

Sacks and Psychology

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A review of:

HARVEY SACKS, *Lectures on Conversation*, volumes 1 & 2. Edited by Gail Jefferson with introductions by Emanuel Schegloff. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. lxii + 818 pp. & li + 580 pp. ISBN 1-55786-358-X (Vol. 1); 1-55786-359-8 (Vol. 2).

ABSTRACT. Sacks's lectures are the historical foundation of conversation analysis (CA), the empirical study of talk as social activity. Sacks developed the implications of his analyses mostly for social science. This review highlights various implications for psychology, and especially for studies of language, cognition and social interaction. Sacks's 'social action' rather than 'communication' approach to talk, including his notion of 'subversion', contradicts common assumptions that CA is inherently consensualist. His legacy provides a challenge to psychological theories of discourse and cultural knowledge, and a rigorous empirical methodology for developing it.

The year 1992 saw the publication of Harvey Sacks's recorded lectures, delivered over the period from fall 1964 to spring 1972 at the UCLA and Irvine campuses of the University of California, on what has come to be called conversation analysis (CA). The lectures have been available until now as mimeos and photocopies, though inevitably with a far less public distribution than is now possible. The first set (1964-5) was published as a special issue of *Human Studies* (Sacks, 1989), and some of the others have also appeared, sometimes as more polished versions, in various other publications (e.g. Sacks, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1987). The two-volume 1992 set (referenced here as V1 and V2), edited by Gail Jefferson, amounts to around 1500 pages, including two introductions by Emanuel Schegloff which are substantial pieces in their own right. They authoritatively summarize and set Sacks's work in context, both academic and (briefly) biographical. Sacks stopped routinely recording and distributing his lectures after spring 1972, but was actively engaged in developments of CA until his death in a road accident in November 1975. That later work includes Sacks (1973), Sacks and Schegloff (1979) and Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974).

The lectures themselves deal with an enormous range of topics, analytic themes, textual sources and academic literature, despite the fact that many lectures are reworked versions of previous ones. Deep erudition and a pervasive concern for the relevance of CA to the rest of the human and social sciences are among Sacks's less known characteristics. His renown, justly, is for his extraordinary and infectious capacity for observation and analysis, for extracting in exquisite detail the workings of everyday conversation and other textual materials, rendering those workings visible and obvious once analytically pointed out, and yet identifying them convincingly as the bases of participants' own competence. It is not merely an acute empirical sensitivity. Pervading Sacks's work is a powerful and coherent vision of the nature of social life and, closely related to that, of how it can be systematically studied.

While Sacks's interests were interdisciplinary (V2, p. ix), his prime goals and targets were those of sociology. He addressed much of his work to the establishment of a foundational status for detailed study of the workings of common-sense practices, which sociology had generally ignored or dismissed. In this sense, CA is closely allied to ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970). It is no straightforward matter to derive a *psychology* from Sacks's work, since he did not routinely address traditional psychological problems; though clearly any analysis of how conversational interaction works has an immediate relevance for *social* psychology, and might be considered, without further comment, as social psychology. However, Sacks did sometimes address recognizably psychological issues directly, such as socialization, psychopathology and memory. And even when he did not, his work is full of significance for any attempt to understand the workings of language and action, including their relations to everyday knowledge, categorization and communicative practices, which are amongst the prime concerns of the cognitive sciences. The aim of this review article is to draw out some of those implications, and point to some current work that is employing them.

Members' Categories

One of the themes of Sacks's work is that ordinary talk is coherent and organized to an initially surprising degree of precision. Rather than being loosely formulated or slapdash, full of 'performance' errors and infelicities, every utterance, word and pronounciational particular is potentially worthy of examination. It is not that speakers are thought to be planning or consciously selecting all these features, but that there is no hearable level of detail that may not be significant, or treated as significant by conversational participants. This applies to verbal categories, for example. Category descriptions of persons, things or events are always ones that

could have been otherwise, such that actually occurring descriptions are always contingent, particular and occasioned phenomena. That is to say, specific descriptions occur against some set of alternatives, and are oriented to as such by conversational participants.

Sacks's most sustained analyses focus on the conversational deployment of categories, and, in particular, of *Membership Categorization Devices* (MCDs). These are sets of categories of persons. For example, MCDs such as 'gender,' 'race' and 'family' collect together categories such as male/female, black/white, brother/sister/wife, and so on. Sacks's interest is in how such categories are *discursively deployed* in ways that permit a particular range of inferences. Sacks cites from a group therapy session with teenagers. Dan is the therapist.

Ken: So did Louise call or anything this morning?

Dan: Why, didju expect her t'call?

