, because
81			I can't accept (1.0) I can't accept (1.0) y'know: (.)
82			what he's telling me, (0.5) y'know?= =I just belie:ve
83	→		that this girl was here all alo:ng, (0.2) and that's why.
84			(0.5)

Again we can see how some of the married-with-children kinds of identity categories, that were introduced in extract (2), can start to be used as discursive resources in the production of narrative accounts. The specific item of interest here, in extract (5), is 'this girl' in line 83. Whereas Connie might well have said 'this woman', the expression 'this girl' serves to downgrade her status, if not her threat, as an unattached, unmarried, available, possibly young, female. I do not want to make too much of those connotations at this point, nor to hinge an analysis on a single word: it is not possible to nail down precise meanings of that kind. Indeed, that is part of the functionality of such fuzzy categories, that they can invoke various indexical possibilities without making explicit claims that might be easier to rebut.

Nevertheless we can follow the descriptions *woman* and *girl* in how Jimmy deals with Connie's claims. Following Connie's account of her problems, the counsellor invites Jimmy to say something.

(6) (following shortly after (5))

98		Jimmy:	(. . .) U::m (0.8) it's >not right< to sa:y that (0.5)
99			>I didn't leave Connie for another woman.<
100			(0.6)
101			But (0.4) I was liv- sleepin' away for (0.5) 'bout
102			three- three weeks (.) ↓four weeks three weeks (0.4)
103	→		whatever, (0.6) when I moved in: (.) with a wo- girl,
104			which I did have (1.0) uh: a bit of a fling with (.)
105			when Connie went on holiday last year.
106			(1.2)
107			U::m
108			(2.0)
109			a:nd moved in with her, (0.6) (uh, what, three weeks?)
110			(2.8)
111			uhh (0.8) then moved back ↑out.
112			(2.0)

Jimmy denies leaving Connie 'for another woman' (line 99), which is consistent with his general story of long-term marital strife, and Connie's outrageous flirtatiousness, as the cause of his leaving (see Edwards, 1995b). Leaving someone 'for another woman' is a recognizable cultural idiom for this kind of activity. But note Jimmy's repair in line 103, where he apparently starts to say 'woman' and corrects it to 'girl'. The category he uses switches from the denied and generalized one ('another woman'), to the particular person with whom he admits he 'moved in'. Aligning himself with Connie's description, 'girl', enables Jimmy to make his own use of any downgrading of her status that the switch allows. Note how this fits with other features of his talk: what Connie had previously called an 'affair', Jimmy refers to as 'a bit of a fling' (line 104), specifically located during a holiday (line 105) rather than something long-term. He also softens Connie's prior description 'living with' into 'moved in with' (line 103), a more locative rather than sexual kind of expression, reinforced by how he shortly 'then moved back out' (line 111). So Jimmy's adoption of the term *girl* manages to align with Connie's, while helping to downgrade the status of his relationship with the 'girl', and counter Connie's claim that something more serious, long-term, and marriage-threatening had been going on 'all along' (extract (5), line 83).

Contrasts between the expressions *girl* and *woman* are not driven by objective category membership, nor a slavish adherence to semantics, nor even to invoke the specific kinds of implications we have seen in extracts (5) and (6) with regard to Jimmy's 'other woman'. Connie also uses both

terms *girl* and *woman* when talking about herself and her friends. The instances I shall examine centre around Connie's complaint about Jimmy's attitude to her having nights out with her female friends. Connie complains that Jimmy unreasonably disapproves, and gets extremely and irrationally jealous, of what she might be getting up to with other men, thus severely restricting her freedom in going out. Jimmy defends his suspicions as rational and based on his knowledge of what she is like after a few drinks. At least, this crude summary must suffice, given the lack of space to show here how these concerns are worked up and managed, with marvellous rhetorical intricacy, in their talk.

