Relationships in Action: Categorization in Gay and Lesbian Couples' Talk

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Abstract

A growing body of literature examines how relational partners maketheir relationships available through their conversational actions. Thisstudy extends that work through a Membership Categorization Analysis of the talk of gay and lesbian couples in order toidentify the conversational actions associatedwith membership in a same-sex couple. The data examinedinclude transcriptions of video recordings of gay and lesbian couples interacting during informal dinner occasions. Conversational actions identified include claims of intimate knowledge of one's partner and discussions of relationship roles. I argue thatthese conversational actions are category bound to relational pairs, including same-sex couples. Findings are discussedin terms oftheir implications for identity constructionand gender role behavior.

1. Introduction

Relational partners are called upon to share pieces oftheir history together, convey knowledge about their partner, or describe how responsibilities are allocatedintheir relationship. Theseand other actions represent taken-for-granted evidenceof a relationship's existenceandare usedto infer the type of relationship individuals share. Discussingrelational history is one way speakersmaketheir various types of relationships observable. Identifying types of relationships, particularly between romantic versus non-romantic partners or same-sex versus heterosexual relationships, requires examining the features of talk speakersmake available. Locating cultural or language activities supports inferences regarding how relationships are identifiable.

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This study focuses on the discourse practices of gay and lesbian couples interacting together intheir social lives. Data are presentedin order understand the methods members of gay and lesbian couples use in constructing theirrelationships.

This study employs Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), an analytic approach for indicating how certain behaviors or characteristics are normatively linkedwith certain categories (Weatherall, 2002). The method developed through the analysis ofhow members, the actual speakers and hearers in a conversation, treat various membership categories (e.g., mother, father, etc.) as belonging in a set linkedto certain behaviors (Lepper, 2000; Sacks, 1972; Stokoe, 2012). Membership Categorization Analysis isperformed when membership in a given category is inferred through behaviors such as language, culture, courses of action, dress, situation, setting, or conversational utterances thatmakecategories observable and reportable (Eglin, 2002; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984). The attributions concerning a category can be tracked back to the activities that members associate with a given category (Stokoe, 2004). Thus, when members engage in categorization work, they reveal a shared common sense knowledge oftheir world, generally understood as culture (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).

As an aspect of MCA, Membership Categorization Devices (MCDs) represent how individuals' everyday knowledge about people is organized(Leudar, Marsland, & Nekvapil, 2004). MCDs consist of membership categories, a type of reference form based upon classifications or social types usedto describe persons, andMCDsare constitutedby category-bound activities (Leudar et al., 2004; Psathas, 1999; Roca-Cuberes, 2008). Thus, membership categories, such as "mother" or "son," are seen as part of a collectionor MCD, such as "family" (Roca-Cuberes, 2008). Members can also be pairedin standardized relational pairs such as "husband-wife" inwhich certain membership categories come together with specific rights and obligations (Lepper, 2000). Gays and lesbians can be pairedin the MCD same-sex couple.

Category bound activities are commonsensically associatedwith membership categories and include actions expectablyand properlydoneby persons whoare the incumbents of particular categories (Psathas, 1999; Roca-Cuberes, 2008). For example, the activity "soothing a crying baby" may be a category bound activity for the category "mother." When members act incategory-bound ways, inferences that the individual performingthe actionis a member or incumbentof a given category can beand are made basedonthese actions (Psathas, 1999).

Using Membership Categorization Analysis, scholars examined actions associatedwith masculinity (Georgakopoulou, 2005), representations of key figures in the September 2001 terrorists attacks (Leudar et al., 2004), andthe intersectionof morality and public policy(Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009).

Researchers explored how certain conversational actions relate to enacting incumbency in specific interpersonal relationship categories (Mandelbaum, 2003; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005). For instance, incumbency in some relational membership category is referenced when a speaker conveys prior shared experiences and relies on another speaker, whowas presumably present during that past shared experience, to pick-up a minimal referencetothat past shared experience. For example, both members of a romantic couple would be expectedtohave knowledge ofand jointly tell their how-we-met story. Showing interest in future activities or recognizing one's voice over the telephone based upon minimal vocal utterances may also indicate membership in an interpersonal relationship category (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005).

