ABSTRACT

Purpose – This chapter explicates the categorical resources and practices used in some disputes involving two children.

Methodology – The data on which the study is based consists of a transcript of an audio recording of the naturally occurring talk-in-interaction during a family meal. This data is analyzed using the approach of membership categorization analysis (MCA).

Findings – We show that it is neither the category collection “children” nor the category collection “siblings” that is relevant for the organization of these disputes but rather a number of asymmetrical standardized relational pairs, such as “rule-enforcer” and “offender” or “offender” and “victim.” It is these pairs of categories that are demonstrably relevant for the members, providing for and making intelligible their disputes. We then consider the question of the demonstrably relevant “wider context” of the disputes to which the disputants are actually oriented. This wider context is an omnirelevant oppositional social relationship between the children. We demonstrate that the disputes reflexively constitute the character
of their oppositional relationship and show how these are instantiations of an omnirelevant category collection, namely, “parties to an oppositional relationship.”

Value of paper – This paper contributes to the corpus of ethnomethodological studies on children’s culture in action and more particularly on the categorical organization of children’s (and others’) disputes. It also contributes to MCA more generally in respect to its focus on the issues of omnirelevance and the “occasionality” of category collections.

Keywords: Ethnomethodology; membership categorization analysis; children’s disputes; demonstrable relevance; social relationships; omnirelevance

In this chapter, we use membership categorization analysis (MCA) to explicate the categorical resources and categorization practices used by two children in the production of their disputes. The data for the study consist of some instances of such disputes which occurred during a family meal involving a mother and a father and their two children, a boy of 13 and a girl aged 8. MCA emphasizes that it is of crucial importance to comprehend the categories and category collections that are demonstrably relevant for the participants in the scenes of social life. The analyst is not entitled to merely assume that some category collection such as “children” is relevant for understanding “children’s disputes.” The relevance, for members, of such a categorization would have to be demonstrated for the analyst’s account to be an adequate one. We accordingly seek to discover and to demonstrate just what categories are organizationally relevant for the participants in them. We show that it is neither the category collection “children” nor the category collection “siblings” that is relevant for the organization of these disputes but rather several asymmetrical standardized relational pairs (SRPs) of categories such as “rule-enforcer” and “offender” or “offender” and “victim.” It is these pairs of categories that are demonstrably relevant for the members, providing for and making intelligible their disputes. We then consider the question of the “wider context” of the disputes. At issue is whether such wider contexts are actually oriented to and relevant for the disputants. Our vehicle for addressing this issue is Sacks’ concept of omnirelevance. We show that the relevant context for the disputants is their omnirelevant oppositional social relationship. The disputes reflexively constitute, and comprise recognizable instantiations of an omnirelevant category collection, namely, “parties to an oppositional relationship.”
CHILDREN’S CULTURE AND CHILDREN’S DISPUTES

An ethnomethodological approach to children’s culture emphasizes “culture-in-action” (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Sacks, 1992a, 1992b; Speier, 1971, 1973, 1976). A particular avenue of inquiry has been concerned with the cultural resources used in children’s disputes, and a major focus of attention in this field has been on the sequential organization of these disputes (Church, 2009; Maynard, 1985). It has been shown, for example, that the sequence of a dispute begins with a “disputable” or “arguable” (Maynard, 1985). The second part of the sequence involves a second party producing a turn which disputes or argues with the disputable turn. The disputability of the first turn is only realized in the second turn and is a product of analysis by its recipient or other participant in the interactional scene. For example, analyzing that one has been insulted, or analyzing that one has been inappropriately directed, or analyzing that someone’s account is false is made available in the response to the turn containing the disputable. According to Maynard (1986) the dispute “takes hold” in the third turn when the original disputable “is defended by the first speaker” (Church, 2009, p. 12).