In extract (7) (from session 2) the counsellor invites Connie to spell out 'quietly to Jimmy' her desire for more 'freedom of choice' in what she does. I should say that in this extract you will see quotation marks within speakers' turns, but they don't signal actual quotations. Rather, they show the speaker overtly 'doing quotation' as a presentational feature of talk, speaking 'in the voice' of another (see Wooffitt, 1992), usually with a shift in tone of voice, rate of speech, or a kind of acted-out lilting quality to the delivery (e.g., Edwards, 1995b), sometimes imitative of another speaker, and often, as below, separated off by pauses.

(7) (DE–JF:C2:S2:p.22)

1375	Connie:	>What I would like to be able to do is,< when my friend
1376		rings me up, (0.5) every six weeks, or: when they're
1377 →		having a ↑girls' night out, >to be able to say,< (.)
1378		"yeh I'd love to go." (0.7) Without (0.2) THAT meaning,
1379		(.) going out with my frie:nds (.) doesn't have anything
1380		to do: (0.2) with not wanting to sit in with you.
1381		(0.8)
1382		That's what I mean.
1383		(.)
1384		I just (.) want (0.8) you know how o:ften it happens,
1385		(.) an' I just like to go out with you, (0.8) sitting
1386		there saying, (.) "th*a- y*eh th*at's f*ine," (0.8)
1387		no:t (.) with sitting there with a fa:ce that's (.)
1388		I kno:w I've (.) touched on a sore spot.
1389		(1.0)
1390		I just- that's what I would like. (.) And (.) as I said,
1391		(.) you know (.) how often that that happens.
1392		(0.6)
1393		When my frie:nd rings me up (.) "I have a pro:blem,"
1394		(1.3)
1395		y'know: "d'y'fa:ncy comin out, an hav'n a chat?" (.)
1396		"Ye:h I'd love to go:, no: problem, (.) I'll see you
1397		such and such a time,"= but I don't feel that I have
1398		to (0.3) say, (.) "would you ↑mi:nd Jimmy? (0.9) if I
1399		go out," (0.7) or::, (0.9) whatever.

The thing of interest again here is how relevant identities are formulated, concerning Connie and her friends, and how those formulations work in company with other descriptive categories – activities, places, circumstances, narrative details. The focal details here, for the analytic points I want to make, are 'friend(s)' and 'girls' night out' (lines 1375 and 1377 respectively). The people Connie wants to go out with are her friends (not some unknown quantity, some anonymous bunch of women, say), and rather than this being an activity she is especially looking to do, Connie's role is reactive (lines 1376, 1393) to an occasional telephone call from one of them. The burden upon Jimmy of such events is played down: it happens only 'every six weeks' or so (line 1376), and 'you know how often it happens' (line 1384). The activity and purpose of such nights out is the kind of thing friends do, having a 'chat' about some 'problem' (lines 1393–5). The categories 'friend(s)' and 'girls' work together with these and other details (e.g., the 'just' in line 1385) to define these nights out as entirely unthreatening and harmless to Jimmy, such that his objections and suspicions are unfounded.

If I may again gloss the content of some intervening talk, Jimmy responds that Connie is asking him to 'trust' her, but he cannot do that, knowing how she 'behaves' when 'out with company'. The category 'company' nicely works to widen the social scope of Connie's nights out with her women friends, without being explicit enough to require a denial. He also attends to the objection that he is not there to see what she does on girls' nights out:

(8) (DE–JF:C2:S2:p.23)

1427	Jimmy:	Well (.) I never kn↑ew what you're like (.) on- when
1428		you're out with the girls. (.) But I know what you're
1429		like when you're out with me: with a load of ↑people.=
1430	Connie:	=Yye:h, well I've been ma[rried for-]
1431	Jimmy:	[a:nd the:n-]
1432		(0.5)
1433		[( )]
1434	Connie:	[I:'ve been] married for twe:lve ↑years Jimmy,=
1435		I:'ve never had an affai:r or: an atta-
1436		invo:lve[ment with anybody else.]
1437	Jimmy:	[↑That's ↓what you're tellin' ↑me,]
1438		[y- you're a:lways tellin' me that.]
1439	Connie:	[That's the truth. And you kno:w] that's the truth.