Ken: No, I was just kinda hoping that she might be able to figure out some way t-to come to the meetings and still be able t'work. C'z she did seem like she d- wanted to come back, but uh she didn't think she could.

Dan: D'you miss her?

Ken: Well in some ways yes, it's- it was uh nice having- having the opposite sex in- in the room, you know, havin' a chick in here.

(V1, p. 597)

Sacks focuses on Ken's switch from a named individual ('Louise') to a generalized gender category ('the opposite sex . . . a chick') to account for his concern for her absence. This effectively forestalls any inference that his concern might have been personal: 'he wasn't going to say he likes her or anything like that' (V1, p. 60). The gender categorizations work on the basis that Louise, as the only girl in the group, is uniquely, if impersonally, identifiable by gender,¹ 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' (V1, p. 60; original emphasis). So the interaction-orientation of situated category usage performs, in this case, a subtle kind of motivational accountability.

Sacks's treatment shows that verbal categories are not just sense-making devices that get triggered by events; that kind of perceptual-cognitive theory, common in cognitive and social psychology, grossly underspecifies situated talk. People have a lot of flexibility in their choice and deployment of words, which permits particular choices of words to perform, on actual

occasions of use, important interactional and conceptual work. In the case in question, we see the generalized category 'a chick' being used to refer to a particular individual, while managing to invoke that general category as *the relevant feature* of that individual, and at the same time performing reflexive work on the speaker's own perceptions and motives. It is not that these words will always have these specific uses, but that we need to examine them in use to get a grasp of how they work, and perhaps, in a sense, of what they are *for*. It is a route into the functional basis of semantics. I have developed elsewhere (Edwards, 1991) an argument directed at current psychological approaches to categorization; that it is not merely a fortunate feature of verbal categories that they make all this interactional work possible. Language can be conceived of in the first instance as a medium for social actions, rather than social actions being a windfall consequence of people representing things mentally in what turns out luckily, or for biological reasons, to be a shared symbol system. If we are interested in categories as conceptual and cultural tools, it will not be enough to base psychology on conceptual analysis and decontextualizing methods of investigation. We shall also have to follow Sacks and look at how people use categories interactively.

One of the charges sometimes levelled at Sacks and CA, by alternative approaches that treat language, discourse or texts as socially significant in some way, is that it is a form of political quietism, displaying a lack of concern for the wider, macro or political nexus of sociolinguistic relations. This can be argued in a number of ways. One is to focus on Sacks's pervasive use of the term 'member', in expressions such as 'members' categories'; that it implies a *consensus* conception of social life. It does not. Rather, it is designed to ground analysis in the categories used by conversational participants, and to avoid the presumptive use by analysts of categories such as role, race, class or gender (or, indeed, psychological categories such as motive or intention) as *prima facie* explanatory resources. Sacks's analyses of the deployment of membership categories demonstrates how they are used contrastively, often in rhetorically powerful oppositions, visible as such once pointed out, such as male-female, black-white, rich-poor, in ways that manage (promote, reduce or otherwise deal with) various divisions within and between groups.

The classic study (lecture 7 and others, fall 1965; also Sacks, 1979) is of the teenage therapy group's contrasts between 'teenager' and 'hotrodder', and between 'Bonneville' and 'Pontiac station wagon', when referring to the same persons or objects. Each opposing pair provided a means of managing group membership, exhibiting alignment and, specifically, including or excluding one of the participants as a legitimate group member, at least for the business at hand. While 'teenager' was a category used by adults, 'hotrodder' was one invented by *members* of that category. A group member's description of his car as a 'Bonneville' (a hotrodders'

members' category) was ironically reformulated by another group member as a 'Pontiac station wagon', a 'mommy's car', and such, and all in the context of a discussion of why the owner had regularly succeeded in avoiding police interference. Rather than this avoidance being recorded by the group as some kind of admirable achievement, alternative descriptions were marshalled to suggest that he was not really at risk, not a true 'hotrodder' perhaps. Again, it is not that these contrasting sets (or 'alternation categories'—V1, p. 441) are perceptually necessary, but, rather, that 'formulating in terms of two-class sets is a method of doing things' (V1, p. 48). There is nothing consensual about Sacks's notion of 'members' categories'. Indeed, he focuses on some contrast sets as 'revolutionary', used for 'doing rebellion, the first feature of which is that one sets up a category you administer yourself' (V1, p. 174);² examples would include the promotion of black (Sacks's example) and gender politics.