Another complementary strand of work has used MCA to investigate children’s disputes (Bateman, 2012; Butler, 2008; Butler & Weatherall, 2006; Danby & Baker, 1998, 2000; Hester & Hester, 2010) and it is the approach used in this chapter. The potential payoff is that will offer insight into children’s relationships, how these may be involved in their disputes, their own analyses of what is disputable and how these disputes are then organized. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of MCA. However, it is important for this chapter to make some remarks about what MCA is not. In particular, MCA is not the mere observation and re-description of members’ talk and interaction in terms of a collection of technical concepts such as membership category, membership categorization device, and so on. MCA is something that the members of society engage in themselves when they make sense of the social world around them and produce their own actions as analyzable and recognizable by other members. As an analyst’s enterprise, then, MCA is not simply description but the analysis of members’ analyses.

MCA’s emphasis on members’ categorization practices follows of course from its ethnomethodological roots. Thus, it is now well known that where sociology prefers to treat social order as a theoretical problem,
ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have established programs of inquiry which respecify that orderliness as members’ phenomena of practical action and practical reasoning (Button, 1991; Garfinkel, 1967, 1991, 2002; Hester, 2009). One expression of this respecification consists in how MCA has transformed categorizations of persons from taken for granted resources for sociological explanation into topics of inquiry in their own right (Sacks, 1992a, 1992b; Zimmerman & Pollner, 1971). As Sacks (1992a, p. 41) pointed out: “all the sociology we read is unanalytic, in the sense that they simply put some category in.” This is done, for example, in selecting race, class, or gender categories and then comparing distributions of some “problematic” type of behavior between these categories. In “just putting the category in” sociologists presume these categories are appropriate ones for understanding the behavior in question. However, not only is it the case that these categories may not have any bearing on the behavior in question as far as the participants themselves are concerned, it is also the case that the procedures used in selecting and applying such categories for persons have not been subjected to analysis. In contrast, MCA has investigated how members of society (including professional sociologists) select and make use of categories in social interaction.

It was in this connection that Sacks (1966) also drew a distinction between “possibly correct” versus “interactonally relevant” categories (Coulter, 1991). While persons may be “correctly” described as male, female, old, young, black, white, American, British, or Irish, not all of these will be relevant for some piece of social action. The research policy and task is to investigate which categories are selected and used in actual instances of talk-in-interaction. Schegloff (1991) later reiterated and elaborated this distinction in his discussion of the “demonstrable relevance” and “procedural consequentiality” of categorizations of persons.

These considerations pertaining to the relevance of categories for members have some specific consequences for the analysis of “children’s” disputes. A categorical orientation to the analysis of children’s disputes raises the question of the relevance of the category “child” for understanding the disputes to be analyzed. Indeed, Maynard (1986) has drawn attention to the possibility that the sequential structures deployed in the accomplishment of children’s disputes may not be unique to children at all. In addressing the sequential organizational practices that are the witnessable endogenous properties of the local order of disputes, it is important to recognize that in characterizing them as “children’s disputes” such a characterization should in no way be taken as a claim that children’s disputes are
organizationally different from adults’ disputes. The sequential resources used by parties to accomplish dispute may well be generic even if the actual topics of the disputes may differ. In a similar vein, as has also been argued by Butler (2008, p. 14), the category collection “children” may not be the relevant organizational device for the participants in such disputes at all. If it is, on the other hand, it is incumbent on the analyst to demonstrate that this is so, rather than simply presuming it a priori.

The key point is that the particular categories that the parties are oriented to, and that are relevant for them in the organization of the disputes, are matters for empirical research and are to be discovered in the research materials rather than being presumed at the outset. Therefore, the research questions are: What categories and collections of categories do the parties involved actually use in accomplishing their disputes? Are they disputing as “children,” “classmates,” “neighbors,” “gang members,” “game players,” “siblings,” or as incumbents of some other membership categories? In our data, and we assume in the case of disputes generally, it is not categories in isolation but pairs of categories. Minimally, the relevant categories are disputant/disputant, but there seems to be more going on in these disputes than the occupancy of opposing dispute positions. Dispute turns can accomplish actions more than simply disputing. A dispute turn may, for example, be put to the service of putting somebody down, challenging their authority, getting someone into trouble, and a variety of other actions. Such actions, furthermore, are category-implicative; they consist of activities that are bound to particular membership categories for the occasion of their production, and they imply relationally paired categories. These “relational pairs” are “standardized” in so far as the one makes the other programmatically relevant and the parties are mutually aware of the predicates attached to each member of the pair relative to the other (Sacks, 1966, p. 37).