Jimmy claims to be extrapolating from what he knows Connie to be like, on occasions that he *has* directly witnessed. Note again here Connie's rhetorical use of their twelve years of marriage (see the discussion of extract (2)), as a basis for her claim to long-term fidelity and trustworthiness, a nice counter to Jimmy's mistrust of her which, with perfect symmetry, invokes which of them *has* had an affair. Jimmy 'ironizes' her claim

as mere words (line 1437). But let us stay with the 'girls' Connie wants to go out with. Jimmy's formulation, 'when you're out with the girls' (lines 1427–8) echoes Connie's prior description, 'a girls' night out', though significantly omitting Connie's account of how such events are triggered by 'a friend' wanting to talk about a 'problem'. Jimmy uses the categories 'girls' and going 'out', compares that to occasions he has witnessed (line 1429), and goes on (in further talk) to build it all as problematic, a socializing, pub-based kind of event in which Connie has a few drinks and becomes flirtatious. Jimmy concurs with the counsellor's suggestion, that he fears Connie 'might end up in bed with someone else'.

Now, the category 'girls', as we saw earlier with regard to Jimmy's affair, is nicely appropriate for any such sexual developments – nicely, that is, for Jimmy's version of things. Jimmy tells of an evening when Connie came home late from such a girls' night out, and Connie disputes his story and re-tells it in her own words. The counsellor then sets up 'a little experiment' for them. This is a counselling-oriented exercise in mutual understandings, in which Connie will tell her side of things, and Jimmy has to repeat what Connie says, and then vice versa. I shall restrict the analysis to Connie's re-telling, omitting (again for brevity's sake) the way Jimmy, in repeating it, manages also to parody it. So Connie proceeds to talk again of her 'girls' nights out', but now (in extract (9)) *reformulates their relevant identities*, as 'married women'.

(9) (DE–JF:C2:S2:p.30)

1846	Connie:	(. . .) when I go out with the gir:ls, it's a:ll married
1847		women talking about our ki:ds or somebody rin:gs (.)
1848		'hh they have a pro:blem, y'know (.) "d'you fancy go-"
1849		(.) that's uh- (.) the gir:ls night out
1850		(. . .)*((several turns omitted here))*
1851		When I go out with people it's normally a crow:d of
1852		married women, (.) which Jimmy knows each and every
1853		one of them.
1854		(0.8)
1855		Ri:ght? It's normally to a pub, that's nor:mally quiet,
1856		(0.5) you kno:w that there's (.) ↑no:body in it (.)
1857		because it's normally on a Wednesday or a Thursday night
1858		that we would go out, (.) there's ve:ry few people out,
1859		(0.2) an' it's a:lways a quiet pub. (.) Ni:ne out of ten
1860		times it would be that type of pla:ce because (.)
1861	Counsellor:	But what about the ti:me that it isn't?=
1862	Connie:	=The on:ce (.) it would be: I actually remember once
1863		now, (.) an' that's why I said ni:ne out of ten times
1864		'cos I KNO:W Jimmy is going to say it, 'h
1865	Jimmy:	[th- the-]
1866	Connie:	[the one] night we went was to (.) the- m- (.) this
1867		Manhattan Rock Cafe:, (.) which was (.) no wa:y you
1868		could possibly ta:lk in because it's lou:d its music

1869	but (.) full o' women on a Thursday night which I will
1870	state again. ˙hhh But (.) ˙hh this isn't nor:mally the
1871	pub (.) that we go to, (.) nor:mally as I sai:d it's (.)
1872	either (.) maybe somebody's birthday? (0.2) That's (.)
1873	a reason we go out an' have a few drinks, ˙h another
1874	it could be: somebody has a problem like recently a
1875	friend of mine had a pro:blem that wanted to talk, ˙hh
1876	the:se are the ni:ghts out, (.) these are the (.)
1877	thi:ngs we sit around ↑one table (.) full of married
1878	women, (0.2) an' that's (.) normally our nights out.