Sacks's studies of the construction and deployment of membership categories resonate closely with, and have influenced, psychological applications of discourse and rhetorical analysis (Billig, 1987; Edwards, 1991; Edwards & Potter, 1992, 1993; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1990). While CA focuses very much on conversation, as the term implies, Sacks's early work in particular dealt with textual materials drawn from a variety of sources, including some brilliant analyses of extracts from the Old Testament, items from a published book of children's stories, various anthropological and ethnographic texts, and articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

One such *New York Times* article reports a Navy pilot's remarks on serving in Vietnam (lectures 14, fall 1965, and 5, spring 1966). Sacks notes in some detail how membership and institutional role descriptions (e.g. 'a military man being shot at by another military man like myself') provide a warrant for described actions and attend rhetorically to alternatives: 'the formulations have alternative imports, and . . . he is able to choose that formulation [of military action] . . . that permits him to do it without important moral consequences' (V1, p. 206; cf. V1, p. 307 on the alternative categories 'military' and 'criminal,' pervasively relevant in descriptions of intergroup killings). As well as providing a detailed analysis of the extract, Sacks indicates how its principles can be extended to a wide variety of other organizational settings. Recent work building on those insights includes studies of how participants make relevant *in* their discourse its situatedness within and accountability to organizational settings (e.g. Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; Drew & Heritage, 1992), and of how similar sorts of categories (to Sacks's Navy pilot's) have been constructively and rhetorically deployed in press and television reportings of political disputes, and of military actions such as the Iran-Contra arms sales (Bogen & Lynch, 1989) and the Gulf War (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Finding Categories in Activities

One of the major principles of CA, and one with direct relevance for psychology, stems from a key feature of Sacks's early work on categories. This is the principle that the categories we are interested in are *members'*, or *participants'* categories. This is not a straightforwardly psychological sense of ownership, such as the categories which individuals carry around in their heads and by which they see and understand the world. Rather, it is categories-in-use, in the performance of the actions done in talk and text. Sacks is critical of the use of disembedded materials such as informants' accounts and interview responses, particularly in ethnographic work: 'they're studying the categories that members use, to be sure, except at this point they're not investigating their categories by attempting to *find them in the activities in which they're employed*. And that, of course, is what I'm attempting to do' (V1, p. 27; emphasis added).

The coherence of category usage as a situated, occasioned and rhetorical feature of everyday discourse, which Sacks and subsequent CA work reveals, provides for a powerful challenge to how psychology has conventionally dealt with discourse (cf. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In cognitive, social and developmental psychology categories are almost invariably collected and theorized outside of their occasions of use, as elements for a cognitive semantics; accounts are collected via interviews; stories and scenarios are invented for use in experiments; responses are elicited for what they tell us about mental constructs such as attitudes, concepts, children's minds, and so on, rather than studied as parts of situated actions. Formalized extensions of such conventional methods include the use of coding schemes, as well as rating scales, personality tests and other fixed-response tools. The alternative, of finding participants' descriptions 'in the activities in which they're employed', makes possible the systematic study of situated cognition and social action (cf. Suchman, 1987). It also provides for a discourse-functional account of some of language's design features—of why folk categories are so notoriously fuzzy, variable, inconsistent and contradictory (cf. Edwards, 1991) when not cut into shape by procrustean forms of sampling and analysis.

Sacks's analysis of members' categories applies not only to the overt use of categorial descriptions, but also to more subtle features of talk-in-interaction, such as the status of a turn at talk as an 'interruption' (V1, p. 641). The idea here is that an interruption (as distinct from some other status that overlapping speech may have) is not something inherent in talk's physical characteristics, but something whose status depends on its being treated-as-such by participants. This is not, as commonly assumed, a matter of moving from an objective to a subjective, interpretative sort of analysis, but, rather, a matter of taking analytic advantage of conver-

sation's inherent interaction-orientation. Participants' treatment, or uptake, of each other's talk can be viewed as a kind of reading of it, a kind of participants' analysis that provides a highly pertinent 'proof procedure' for more formal analyses of talk's interactional status (cf. Sacks et al., 1974). The emphasis in Sacks's later work, and in contemporary CA, on the importance of talk's sequential organization, is therefore an extension of Sacks's early insistence on finding categories in participants' discursive practices.

Action and Subversion

In Sacks's analysis talk is *action, not communication*. It is a form of activity; not a medium for the transmission of thoughts, nor for the realization of some other underlying reality. For Schegloff this was Sacks's essential insight:

. . . the distinctive and utterly critical recognition . . . that the talk can be examined as an object in its own right, and not merely as a screen on which are projected other processes. . . . The talk itself was the action, and previously unsuspected details were critical resources in what was getting done in and by the talk; and all this in naturally occurring events, in no way manipulated to allow the study of them. (VI, p. xviii)

This is a particularly important issue for psychology, because the communication view of language is common-sensically psychological: language viewed as representation and transmission between minds, so that minds become visible and available for study through language.

