

Being a Woman: Membership Categorization in Interaction

Nada Tadic

Teachers College, Columbia University

MCA has aspired to underscore the significant influence categorization can have on the way members of a culture experience their social reality and assume their roles in it. By following such aspirations, analysts inevitably run the risk of projecting “common-sense” assumptions onto their data and having their work characterized as “wild and promiscuous” (Stokoe, 2012). So as to avoid these pitfalls, analysts have searched for ways of making assertions based on the data alone, by treating membership categorization as analytically pertinent only when it is demonstrably relevant and procedurally consequential to the interaction. The trouble with this approach, however, is that the relevance of a certain category might not always be obvious in a single turn or even a single segment of talk. Categories and category-bound predicates may be unpacked throughout an entire interaction and explicitly named only in passing, if at all.

This paper aims to show how one category—that of ‘girls/women’—could be demonstrated as relevant via the participants’ invocation of and orientation to other, connected categories and category-bound activities. The analysis shows that participants build a shared understanding of categories throughout their conversation, and that the demonstrable relevance and procedural consequentiality of these categories becomes evident only gradually as the interaction progresses. Almost an entire hour before they explicitly mention it, the participants seem to orient to the ‘girls/women’ category by invoking the related category of ‘men/guys/boys’ and its category-bound predicates. They seem to treat the ‘men’ and ‘women’ categories as a standardized relational pair (as having duties and moral obligations to one another), and, by invoking the ‘men’ category, the speakers appear to make potentially relevant their (unstated) orientation to and membership in the ‘women’ category.

The data for the analysis were taken from an hour-long video recording of three single, twenty-something graduate students—April, Jenny and Regina (pseudonyms)—making plans for going out the following weekend. In the first extract, Regina and April are discussing whether they should invite someone to come out that weekend. In lines 05-06, April suggests inviting their male friends. Regina, however, responds to this suggestion with laughter and then with a dispreferred second pair-part (09-10), explaining that their male friends’ presence would impede the young women’s chances of getting free drinks from ‘guys,’ i.e., potential ‘suitors’:

Extract 1: Mike and Chris

- | | | |
|----|---------|--|
| 01 | Regina: | ↑yeah. and ↑if no:t, then it’ll just be me |
| 02 | | and you. and that’ll be fun too. so= |
| 03 | April: | =°↑yeah.° |
| 04 | Regina: | okay, well [()] |
| 05 | April: | [We can a:sk] Mi:ke and |
| 06 | | ↑Chris:. |
| 07 | Regina: | haha |
| 08 | April: | °and maybe Jim.° |
| 09 | Regina: | → yeah but we’re not gonna get guys |
| 10 | | buying us drinks if they’re there.=just |
| 11 | | telling you.= |
| 12 | April: | → =that’s tru:e. I know. |

Regina's response can be heard as invoking a category of 'guys' and its category-bound activity of 'buying (girls) drinks.' First, Regina uses a non-recognitional reference term to refer to any member(s) of this category—no specific guy(s), but guys in general. And second, April does not challenge Regina's use of the categorical 'guys' or of the accompanying category-bound activity. She does not initiate repair of Regina's statement or question its significance or legitimacy. She confirms it. That 'guys buy (seemingly single) girls drinks' is treated here as shared common-sense knowledge.

The 'guys' category makes potentially relevant the category of 'girls/women' and Regina's and April's membership in it. Namely, the "us" in line 10 is ambiguous and category-resonant: It can refer to Regina and April as individuals and to them as the categorical 'girls' in the category-bound activity of guys 'buying *girls* drinks.' By invoking the 'guys' category, Regina accounts for her possible/implicit rejection of April's suggestion and aims to influence April's future action, both in terms of the sequential organization of the talk and in terms of the girls' weekend plans. Regina succeeds on both counts: 1) April accepts the account, implicitly retracting her previous suggestion, and 2) the young women do not invite their male friends out that weekend. This success can be explained by April's and Regina's orientation to how the 'guys' category impacts them as members of the corresponding 'girls' category. The women exhibit an awareness of activities ascribed to 'guys' and consequently seem to readjust their behavior to fulfill their own obligations as members of the corresponding category. They are (single, heterosexual) women; women go out to meet men; they meet men by appearing available and receiving free drinks from them. Though there is no explicit mention of the 'girls/women' category here, the participants' orientation to it seems to be relevant for their actions. In order to make the relevance of this category more evident, and avoid the 'wild and promiscuous' label, an example of the category's explicit mention is analyzed next.

In the following extract, the women are painting their nails. Regina brought a pink nail-polish color called "seduction" to share with her friends since she had humorously remarked that this shade brought her good luck in her romantic life. The girls decided to use the "seduction" color to "improve their chances" of meeting men that weekend. Jenny, however, expresses doubt about using the shade as it is "too girly" (line 01). Regina and April refuse to accept Jenny's misgivings and demand she use the color (lines 02-05).