Continuing the work of identifying category bound activities to interpersonal relationship MCDs, Rintel(2013) examined video distortions that occurred during video calls between long-distance couples. The couples managedthose distortions through parody and teasing, whichRintel(2013)arguedthe couples treatedas a resource for intimacy. Korobov(2011)found that individuals engagedin speed-dating genderedtheir desiresand preferences for a potential romantic partner in a manner consequential to how possible romantic partners create connectionand affiliation. Fitzgerald andRintel(2013)explained how characters describedin an end-of-the day story embedded in a boyfriend-girlfriend interactionhave implications for the MCD couple when the character is describedin problematicor promiscuous terms. This study extends the work of these and others by examining conversational actions of gay and lesbian couples that are linked to a same-sex couple MCD.

The conversational practicesidentifiedbythese researchers donot necessarily demonstrate category boundednesswith a specific relationship membership category. Various relational categories including friends, spouses, andsiblingsare able to recognize each other's voices over the telephone or may be expectedto show interest in each other's future plans.

Astheseexamples indicate, categorical incumbency for many interpersonal relationship types isinteractionally revealed through talk rather than being publicly observable, such aswith gender membership categories (Roca-Cuberes, 2008). Nonetheless, examining interpersonal relationships from a perspective groundedin real-life social interactions is best equippedtodemonstrate how interpersonal relationships, including gay and lesbian relationships,are systematically occasionedin various conversational activities (Korobov, 2011).

2.Aim of the Study

This study will build upon the types of conversational actions indicative of incumbency in an interpersonal relationship categorywith the aim of analyzing membership categories that suggest a same-sex relationship between interactants. As stated earlier, behaviors such as expressing a shared history or recognizing another's voice on the telephone may point to incumbency in a relationship category (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005). The goal here isto identify conversational actions associatedwith a romantic relationship with a specific focus on examining what gays and lesbians doto enact incumbency in the same-sex couple MCD. I assertthatthis study's speakers engagedincategory bound activities linked to the MCD same-sex couple through the conversational actions ofmaking claims of intimate knowledge about their same-sex partners and discussing relationship roles.

3.   Data and Analytic Approach

The data included transcripts of video recordings of gay and lesbian couples gatheredfor various dinner events held intheir homes. The video recordings included the participationof three gay male couples ("Three Gay Male Couples" video) and two gay male couples and one lesbian couple ("Dinner with the Neighbors" video). The transcripts were created using a versionof the Jeffersonian system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). In each case, the recording device did not impact the events' occurrence. Participants were told participationwas voluntary andthat the researcher was interestedin examining the conversational behaviors of gays and lesbians. None requestedthat the recording device be turned off. The use of pseudonyms in the transcripts protects confidentiality. As described above, the analytic approach usedto examine the data is Membership Categorization Analysis.

4.Analysis

The two analytic sections that follow each examine category work in particular relationship –oriented environments. The first looks at categorizationin displays of intimate knowledge. The second shows how speakers display features of categorical practices in discussions of relationship roles. The extenttowhich speakers orientto categorical work as common, cultural knowledge becomes evident through the manner producedby participants(Stokoe, 2012).

4.1 Categorical practice in claiming intimate knowledge

The shared experiences of relational partners enable themtoacquire intimate knowledge about each other. Experiences enable partners tolearn one another's preferences or habits. Thisknowledge can be shared during interactionand understood as a category-bound activity, or an activity linkedto a category (Stokoe, 2012). For example, displaying knowledge of another's food preferences may be category-bound to the standardized relational pair spouse-spouse, amongst others. During the following interaction, which occurs near the start of the dinner, Matt is responding to a get-to-know-you question regarding his occupation.