Sacks shares the ethnomethodological conception of social actions, in which 'the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings "account-able"' (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 1). In other words, it is a constitutive feature of the performance social actions that they are made intelligible and accountable as the actions they are by and for participants' involvement in them. It is by virtue of this essential *visibility* of interaction, for participants, that recorded conversations are also amenable to analysis. Understandings and misunderstandings arise as practical issues for participants, rather than as analysts' problems. They are managed as an integral feature of interaction itself, via talk's sequential organization and built-in repair procedures (see Heritage, 1984, for some exposition of these ideas, and Schegloff, 1992, for a detailed discussion).

The interactionally achieved visibility of actions links to what Sacks calls *subversion*. This consists in the enlisting by participants of actions' visibility, such that actions will be taken for what they appear to be: 'When a woman walks away from a supermarket with the baby carriage filled with a baby that's not hers, that's the sort of thing I'm talking about with

“subversion.” It’s not seeable’ (V1, p. 254). Sacks’s example derives from his celebrated discussion of a child’s story from a published collection which contained the sequence ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.’ His analysis elaborates the kinds of cultural assumptions required to make that a coherent narrative, such as the category-incumbent activities expected of mommies and babies, their canonical kinds of relations, the likelihood that it was the baby’s own mommy, and so on. Given that those sorts of things are treated as hearable and seeable by participants in talk and action, their subversion is possible. People can perform actions, and say things, for the kinds of actions they will be taken to be.

At this point, the term ‘subversion’ becomes a little misleading, in that what we have is an example of how social action per se works. It is not so much a matter of deception, machiavellianism or insincerity (though it *can* be, or be taken to be), as of Garfinkel’s dictum regarding the accountably-seen-to-be-done nature of social actions. In Sacks’s words,

... producers of activities could use seer’s and hearer’s maxims. That the seer’s maxims are available to producers of actions, and are crucial to them in producing their activities, can at least in part be gotten at by locating those things which Members have available to them as things that can be done subversively—under the very general usage of ‘subversion’ I offered . . . subversion is simply a consequence of seer’s maxims, hearer’s maxims and the like. (V1, p. 414)

So subversion becomes the norm, with the non-condemnatory sense that actions are produced with regard to their visibility-as-such. Even such a category as ‘being ordinary’ is something that people can ‘do’ (V2, p. 215; cf. Sacks, 1984), just as ‘being phoney’ is a notion that they can also apply (V1, p. 581).

Subversion is not to be confused with a motivational theory of talk. It is not that social actions are thought to be produced by some prior motive or intention, such as saving face or trying to influence, but that recognizability is a constitutive feature of how social action works, and participants do things with it. Conversational exchange is the arena in which motives and intentional states are *at stake for participants*, and is therefore analytically prior to the mental states that supposedly precede it.

While inviting comparison to the work of both Wittgenstein (1953) and Vygotsky (1987), Sacks’s ideas also have important implications for those comparisons. CA provides a model for a systematically *empirical* examination of intersubjectivity, as a *participants’ practical concern*, rather than a matter for theoretical claims about the minds of speakers and hearers. Intersubjectivity can be analysed as a practical conversational accomplishment, managed by conversation’s ordinary procedures for turn-taking and repair (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1992). Again, this ties in to the notion of talk as action rather than communication. The communication model of talk, as a kind of inter-mental transmission of ideas, is certainly the simpler one (Harris, 1981; Reddy, 1979). Unfortunately, that simplicity is bought

at the expense of loading the explanatory burden onto a private and underlying life of the mind. The problem of intersubjectivity then becomes a matter for theory and conceptual analysis: the philosophical 'other minds' problem; the psychology of 'theory of mind'; the Piagetian notion of childhood 'egocentrism'; the symbolic interactionists' 'taking the role of the other', and so on. It is not that CA's approach rids us of the need for a psychology of interactional competence, but that by focusing on conversation's built-in procedures, on talk as action rather than communication, it reduces the explanatory burden on the mental states of speakers and listeners. Indeed, we no longer have a division between speakers and hearers. What we have are participants in interactions, social actors whose talk, turn by (overlapping) turn, can be examined by participants and analysts alike for how it displays their 'hearings' of each other, and performs next-turn 'repairs' on those hearings.