A distinction can also be drawn between those SRPs which are symmetrical and those which are asymmetrical. The membership categories of symmetrical SRPs have similar predicates; asymmetrical SRPs are constituted from different activities, rights, responsibilities, entitlements, and other predicates. For example, in the case of the SRP “master/slave,” the “master” has different rights from those of the “slave” and in the case of the SRP “teacher/student,” the teacher has different predicates from those of the student.2

Our proposal with respect to our data is that neither the category collection “children” nor those of the SRP “brother” and “sister” would be effective in making recognizable what the participants were doing. Specifically, the
activities in question are not, prima facie, bound to the categories “children” or to “brother” and “sister.” These activities consist of degradations and attempted degradations, insults and name callings, rebukes, mockery, and various resistances, defences, and other counters. These activities are not bound to the category collection “children,” nor to the category collection “brother” and “sister.” The question then is: if these activities are neither bound to “children” nor to “siblings” then what categories and category collections are they bound to? To answer this question we will turn to our materials.

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the data upon which our study is based consists of some instances of audio-taped and transcribed (according to Jefferson, 1978) talk-in-interaction which occurred during the course of a family meal involving a mother (Jen) and a father (Harry) and their two children, a boy of 13 (Russell) and a girl aged 8 (Maggie). For reasons which should become clear as the analysis proceed, we have selected not only the disputes which occurred between the two “children” but also some of the talk-in-interaction which preceded it and followed it. In the analyses that follow, we show that a collection of asymmetrical SRPs, such as “rule-enforcer” and “rule-breaker,” “rebuker” and “resister,” and “bully” and “victim,” are used to organize and structure the disputes. We will illustrate this with three data excerpts.

In Excerpt 1 Russell and Maggie have just been informed via their mother’s announcement that dinner is now ready and that they should go to the bathroom and wash their hands. On their way from the bathroom to the kitchen a “fight” breaks out and as they enter the kitchen the following occurs:

Excerpt 1.

1. M: He stra:ngled me::
2. J: Have you washed your hands?
3. M: He stra:ngled me::
4. R: She wouldn’t die:
5. J: Ohhhh. Russ [please ]
6. M: [But you] strangled me hh: (1.0) it hu::r’
7. (2.0)
8. R: Of course it didn’t hur’
9. M: It hur’
10. J: Wehh:ll (2.5) We’ll have to start without Harry
11. R: Mm Mm Mm Mm Mm ((pretending to hit sister))
12. M: No [Ge’off] ([shrieks])
13. J: [Oh come] o::n calm down please and sit and eat
In sequential terms, after Maggie’s initial complaint (line 1) to her mother, and its repetition (line 3), that Russell “strangled” her, a dispute between Russell and Maggie develops (from line 6) about whether his “strangling” her “hurt” or not. The dispute sequence begins with Maggie’s disputable complaint that Russell’s strangling her “hurt.” He disputes this by saying (line 8) that “of course it didn’t hur’”, although he does not deny having attempted to strangle her. She then disputes this with her reassertion (line 9) that it did “hu:r.” In terms of the categorical resources used to produce the dispute, the organizing membership categories, we suggest, are neither “child–child” nor “brother” and “sister.” This is not to say that the participants in the dispute are neither children nor siblings. Rather, it is to say that these categories by themselves are not demonstrably relevant for them because they do not render intelligible the nature of what these “children” or “siblings” are doing. The organizing category collection for the recognizability of the dispute at hand involves the asymmetrical SRP, “offender” and “victim.” In saying that “you strangled me, it hurt,” Maggie categorizes him as an offender/aggressor against her and herself as a victim. It is his behavior as an aggressor that she finds complainable, not the fact that he is another child and a brother. He disputes her categorization, denying that he offended in the way that she claims and also that she is a victim because his actions did not in fact hurt.