Connie takes this re-telling opportunity to attend to Jimmy's objections to 'girls' nights out', and to define the specific occasion he complained of, both as harmless and as exceptional (the pervasive and emphatic 'normally', and 'nine times out of ten', and lines 1861–71). The 'girls' are respecified as 'all married women' (lines 1846, 1852, 1877), and all known to Jimmy (line 1852). Their activities consist of recognizably harmless category-relevant things for 'married women' to do, such as talking about their children, talking about personal problems, or celebrating a birthday (lines 1847, 1872, 1874). Rather than looking for any kind of additional male company, they routinely choose a quiet pub and a quiet night (lines 1855–60) so they can chat about personal and family matters. Note how the details work, how relevant identities (married women) are built not only by naming folk as such, but by combining those descriptions with category-relevant activities (talking about their children and problems) and places (quiet, empty pubs, not noisy night clubs), including how they 'sit around one table' together, as a group and exclusively ('full of' married women, line 1877), rather than, say, looking to pair off with any men who might be around. The category 'married women' does not get used here merely because that is *what they are*, or *how they think* of themselves. It was not used when Connie first described her nights out. Its use attends to local, rhetorically potent business in their talk. Further, it occurs in narrative combination with descriptions of places and circumstances that, rather than serving as situational variables, are as much talk's business to define and make relevant as are the descriptions of persons.

Concluding Comments

In contrast to the cognitions-in-context model of social categorizations offered by a psychological account such as self categorization theory (SCT), the analysis of how categorizations of self and others arise in discourse emphasizes their locally constructed, occasioned, and rhetorically oriented nature. In SCT there is scant interest in discovering empirically what the categories are that people use, nor how they use them. Rather, given that we know what the categories pretty obviously are, the aim is to

explain how people will place themselves and others into them, according to the situations they find themselves in. In discursive psychology, that kind of mechanical variables-and-effects model is replaced by one in which categorizations are studied as empirical phenomena occurring in talk and text. Rather than fitting into a causal matrix, categorizations feature in actively worked-up versions, that constitute the sense of the very circumstances in which they are used. Indeed, 'the situations they find themselves in' are ordinarily no less subject to the vagaries of categorization and description than the people themselves. The situational flexibility found, in how discourse categories are used, is not triggered or 'switched on' by situations so much as defining and making them relevant, providing for their interpretation, countering alternative versions, generating some kind of narrative and explanatory sense of things. Those definitions are things people do in their talk, rather than things that experimenters do for them by providing conditions and variables within which to record their responses.

One of the virtues of SCT is that it has partially dissolved the distinction between 'social' and 'personal' identity that was used in social identity theory. Rather than denoting distinct psychological entities, these are now conceived as products of the same kinds of cognitive categorizations (Oakes et al., 1994). According to SCT, 'self-concepts are categories and like all categories are based on the perception of intra-class similarities and inter-class differences between stimuli' (Turner, 1987: 44). Social identities will predominate over personal ones, for example, where between-group differences are perceived as more salient than within-group differences between persons. It is as if, when Connie and Jimmy shift between the inter-class alternatives 'girls' and '(married) women', they do so having first 'processed' intra-class similarities, as if checking, for instance, which category was the best designator of people's perceptually salient properties.

It is an extraordinary psychology of mental processes that we are driven to (see Edwards, 1997, and what Button et al., 1995, call 'spectatorism') when we ignore how discourse and social interaction work. Despite SCT's vocabulary of perception and 'stimuli', the groups and categories to which people may belong, that they identify with, aspire to, or count themselves members of ('the self defined as male, European, a Londoner, etc.', Turner, 1987: 29) are also *verbal categories* (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Discursive psychology's point of departure is the observation that, being verbal categories that folk may apply, these are indeed categories like any other, that is, *descriptions* that can be analysed in the same way as other descriptions, as discourse phenomena. The task is to analyse what people do with the words they use.