Sacks's analysis of discourse as social action has strong implications for psychology, the most obvious of which are for how we deal with language. Language features heavily in psychological research and theory, both as topic and as methodological resource. This is the case even when the overt concern is with something else, such as memory, perception, reasoning, moral and intellectual development, or social cognition. The usual approach is either to define the topic as 'language' (the linguistic system, its role in mental organization, its development in children, its effects on cognition or its status as product of perceptual processes), or else to use it as method (to present scenarios, vignettes, propositions, etc., in experiments, or to ask questions, discover how children think, etc.). While Sacks's work certainly poses problems for such uses of language, it would be a mistake to see this purely negatively. Rather, Sacks opens up and adds a powerfully empirical, and ecologically situated, way of examining how people make sense of the world, as something they do within, rather than in addition to, their engagement in social practices. This is, as yet, a very under-explored domain in which to pursue psychology's standard topics.

Rules, Norms and Talk's Machinery

In Sacks's view, social actions are not rule-governed, but rule-oriented. Rule-orientation is part of what makes actions intelligible and accountable, part of how they work as interactions. It permits flexibility, in the sense that particular actions (those that are talk's topic, or else talk itself) can be produced, brought off, treated or described, so as to bring them under the operation of some norm, just as norms themselves can be variably formulated. The rule-relevance of particular actions is therefore always a situated accomplishment, rather than something to theorize about in the abstract.

The relation between rule-orientation and the intelligibility of actions links into a pervasive concern with *socialization*, with how children are able to become 'members', and with how certain kinds of marginal people (the insane or deviant) get defined as such. Social interactions have an almost hologrammatic quality, such that

... it really wouldn't matter very much what it is you looked at—if you look at it carefully enough. And you may well find that you got an enormous generalizability because things are so arranged that you could get them . . . a Member . . . has to be able to do that, and things are so arranged as to permit him to. (V1, p. 485)

The same feature of social life that makes it visible-and-accountable is the basis both for participation and for new participants to see how to take part. Sacks argues, in a discussion of various ethnographic and other sources (including God's discovery of Adam's and Eve's having eaten the forbidden fruit), that children can learn from their parents' reactions which aspects of their own conduct are visible, and treated as evidence of prior actions and mental states; and, of course, how such evidence can be subverted for such readings.³

This notion that conversational interaction relies upon the operation of some kind of 'machinery' sounds like straightforward cognitive science. Sacks even conceives a machinery for individual speakers, using the image of a set of conversational components or devices, ways of saying things that are available for assembly and use:

... the image I have is of this machinery, where you would have some standardized gadget that you can stick in here and there and that can work in a variety of different machines. And you go through the warehouse picking them up to build some given thing you want to build. (V1, p. 158).

The analytical task is to find those components, see how they work to perform some kind of interactional activity, and 'then try to build a way of reproducing that activity' (V1, p. 471). In the same sense, 'a culture is an apparatus for generating recognizable actions. If the same procedures are used for generating as for detecting, that is perhaps as simple a solution to the problem of recognizability as is formulatable' (V1, p. 226). This echoes the familiar analysis-and-synthesis and schema models of cognitive psychology, such as Schank's (1982) treatment of script-based 'reminders', where what makes some social scenario memorable is based on the employment of the same processes that are used to perceive and comprehend it.

However, any notion that Sacks's work is easily subsumed by cognitive psychology would ignore the major thrust of his analyses. Rather than talk being generated and assembled from inner rules and representations, Sacks emphasizes the contingency of talk on and for its occasions of use, and the interactional accomplishment of meaning. Schegloff refers to 'the echo of generativist studies in the form of *some of this early work*' (V1, p. xxi; emphasis added), and it may be that, as with Schegloff's own

writings, it has required the subsequent development of cognitive, linguistic and speech act models of knowledge and talk to establish some foils for practitioners of CA to argue against. Certainly, the notion of talk as the object of study, rather than a screen written on by other processes, is less easily assimilated: as are talk as situated action; rules as oriented-to rather than governing; the necessity of studying actual rather than idealized instances; and the reflexive relations between actions, subversion and analysis.

Sacks remarks:

Our task . . . is not simply to be building a machine which can make inferences, and make them in the strong way that I've proposed. A problem for . . . describing socialization will consist in large part of how it is that a human gets built who will produce his activities such that they're graspable in this way. That is, how he'll behave such that these sequencing machines can be used to find out what he's up to. (V1, p. 119)

Social life is organized so that people can take part in it, and learn to take part in it, via its publicly displayed nature. Analysts are engaged in 'finding how it is that people can produce sets of actions that provide that others can see such things' (V1, p. 119).