In rejecting the category pair, “victim” and “offender” Russell attempts to locate the strangulation within a rather different pair of categories, possibly “teaser” and “teased.” He does not deny that he “strangled” her – he says that “she wouldn’t die” – but this “admission” humorously misidentifies (cf. Sacks, 1992a, p. 419) the character of his action in that the mother responds to it with “oh Russell please” rather than with a response more resonant with an admission to a serious crime. His self-misidentification as an “attempted-strangler” seems to be treating the episode as a joke or play-fight to which Maggie has over-reacted. Furthermore, this over-reaction has been expressed with an incorrect (as far as Russell is concerned) and therefore contestable identification of the two categories involved.

It is important to note that both her selected categories – victim and offender – and his – teaser and teased – are asymmetrical. In terms of the predicates of these categories, both put Russell in an “elevated” and “dominant” position relative to that of his sister. As an offender, in relation to his sister as a victim, he has physically “overpowered,” dominated, and inflicted injury upon his sister. As a teaser, she is again a
victim, albeit of a joke rather than a physical assault. The second excerpt is as follows:

Excerpt 2.

1. J: Do you want a drink?
2. R: You could have asked Maggie.
3. J: [Do you want] a drink?
4. M: [I didn’t]
5. J: [She didn’t ask]
6. R: You she did
7. R: ((s.v.)) She asked for a side plate () The::re you go
8. M: Thank you ((falsetto))

Here the dispute sequence begins with an action by Maggie in response to which Russell (line 2) makes an imputation of deviance. This deviance involves Maggie reaching across the table to get a drink. This is an instance of a “dinner-time rule” being invoked by Russell, namely, that diners do not reach across the table to obtain items but rather they should make requests for others to pass them the item which they want. The imputation of deviance is disputed by Maggie who declares (line 4) that she did ask. Jen, the mother, also disputes (lines 5–6) Russell’s complaint/accusation, corroborating Maggie’s version of events. In the third turn of the dispute, Russell addresses his mother and corrects her (line 7) with the retort that Maggie did not ask for a drink but asked for a side plate.

As with Excerpt 1, the natural history of this dispute can be seen to be organized in terms of an asymmetrical standardized relational pair of categories, rule-enforcer and deviant. Russell takes a position as the incumbent of the membership category “rule-enforcer,” imputing the relational category “rule-breaker” or “deviant” to Maggie on the grounds that she did not “ask” for a drink to be passed to her. However, rather than accepting this category imputation, Maggie counters that she did not break a rule because she “did” ask him. She is not therefore an “offender” because she in fact produced an action that exhibited rule-compliance, not deviance. So, contrary to Russell’s category imputation, she is actually a “rule-follower” not a deviant. Her category-resistance and counter-self-categorization as “rule-follower” (via the category-bound activity “asking”) is then countered (after the mother’s corroboration of Maggie’s resistance) by Russell. He does not dispute that she “asked” for something but that she asked for a side plate, not a drink. She may have been a rule-follower in asking for a side plate but in so far as she did not ask for a drink her incumbency of the category “deviant” remains therefore in place, with Russell sustaining his
incumbency of the asymmetrical relational category, “rule-enforcer.” This is not disputed by his mother or by his sister.

Excerpt 3.