Extract 2: Seduction

- 01 Jenny: I ↑feel this color's too ↓girly for me.
02 Regina: well- fucking SUck It Up and Do It.
03 GOdDA[mn it Jenny.]
04 April: [it's seDUction] Jenny. be a
05 → GIrl. be a WO(h)man. hhh

In her response (04-05), April goes categorical (Stokoe, 2012). She demands not merely that Jenny use the nail-polish, but that she "*be a girl*" and use it. This demand echoes similar cultural demands grounded in "common-sense" expectations that people have of various category members, (e.g., "be a man: don't cry"). By using the indefinite article, April explicitly invokes the 'girls' category, calling on her friend to act like a proper representative—wear nail-polish that is "girly." However, April does not seem to see the nail-polish as "girly" simply because it is intended for proper members of the 'girls' category. She underlines that the color is "girly" because it represents "*seduction*," stressing "it's seDUction Jenny" and thus signaling that seduction is inevitably "girly" (as in "of course it's girly, it's seduction"). This link between 'being feminine' and 'being seductive' ties back to the 'women' category-bound predicates implied in the previous example. Namely, being

“seductive” is a prerequisite for meeting other responsibilities already associated with the ‘girls/women’ category. In order to “meet men” and “get free drinks,” women need to attract their attention by being “seductive.” That April repairs or upgrades her demand from “be a girl” to “be a woman” might reflect her “common-sense” knowledge that being seductive is bound to the category of ‘women’ more so than to that of ‘girls.’ It also might reflect the notion that being a ‘woman’ entails more obligations to the category and tougher demands on the members to fulfill these obligations.

Just as with the ‘guys’ category in the previous example, the ‘girls’ category is invoked here to initiate a change in behavior—to stifle Jenny’s opposition to acting like a proper member and induce her to use the “girly” nail-polish. Though April and Regina eventually support April’s decision to use another nail-polish, their initial refusal to do so can be seen as stemming from the category’s protection from induction (Schegloff, 2007). When Jenny expresses her misgivings about “seduction,” it is not the category-bound predicate of wearing “girly” nail-polish that is questioned as possibly not attributable to all members of the ‘girls’ category. It is *Jenny* who is treated as an improper member, one who refuses to act according to the obligations assigned to her category. The fact that April and Regina accept that they cannot force Jenny to behave a certain way may be because they are her equals and cannot make such a demand, or because they accept that choice of nail-polish is not so monumental after all. Finally, that the women do not take the matter as seriously as it might appear is indicated by April’s laugh when (and after) she says “be a WO(h)man” (line 05).

As the analysis has shown, the participants’ orientation to the ‘girls/women’ category is made relevant not only through its explicit mention, but also through the invocation of the corresponding category of ‘boys/guys/men’ and its category-bound predicates. By exhibiting an evident orientation to the ‘guys’ category, the three women are implicitly also orienting to their own membership in the ‘girls’ category and to the obligations they have to it, (e.g., being seductive and approachable and going out in order to meet men). The women work together in building the assumed predicates bound to the categories of ‘girls’ and ‘guys,’ simultaneously creating and enforcing supposed responsibilities that members of the two categories have to each other. Moreover, they invoke the categories in order to promote the successful achievement of other actions, mainly to influence the behavior of their interlocutors—make demands, pursue a preferred response, and mitigate a dispreferred second pair-part. Though their invocation does not guarantee the success of an intended action, the participants still treat the categories as legitimate incentives for possible behavior change. By going categorical, they implicitly justify their action and call for their interlocutors to accept the justification and respond as proper members of the invoked category.

It is hoped that these findings contribute to the work of MCA by demonstrating how membership categorization can be analyzed and shown to be relevant to the participants and the development of their interaction. The relevance of a category in a conversation might become evident gradually. However, a category can still be shown as “possibly relevant in the scene whether it is actually articulated or not” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 474). The fact that speakers do not explicitly mention what categorical assumptions underlie their behavior does not necessarily mean that their behavior is independent of any orientation to categories. Conversation and membership categorization analysts should, therefore, strive to show the implied relevance of unstated categories without putting their work at risk of being labeled ‘wild and promiscuous.’

REFERENCES

- Schegloff, E. A. (2007). A tutorial on membership categorization. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 462-482.
- Stokoe, E. (2012). Moving forward with membership categorization analysis: Methods for systematic analysis. *Discourse Studies*, 14(3), 277-303.

Nada Tadic completed her M.A. in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University and is currently a doctoral student specializing in Language Use. Her main research interests include language and gender, membership categorization, and critical discourse analysis.