In Sacks's analyses, the ways in which people deal with the world as orderly and recognizable differ in important ways from their treatment in schema and script theory. Sacks refers to a related kind of notion to that of a mental/cultural script, when analysing a data sample in which the receiver of a telephone help-line call to a psychiatric hospital said, 'May I help you?' Sacks offers as a 'base environment' for such sayings a department store, where 'it's pretty much the case that for a customer, the question of whether some person "can help" is a matter of the department store having made them the person who does that' (V1, p. 9). This way of drawing on his own cultural knowledge of such places is reminiscent of Schank and Abelson's (1977) use of remembered and imagined routines in restaurants. However, Sacks draws on such knowledge as a resource for dealing with specific segments of talk, such that whatever cultural knowledge is introduced to help the explication of talk immediately takes on a contingent and flexible character.

This flexibility is different from Schank's. For script theory it is *cognitive*—a matter for analysts of identifying categories of restaurants (etc.) that are more or less typical, and for participants of learning from experiential variations across visits to restaurants and accordingly having their schematic knowledge structures updated. In Sacks's analysis, the flexibility is *pragmatic*, to do with the interactional contingencies of speaking. Indeed, Sacks emphasizes how robust and *normative* such cultural knowledge is, and how impervious it is to the dictates of personal experience (V1, p. 62). He argues that it is strongly 'protected against induction . . . it isn't automatically modified if events occur which it

doesn't characterize' (V1, p. 196). It is the very robustness of such knowledge that permits its flexible invocation, such that Sacks argues explicitly *against* a 'model of how it might get modified, [in which] you store up a bunch of exceptions, saving each one, remembering them, and when you get a whole bunch of them, you're forced now to say that what you supposed were so is not so' (V1, p. 196).⁴

The normative knowledge that is invoked in conversation should not be equated with statistical frequency, or perceptual normality. It is not that a base environment has to be one that is frequently encountered, and alters in the mind each time it is encountered. Rather, its use is in accounting for actions. So, the 'May I help you?' formula (one of Sacks's bits of machinery), since it normatively implies a person who has the credentials to use it, can be flexibly used outside of any obviously scripted scene. To do so need not imply error, nor provide data for updating mental scripts, but, rather, may perform the action of invoking those kinds of credentials, together with whatever routine, standardized implications may be attached to them. That being the case, we can reconsider even the 'base environment' example as a participants' accomplishment. It is a way of providing a particular interpretative trajectory for interaction. In other words, it is a way of 'subverting', indeed of establishing that a certain kind of interaction is being carried out, a certain kind of status claimed. Such flexibility of usage *requires* that cultural norms are more robust against experiential variations than a perceptually based theory tends to assume.

Sacks's treatment of naturally occurring conversational materials reveals subtleties that pre-programmed, plan-based devices cannot feasibly handle (cf. Suchman, 1987). It is not merely more subtle or complicated, but a different basis of assumption: that the orderliness of social life and its intelligibility stem not from a set of updatable knowledge structures in a sense-making cognitive being, but from how social actions flexibly unfold, as situated performances. Those performances are what Sacks's 'machinery' is for.

Cognition and Common Sense

The standard treatment of common-sense reasoning, in both psychology and sociology, is to consider it a messy, unreliable and contradictory business, such that special methods have to be devised in order to reveal social and mental life as orderly and coherent. These methods include experimental procedures, interview schedules, procedural models, coding schemes, rating scales, statistical methods and formal testing. In some versions of psychology and sociology, the stated aim is even to *replace* common-sense reasoning with something more objective, consistent and reliable (e.g. Churchland, 1988; Furnham, 1988; Homans, 1961; Stich,

1983). Sacks's view of common-sense reasoning is that it should be neither derided nor replaced, but become the primary object for analysis. The task is to reveal its workings, by examining such things as everyday conversations and texts.

On the notorious contradictions among proverbs, for example, Sacks suggests that it is a basic mistake to treat them as abstracted folk theories. They have to be treated as utterances in context, with relevance to whatever is at issue: 'The problem is not, on any given one's use, is it true relative to other proverbial expressions, but, does it, as something one understands with, understand *what it applies to?*' (V2, p. 422; emphasis added). As Schegloff remarks, these sorts of folk generalizations about the world 'are designed fundamentally as objects for *indexical* deployment' (V2, p. xxxvi; original emphasis); that is, for use on specific occasions, with regard to whatever is actually at issue. One such use of proverbs and idioms is to bolster rhetorically some other locally contentious proposition, making it difficult for others to respond: 'Members are so committed to their correctness—that if you undercut one, exactly what you've undercut is not clear. And one doesn't know exactly how we can continue talking' (V1, p. 25; cf. Drew & Holt, 1988).