Extract 1: "Three Gay Male Couples for Dinner"

1. Matt: I sa:y I'm a writer=
2. John: =Don't let him <f:oo::l y:o:u>
3.   He watches soap operas
4.   Which I go hooked into
5. Matt: O:h (.) John you're the one whogot me startedonthose
6.   I only watched CBS

Matt's "I say" utterance (line 1) displayed a possible incongruence between his occupationand how he describes it. John's indicationthat Matt is fooling the others (line 2) affirmedthis difference. John continuedtoprovide his own versionof Matt's occupation, namelythat "he watches soap operas" (line 3). John then explainedthat Matt "hooked" (line 4) him into the same behavior. Matt refuted John's characterization and claimed John started the soap opera watching behavior (line 5).

This series of utterances suggests the MCD same-sex romantic couple for several reasons. Asin the prior examples, John's knowledge of Matt's soap opera watching and Matt's claim that John initiated the soap opera watching at some earlier time indicated an historical aspect of their relationship. Also, John's ability to offer a public claim of deceptiveness by his partner inthe descriptionof his occupation indicates some risk-taking associatedwith a more intimate personal relationship (Mandelbaum, 1989). The teasing nature of John's utterance (lines 2-4) displayed a temporal or historical aspect oftheir relationship and intimacy that may be associatedwith romantic partners due to the risk-taking associatedwith his tease (Pawluk, 1989). The more intimate nature oftheir relationship enabled John tomake such a claim. Lastly, the discussion of soap-opera watching seems more normatively associatedwith a romantic partnership than with another relationship type.

Upon hearing two men discussing occupationand soap opera watching in the manner illustratedin the above extract, Matt and John could be placed into the MCD same sex romantic couple. MCA provides a set of rules of application (the economy and consistency rules, the hearer's maxim) that explain how people account forthe inferences made when they hear theseconversational actions(Tracy, 2011). The hearer's maxim indicates that if a conversational action tiedto some category is presented, and the person performing the conversational actionis a member ofthat category, then the speaker should be understood as belonging tothat category(Schegloff, 2007). Thus, John's statementthat Matt's descriptionof his occupationas a writer fooled the others (i.e., a claim of intimate knowledge) could be a member of a variety ofcategories such as group-of-friends or romantic partners. However, John's risk-taking claim of intimate knowledge that Matt watches soap operas rather than writes is more likely bound to the category same sex romantic partner. Since John and Matt arefrom the same population, the consistency rule enables one to place both men in the MCD same-sex romantic couple.

In contrast to the prior example, the following extract relates to enacting membership in a relationship category, but the conversational actions donotnecessarilyprovide evidenceof a romantic relationship. Inthis interaction Anton is discussing the preparationof a salad.

Extract 2: "Three Gay Male Couples For Dinner"

1. Anton: Bret had a hiss:y fit cuz
2.   I wantedto put some <u>damned</u> olives in the uh salad
3.   He can't <u>eat</u> olives
4.   Anybody ↑ want some olives ((holding bowl of olives))
5. Bret: Do you like olives ? ((glancingtoward John))
6. Matt: John hates olives
7. Anton: Well you know what
8.   I think we should send them down there [on ((noise))]
9.John: [ha haha]

　　　　Several conversational actions point to incumbency in a relationship category such as Anton's referenceto the shared activity of preparing a salad for a dinner party with Bret.Their membership in the standardized relational pairs host-host or roommate-roommate is indicatedby the sharing of household responsibilities such as preparing for a dinner party. The non-addressed recipient response Matt provided (line 6) to Bret's question (line 5) also indicated a relationship between Matt and John to the extentthat he is able to convey this informationon John's behalf without objectionfrom John.

　　　　Both ofthese examples – Bret and Anton preparing for a dinner party and Matt expressing John's dislikes – suggest possible membership in several different standard relational pairs such as sibling-sibling, friend-friend, romantic partner-romantic partner, etc. Friends may jointly prepare for a dinner party and siblings may know each other's likes and dislikes. So, while ethnographic informationdoesprovide information regarding the romantic nature ofthese relationships, the conversational activities here donot point specificallyto the MCD same-sex romantic couple.