Such analysis – of what people *do* with categorical descriptions – gets us away from idealizations such as what Turner (1987) defines as three hierarchically nested 'levels' of the self concept. These are derived from Rosch's (1978) work on 'natural' categories, where there are superordinate levels (e.g., furniture), that include intermediate levels (e.g., chair), that in

turn include subordinate levels (e.g., dining chair). Thus, according to Turner, self concepts can be divided into at least three levels of abstraction: the superordinate level of the self as human being, in contrast to other forms of life; the intermediate level of ingroup-outgroup categorizations such as 'American', 'female', and so on; and the subordinate level of personal self-categorization in terms of one's personality or other kinds of individual differences. These levels can be said to define one's 'human', 'social' and 'personal' identity respectively (Turner, 1987: 45).

Again, the trouble is how permeable these rather idealized 'levels' are. Differentiations between members of social groups (men and women, Scots and Maoris, etc.), are likely to deploy the same kinds of 'personality' categories as distinguish individuals (laziness, meanness, aggressiveness, cruelty, efficiency, etc.). And even the distinctions between what (or who) is 'human' or not, or to be *treated as* human or not (e.g., the Great Apes Project, artificial intelligence, human infants, see Edwards, 1994), deploy the same kinds of descriptions and attributions as folk do for each other (intelligence, rationality, empathy, communicative competence, etc.).

It is not just a matter of recognizing group versus personal categorizations *on sight*. Conventional demographic identities such as male and female, working man and housewife, married woman and girl, parent and child, and so on, are quite capable of being used for doing very personal kinds of category work with regard to narrated events and accountability in them, as we saw with Connie and Jimmy. Similarly, ostensibly personal or dispositional kinds of categories, such as being jealous or flirtatious, sociable or morose, can be worked up as some kind of group membership, just as Connie and Jimmy did with regard to Connie's taking part in 'girls' nights out', and how they categorize themselves and each other as being one *kind* of person rather than another (Edwards, 1995b).

Again, ostensibly obvious 'group membership' categories, such as the fact that the couple are Irish and the counsellor English (national identities), fail to materialize as anything they treat as relevant. England and Ireland do crop up plenty of times. They figure as *locations* in narratives of marital separation, having to seek work, going home for holidays, needing to visit friends and relations, opportunities for affairs, distinctions between one kind of separation (holiday, work) and another (walking out, splitting up). But these are the kind of thing that living in town versus countryside, small town versus city, north versus south, etc., can be used for. But Jimmy and Connie here make nothing at all of *being Irish*, which of course is not to say that they may not do so sometimes. The point is that virtually any categorization can function as a way of locating someone as a member of some group or another, and that group membership can be invoked and deployed for local, 'personal' business; that is the kind of thing people do, and attend to, and counter, in their talk. This is, of course, one of the central themes of this book as a whole, as is the recommendation that the best way of seeing how they do that, and what they do with it, is to study their talk.

Asking what people are *doing*, when their talk reveals that they assign descriptions (i.e., categories) to themselves and to each other, requires a theory and methodology for dealing with descriptions, with discourse approached as a species of social action. Social cognition theories essentially lack a theory of language, and a way of dealing with it empirically as a social phenomenon. Harvey Sacks (1979, 1992) started to show us how 'identity' categories can be approached empirically, how insider–outsider issues are worked up and attended to in talk, how descriptions can perform 'membership' business, and how that can perform further, local, interactional business in the current talk. Categorization is approachable discursively as something we actively do, and do things with (Edwards, 1991), rather than some piece of perceptual machinery that gets switched on by 'stimulus' events. Social categorizations are interaction's business, its matters in hand, not its causal effects or conditions.

Note

Thanks are due to Margaret Wetherell, Jonathan Potter, and Michael Billig for useful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.