1. J: Milk or water Russ?
2. R: Water please (1.0) ((r.v.)) Sit down()
3. M: I know I slipped
4. J: Okay there’s no need to shout at [her]
5. R: [If you slipped]
you’re just standing there goin’
7. M: [No]
8. R: [Oo]h I slipped ((sarcastic tone))
9. M: I went backwards like that
10. (1.5)
11. R: ((r.v.)) Sit do::wn ()
12. M: I know don’t talk with your [mouth open ]
13. J: ((s.v.)) [She is love]y
14. R: Hmm how am I meant to talk then?
15. J: Russell
16. M: You’ve got a mou[thful ]
17. J: [Russell]
18. R: Ner ner ner ner ner [ner] ("talking” with mouth closed);
19. J: [ J-] Maggie just leave him alone
20. ignore him he’s being purposely (3.0) Kevinish
21. M: Mm
22. R: I’m not
23. J: And you are eati’- er talking with your mouthful
24. (11.0)
25. J: What did Harry say when he phoned then?

This excerpt contains an extended dispute. The initial disputable is Maggie’s standing up from the table where she has been sitting since the beginning of the meal. Russell tells her to “sit down” (line 2), which involves the invocation of another mealtime rule. The dispute then “takes hold” in line 3 when Maggie disputes both his right to invoke the rule and the veracity of his claim that she has broken a rule in the first place. She does so by offering an account for the fact that she is standing up. For Russell, her account is disputable, and so he extends the dispute by challenging it (lines 5 and 6). Maggie, in turn, re-asserts, elaborates, and dramatizes (lines 7 and 9) her account which is then met by Russell’s recycling of the original directive that she “sit down” (line 11). At line 12, Maggie makes an attempt to “turn the tables” on Russell through her invocation of another mealtime rule, namely, “not talking with one’s mouth full.” Unfortunately, she states this incorrectly and Russell is presented with an opportunity to ridicule her (lines 14 and 18).
Several asymmetrical SRPs can be seen in use in this extended dispute. First, at the beginning of the excerpt (line 2), it can be seen that Russell assumes incumbency of the category “rule-enforcer,” as he did in Excerpt 2, this time directing Maggie to sit down. His directive involves, then, another imputation of deviance to Maggie: she has broken another mealtime rule by standing up instead of remaining seated. She is therefore not only an offender against whom the rule can be invoked by the enforcer, she is also in the position of someone who can be told, instructed, and directed as to what they must do. As rule-enforcer, Russell assumes the “right” to censure Maggie who, as an imputed incumbent of the category “rule-breaker” or “deviant,” is required to “comply.” In resisting the directive, Maggie also resists the imputed incumbency of the categories of “deviant” and “person-who-can-be-instructed-directed-and-be-told-to-comply” that comes with it. Her resistance involves, first, saying that she “knows” what the rule is and therefore is not someone to be instructed and directed about it. She therefore resists not only her categorization as one who can be properly directed but also his presumed self-categorization as rule-enforcer and director. Second, her resistance involves offering an account for her ostensible infraction, namely, that she “slipped.” Her “excuse” means that she is a “victim” of circumstances beyond her control; she is not the deviant that Russell claims that she is.

We have said that her account becomes another disputable for Russell. He endeavors to expose not only its fallaciousness but also the claimed incumbency of the category “victim” that it implies. For Russell, slipping would not have produced the end-product of standing up, as Maggie claims. Persons do not accidentally stand up. Standing up is the outcome of deliberate and intentional action. She is therefore not a victim but an offender who can be properly directed. She may even be a liar. Again, Maggie resists Russell’s various categorizations of her, offering an elaborated account and an enactment of her “slipping”; she “went backwards like that.” Unfortunately, this account and the accompanying enactment again produces a standing up, thus making relevant a recycling of the original directive from Russell that she should “sit down,” which he duly produces. He therefore retains incumbency of the categories “rule-enforcer” and “director” and she correspondingly remains in the asymmetrically paired category position of one who is an “offender” and who may therefore be directed and made to comply.