　　　　A specific type of shared experience discussedby romantic couples involves their sexual history. This specific type of shared experience enables partners to share information about each other's idiosyncrasies thatare likely category bound to standardized relational pairs involvedin a sexual and/or romantic relationship. The following extract began following a query from Anton regarding the sexual experimentationthat occurs in Lisa and Sandra's relationship.

Extract 3: "Dinner with the neighbors"

1. Lisa: Like sexually you mean
2. Anton: Yeah (.) sexually experiment
3.   Try different things °and°
4. Sandra: I'm (.) more (.4) expe[rimental than you are
5. Lisa: [Yeah
6. Anton: Are you really?
7. Lisa: She's kind of like (.) the saying
8.   Femme on the streets (.) Butch in the sheets
9.   That kind
10. Anton: HA HA [HA
11. Bret: [Ha haha
12. Mark: Oh yes
13. Anton: Ha ha
14. Mark: So when she does finally [get ready
15. Sandra: [He he
16. Mark: It's like get out of the way
17. Lisa: Yeah I'm like I'm way too tired tonight honey

After Sandra explainedthat she is more experimental than Lisa (line 4), Anton sought confirmation (line 6). Lisa then produced the saying "Femme on the streets, butch in the sheets" (line 8) to both respond to Anton's questionandto clarify Lisa's statementconfirming she is the more experimental partner (line 4). Several conversational actions are indicative of membership in a same-sex romantic couple MCD. Both Sandra and Lisa referencedtheir shared experienceofbeing sexual partners, suggestingat least a sexual relationship between the two. Their comments also referenced a historical aspect oftheir relationship becausetheyare able to label one partner as more sexually experimental than the other. Such labeling indicates a history of sexual interaction between Sandra and Lisa fromwhich the evaluation "more experimental" is reached (line 4). Individuals without such a history are less capable of constructing such an identity without possible dispute from the individual for whom the identity is constructed.

Lisa and Sandra share knowledge oftheir sexual relationship. Either can chose toreveal thatshared information regarding their referenced sexual relationship.

The ability toreveal shared knowledge is true for any couple with joint experiences(Mandelbaum, 1987). The inferencethat one must first have sexual experiencewith another in order to consequentlymakeit public indicatedthat Lisa and Sandra are members of some MCD involving a sexual or romantic aspect.

Later in the extract after some laughter from the participants, Mark quippedthat Lisa may needto "get out of the way" (line 16) when Lisa presumably begins her sexual experimentation. Lisa respondedthat she may quash Lisa's sexual advances through the typical "I'm too tired" response (line 17). This utterance also suggests a long-term elementto the relationship between Lisa and Sandra inthat Lisa may be tired "tonight" but not some other night. Hearers ofthis utterance may infer that a relationship occurring over some period of time exists between Lisa and Sandra.

The hearer's maxim indicates that ambiguous categories that could be part ofat least two different MCDs should be heard as belonging its category bound device (Psathas, 1999). This suggests that Lisa's utterance "femme on the streets, butch on the sheets" is a member of the category lesbian and may be a part ofat least two different MCDs such as same-sex romantic couple or sexual adventurers. Considering both Lisa's "femme on the streets" utterance and Lisa's "I'm more experimental" utterance (line 4), the category lesbian inthis instance is likely bound to the MCD same-sex romantic partner because this self-descriptionand descriptionofone's partner suggests a longer-term sexual relationship. The consistency rule, which indicates that category names from the same device should be appliedto members of the same population(Sacks, 1974), suggests that the category romantic partner may be more appropriately appliedto both Lisa and Sandra given the historical nature oftheir shared experiences.   Additionally, because two women spoke about an enduring sexual relationship, the MCD same-sex romantic couple is inferred.

4.2 Categorical Practice in Displaying Relational Roles

Inthis section, the relationship oriented phenomenon of relational roles is the focus of analysis. I focus on the ways speakers invoke categories and the corresponding category-bound activities in the course of discussing their relationships. By explaining how these couples discuss roles within their relationships, I demonstrate howthis activity is category bound to the MCD same-sex couple.