The basic notion here is that participants' versions of the world are interaction-oriented, and can be studied in terms of how they are designed for and fitted to whatever text or conversation they occur in. This applies not only to proverbial expressions, but to other kinds of descriptions as well. Examining texts and conversations in this way leads us away from the idea that everyday stories and descriptions are reflections of participants' abstracted understandings, and towards the study of versions and descriptions as rhetorically and sequentially situated productions (cf. Edwards & Potter, 1992). One of the features of such stories and versions, therefore, is their indexical character for speakers and hearers. Whatever their topic, 'stories are "about"—have to do with—the people who are telling them and hearing them' (V1, p. 768). The analysis shifts, therefore, 'from story features to *story-telling* features' (V2, p. 256; original emphasis).⁵ Sacks's approach to common-sense reasoning is therefore in stark contrast to traditional notions of its inadequacy in comparison to what psychology and social science can offer. It contrasts also with some of the more recent and respectful 'constructionist' work (Semin & Gergen, 1990) that relies on abstracting the content of common sense from the conversational practices in which it is ordinarily produced.

In spite of his overriding emphasis on stories (accounts, reminiscences, etc.) as situated, interaction-oriented productions, Sacks sometimes treats participants' different versions of events as matters of differential perception. In analysing a description of police presence at a department store, produced by a (white) witness who passed by in her car, Sacks imagines the

same story told by a member of a black neighbourhood; such an alternative story might imply a role for the police as creating rather than solving problems. Sacks refers to a 'differential organization of the *sheer perceiving* of the event' (V2, p. 85; emphasis added). He insists that

. . . the notion of there being arguable cases involved is unavailable to either group [whites or blacks, etc.] by virtue of the fact that all they're doing is scanning a scene to see what's happening. They're not arguing anything, they're not imagining anything. . . . And to tell them that they're imagining it or that they're making a case . . . is to put them in a position where they could not readily come to understand what you're talking about. (V2, p. 186)

And yet, those different 'perceptions' are given to us as different descriptions, as stories that orient to features of the *telling*, such that a witness in a passing car might have his or her status differently construed, 'transformed in a variety of ways . . . not as a "witness" but possibly as a "car moving away from the scene". . . . Or . . . you're somebody who is callously passing it by' (V2, p. 186). While making somewhat strained use of imagined stories and denials (what people would say if told they are imagining things etc.), the thrust of Sacks's empirical work is to perform analysis on actual occurrences, on the basis that we do not really know what people would say. So how do we read Sacks's direct-perceptual psychologizing in this example?

One way to understand Sacks is to see his own text as rhetorically designed and occasioned. It is a pervasive feature of his analyses that he is not only revealing how data fragments work, but doing so in contrast to how other kinds of analysis might do it. Sacks's argument is not with cognitive psychology in this case, but with the kinds of social analysis that read into participants' activities their membership of social groups, where speakers are promoted to the position of spokespersons for some kind of class, ethnic or gender interest.⁶ What Sacks is arguing is therefore directly in keeping with his analyses of membership categories, where membership operates as a participants' construction rather than an analyst's explanatory resource.⁷ The message is both theoretical and empirical. Rather than start from some ready-made issue such as 'how attitudes to authority develop' and looking for them in conversational materials, Sacks recommends that 'the first rule is to learn to be interested in what you've got. I take it that what you want to do is *pose those problems that the data bears*' (V1, p. 471; emphasis added). As Sacks's analyses clearly demonstrate, that is precisely what opens up, rather than prevents, the possibility of empirical work on participants' categories of the extra-discursive, including everything from group membership to personal identity, institutional setting, matters of belief and constructions of what is routine and exceptional in life (cf. Edwards, 1994).

Conclusion

Sacks's legacy might be construed as anti-psychological, in that he focuses on talk as situated social action rather than a product of mind. On the other hand, it may be an arbitrary matter what kind of analysis counts as psychology. Sacks had the same trouble counting what he did as sociology, given that he seemed not to be addressing sociology's traditional concerns, nor to be using its established methods. Much of his work is oriented to re-establishing sociology's foundational assumptions, towards a concern for studying, rather than presuming, the workings of common-sense practical reasoning. This was the thrust of his argument against ready-made notions of what was worth analysing: 'the notion that you could tell right off whether anything was important. So you would start to look at what kings did, or to look at votes, or revolution, for example, because those were obviously important' (V1, p. 28). Sacks's move, and it is just as relevant for psychology as for sociology, was to focus empirically on the specifics of his data; the data being whatever conversations and texts that he found in everyday and institutional settings, anywhere except via his own interventions to make them happen. The choice of mundane materials was 'a counter-strategy to the issue of "interesting" . . . we have to find that whatever it is that's interesting about it is what we can say about it' (V1, p. 293).

It is directly from this empiricist principle that Sacks was able to develop the notions of members' categories, of the central importance of sequential organization, of recipient design and the generally methodical interaction-orientation of talk. Whether what comes out of such a focus is thereby sociology, or social psychology, by some current definition of those disciplines, is less important than that it produces robust analyses of what is going on. As Sacks remarked, we need to 'pose those problems that the data bears'. In Schegloff's words, 'begin with some *observations*, then find the problem for which these observations could serve as (elements of) the solution' (V1, p. xlviii). Empiricist claims of this sort do not debar investigation of their own rhetoric, in CA or in any other scientific endeavour where they are made (cf. Myers, 1990). Indeed, it is an under-explored issue for practitioners of CA to what extent analyses of conversational practices can be sustained as purely empirical observations, or revelations, of participants' public procedures. Nevertheless, the position is clear: that the status of any analysis is, we might say, to be held accountable to conversational particulars.

The prospect is thus established for an observation-based and rigorous examination of how, in conversation and text, people produce and implicate versions of worlds, minds, persons and social relationships. However, we may not readily find, in discourse, the precise categories of knowledge, belief, emotion, memory, attitude, cognitive development, and so on, that are currently defined in psychology. A persistent question

that psychologists generally ask when confronted with psychologically oriented analyses of discourse is: to what extent can we tell whether, and what, a person actually understands, remembers or intends by what is said? Sacks provides a partial response directed at the study of comprehension:

A typical device is if somebody tells a story, you give a hearer ten minutes and ask them to retell the story . . . Now what's impressive here is, instead of saying 'Let's find a way of seeing whether people understand what somebody else says,' we've asked 'Is there some procedure people use which has as its product a showing that they heard and understood?' (V2, pp. 30-31)

The solution is to ask a different question, but still a recognizably psychological one, and, moreover, one that the data bears.

Notes

1. 'Chick' is one of a variety of gender categorizations available to this group, such that its choice signals something further about the speaker than merely his choice of a gender category. Sacks does not pursue that here. However, while the term is available as an index of the *speaker's* gendered attitude, we should be wary of reading the talk of 1960s California teenagers in the light of a subsequent history of awareness of language and feminism. Its use today might signal something different; irony, or opposition, perhaps. Note that Sacks understands the remark as, locally, part of a compliment.
2. Cf. '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. I don't mean that in a casual way' (V1, p. 398).
3. There is a parallel here with Vygotsky (1987) on the cultural nature of cognitive development; cf. Bruner (1983) and Lock (1978), on how children acquire the ability to mean things with gestures and words, through having their actions *treated as* signs of intent and interactional orientation. Sacks elaborates 'some formal properties of children's games' along compatible lines (V1, pp. 489-506).
4. 'Odd events, by and large, are just not added together . . . in part by way of the fact that what is normal gets incorporated into things like proverbs and becomes very stable, odd events are just sloughed off. They don't get incorporated. . . . What you get is, "Those things happen, sure, but . . ."' (V1, p. 62). Cf. the rhetorical status of 'commonplaces' (Billig, 1987), and of idiomatic expressions (Drew & Holt, 1988). Sacks notes that 'one thing about odd events, then, is that they're very hard to report. This fact can occasion the relevance of a category that this society has called "believing"' (V1, p. 62; cf. participants' credibility concerns in the reporting of unusual experiences: Wooffitt, 1991).
5. This remark is part of a sustained treatment by Sacks of 'second stories' where, on hearing a first story, people will often produce a second one with shared features of personal involvement. This leads into a discussion of how memory may be organized ('designing the way minds should store experience': V2, p. 257) in order to be able to produce, on occasions, stories that display such kinds of shared or contrasting experiences. This treatment of second stories is comparable to the use made by Schank (1982) of story-swapping 'reminders' about various 'scripted' events, though Schank's pursuit of the cognitive schematics of such event-stories contrasts with Sacks's pursuit of their socio-biographical, indexical and interaction-oriented design.
6. Schegloff provides, as a context for Sacks's treatment of this case, a contrast with possible alternative analyses deploying 'traditional themes of social and political analysis . . . [which might] well have served as a revelatory component of a liberal arts education for white middle-class undergraduates in Orange County, California, in the aftermath of the

Watts riots in Los Angeles just to the north, in years which were, in all but their numerical depiction, still part of the 1960s' (V2, pp. xxii-xxiii).

7. In an analysis of a different data extract, from the teenage therapy sessions, Sacks promotes very clearly the rhetorical, recipient-designed and indexical character of a girl's story of a night out with a boyfriend. Sacks remarks on the story's 'defensive design' with respect to the males in the group—'she tells the story in such a fashion as to rather sharply locate what she will do and with whom, given that she's telling it to one for whom such a story told by an eligible female is readable, and known to be readable, to find out just such a matter' (V2, p. 454).

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