Similar to prior examples, the following extract suggests the standardized relational pair involvedin a romantic relationship rather than another type of relationship because the participants are discussing relationship roles specific to a romantic relationship.In particular, divisionof household shopping responsibilities are addressed.

<u>Extract 4</u>: "Dinner with the Neighbors"

1. Bret: What about shopping?
2. Dave: <u>I</u> shop
3.   Yep I do the shopping
4.   I do all =
5. Mark: =Well, but what kind of shopping
6.   You should specify.
7. Bret: >Food<
8. Mark: Food shopping (.) right

        Several elements ofthis interaction suggest that Dave and Mark are members of the MCD same-sex romantic couple. Dave's response to Bret's question indicates that Dave and Mark arein a relationship inwhich shopping is a household task allocated between the two men. Mark indicatedthat different types of shopping could be allocated between the two (lines 5-6). The distributionof household tasks, which relational pairs must negotiate in order to maintain the shared household (Kurdek, 2007), implies some standardized relational pair such as roommatesor same-sex partners. A longer-term and potentially more intimate relationship is impliedby Mark's indicationthat different types of shopping are distributedintheir relationship. The fact that two men in a relationship allocate shopping responsibilities, and potentially different types of shopping responsibilities, points to a romantic relationship. Roommates may allocate grocery-shopping responsibilities, but theyarenot likelyto distribute other types of shopping responsibilities such asfor clothing.

        Dave's assertionthat he does the shopping (lines 2-4) suggests the category "person-who-shares-a-living-space" could be bound to the MCD roommates or same-sex romantic couple. However, while roommates or friends may allocate grocery shopping responsibilities, theyare less likelyto allocate other types of shopping responsibilities asis suggestedby Mark (lines 5-6).

This utterance allows one to infer through the hearer's maxim that Mark and Dave are members of the same-sex romantic partner population, and the consistency rule indicates that category names fromthat population should be appliedto both men. More specificallytheir shared history and allocationof household tasks suggest the MCD same-sex romantic couple.

The couples below discusseda specific relationship role, namelythe allocationof household tasks such as grocery shopping. This interaction beganwith Bret providing a possible reason for Lisa's primary responsibility for grocery shopping in the household she shares with Sandra.

Extract 5: "Dinner with the neighbors"

1. Bret:	Now isthat because of you going toschoo:l
2.	And she's the one that's wor:king::
3.	Isthat part ofit too?
4. Lisa:	No (.) I think the food thing is because I'm the one that cooks
5.	And Sandra is (.) but
6.	She could go without food for sixteen weeks
7.	And she couldn't give a shit
8. Mark:	Ha ha (.) ho::
9. Sandra:	But so she knows wh- what we haveand what we need
10. Lisa:	But you could know (.) if you wantedto
11. Armando:	Ha hahahaha
12. Lisa:	But you choose nottoknow

Prior tothis extract, Lisa indicatedher primary responsibility for grocery shopping and Bret offered a query with a candidate response, namelythat Lisa did more shopping because she attended school and Sandra worked (lines 1-3). Lisa rejected the candidate response and indicatedthat she grocery shops because she also does the cooking in part because Sandra isnot interestedin food (lines 4-7). Sandra provided another reason for Lisa's role as grocery shopper, namelythat she knows what the couple hasand needs (line 9). Lisa rebutted Sandra's justificationby indicating that Sandra could also know what is neededin terms of groceries (lines 10 and 12).

One feature ofthis interactionthat suggests a romantic relationship is the allocationof household tasks by Lisa and Sandra. This interaction indicates they decidedto allocate grocery shopping and cooking duties intheir household. Their utterances also suggest a historical nature of the relationship inthat Lisa knows about Sandra's lack of interest in food. Sandra's use of "we" (line 9) also suggests a relationship between the two (Íñigo-Mora, 2004). Lastly, Bret's initial question suggesting that one partner works and the other attends school points to another role allocation between Lisa and Sandra normatively associatedwith a romantic relationship. The query suggests some financial caretaking on Sandra's part because she is the "working" partner while Lisa is attending school.

This series of utterances could be heard as two female roommates describing how they handle cooking and cleaning responsibilities within their household. Such a hearing would place Lisa and Sandra in the membership category roommate. However, because neither Lisa nor Sandra objectedto Bret's indicationthat one partner works while the other attends school, Lisa and Sandra are more likely members of a more intimate relationship category grouping, namely a same-sex romantic couple. The financial dependency impliedby Bret's statementis more normatively associatedwith a romantic relationship, not a roommate relationship.

5. Conclusion

The methods observable inthese members' uses of the same-sex romantic partner membership category not only involve members talking about intimate knowledge oftheir partner and the allocationofrelationship roles, but also includeusing this categorizing to accomplish a sense of social role and identity through these conversations. This analysis illustrated the categorization work doneby members asthey use the features of language, culture, conversational action, and settings tomake persons' identities, actions, and other attributes observable. These actions make reportable the occasionof membership in a particular relationship category, andthis categorization work rests in part upon making available the prior shared experiences ofthosein the relationship.

This analysis also supports the perspective that identities arenot fixedand predetermined, but are situated occurrences thatinteractants' make available through their talk (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).

The resources for identity construction emergedas actions such as discussing household responsibilities, reminiscing about past experiences, or revealing a partner's preferences. Those constructed identities relatedto occupation (extract 1) or sexual behavior (extract 3), in some instances, andwere revealed through descriptions of social roles within relationships. Being the "grocery shopper" or the "sexually experimental partner" were examples of the roles made available bythese participants.

The MCD same-sex romantic couple examined here is a result of both conversational resource and topic. The device same-sex romantic couple is evidenced through actions such as the co-telling of prior shared experiences or jointly responding to inquiries. The hearer's maxim supports the placementof members into a general relationship device based upon these actions, but in isolationthese actions alone donot point to incumbency in a same-sex romantic couple MCD. Considering the topics of conversation employedwiththose actions enables one to infer thatthese speakers are members of the same-sex romantic couple device. A topic such as the sexual interactionthat occurs between the partners or the financial dependency one partner hason another support this inference. The greater emphasis MCA places upon interactants' interpretive procedures comparedto turn-by-turn sequencing enables analysts to reach these sort of conclusions (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).

A feature ofthis categorization work isthat characterizations of gay and lesbian partnership are orientedtoas playful and ludic. The elements of humor presentin many ofthese interactions is presentin a variety of instances including Lisa's characterizationof her partner as "femme on the streets; butch in the sheets" and John's assertionthat Matt does nothing more than watch soap operas. The laughter that follows these instances shows these representations are orientedtoas humorous rather than conflict invoking. This may be a feature of the talk that distinguishes same-sex romantic relationships from heterosexual relationships asthis sort of playful, camp-like talk hasbeen linkedwith gay conversation(Harvey, 1998, 2000).

The gender role implications of many ofthese interactions may also differentiate same-sex from heterosexual couples. To the extentthat men discussing types of shopping and watching soap operas or women discussing sexual experimentation deviates from normative gender behavior, these participants donot conform to traditional gender roles.

Perhaps these members feel more comfortable discussing non-normative behavior fortheir gender, albeit in a situationthat includes the company of other same-sex couples. Certainly how categories develop is contingenton the situation, but it also draws on given cultural resources providedby language (Leudar et al., 2004). Clearly further analysis of data, particularlyfrom heterosexual couples, is neededin order to support findings relatedto the manner inwhich sexual orientationand gender are orientedtoin membership categorization work.

This study indicates that a confluenceof factors allows other membership categories to fall away while same-sex romantic partner remains a logical inference. When joint ownership of past experiences, the sharing ofthose experiences, discussionof relationship roles, and non-normative gender behavior come together other types of relationship categories recede from consideration. The examinationof similar data and the connecting of activities to categories will aid in the developmentoftheseand other factors that suggest incumbency in the same-sex romantic couple Membership Category Device.

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