Maggie’s response to the recycled directive is a recycling of her original resistance, namely, she “knows” the rule about standing up. She therefore disputes again his presumed incumbency of the category rule-enforcer and
the activity of directing that is here predicated of it. She then attempts to "turn the category tables," so to speak, by issuing a directive of her own. In doing so, she can be understood as attempting to switch places in the asymmetrical category arrangements that have so far constituted the produced structure of this episode of talk-in-interaction. Thus, she invokes the mealtime rule "no talking with your mouth full," issuing a directive to Russell, "don't talk with your mouth open." In invoking this rule and in issuing this directive she is attempting to locate herself within the category "rule-enforcer" with its attendant entitlement to engage in the category-bound activity, "issuing directives" and to allocate to Russell the asymmetrically paired categories "offender" and "one-who-can-be-directed-and-told-to-comply." Unfortunately for her, this attempt to switch category positions with Russell fails because she states the rule incorrectly. It can be assumed that she meant to say, "don't talk with your mouth full" which is a rule, like the sitting down rule, that has been invoked several times previously in the meal by the mother. Instead, in saying, "Don't talk with your mouth open," she presents Russell with an opportunity to make fun of his sister, an opportunity that he loses no time in grasping. In countering her directive with "how am I meant to talk then" he regains the categorical advantage; she is now "reduced" from a rule-enforcer to an incompetent speaker. Despite her attempt to correct herself by saying "you have got a mouthful," he nevertheless enacts compliance with Maggie's inept directive, showing what it would be like to talk with his mouth closed, the incomprehensible, "ner ner ner ner ner ner." 

We conclude this section by noting that a variety of asymmetrical standardized category relational pairs are key organizational features of the disputes exhibited in the excerpts we have analyzed. Thus, Russell attempts in his various oppositional turns to "degrade" his sister in some way. He tries to enforce a rule, call her deviant, hurt her, ridicule her, tease her, etc., and in so doing variously constitutes himself as a rule-enforcer, a director, a strangler, a teaser, and so forth. In these actions, he allocates Maggie to some category lower than his in the local categorical order. She is someone who can be told what to do, who can be made to look stupid, and who can be physically overpowered. Yet Maggie, even though she is put on the defensive, resists; she does not accept his attempted categorical asymmetries. She resists the degradation and sometimes attempts herself to reverse the attempted alignment of categories. Sometimes she enlists the support of her mother (to even things up), and along with her resisting, thereby constitutes herself as an incumbent of an oppositional category.
In the next section, we will consider how the asymmetrical category relations and the degradations through which they are realized are omni-relevant for these members and remain “on the table,” so to speak, throughout the meal.

CHILDREN’S DISPUTES AND OMNI RELEVANT CATEGORY RELATIONS

So far, we have analyzed some disputes, paying particular attention to the asymmetrical category relational pairs used in their organization. We have sought to demonstrate that these category relations are those which are relevant to the parties involved in the disputes. Thus, while the parties may be “correctly” categorizable as children, and related to each other as brother and sister, these membership categories are not by themselves the relevant ones for the organization of these disputes. The relevant categories comprise a collection of asymmetrical standardized relational pairs: rule-enforcer/deviant, director/directee, offender/victim, teaser/teased, and so on. These do not negate their incumbency of the category collections “children” and “siblings” but such incumbency does not provide the categorical context for the conduct of their disputes. In the second part of the paper we wish to consider the connection between the asymmetrical category relational pairs which are demonstrably relevant for, and which are used in organizing the disputes, and a wider context of oppositional social relations between the participants. We seek to show that the disputes emerge out of and reflexively constitute an omni-relevant oppositional category relational pair, “parties to an oppositional relationship.”

Our starting point would seem to be fairly uncontroversial: children’s disputes do not exist in isolation. They develop out of and contribute to larger contexts of children’s lives. However, while this observation may seem, on the face of it, to be uncontroversial and innocuous, the analytical task of establishing a connection between the local ordering of disputes and some wider context of children’s lives is, on reflection, less than straightforward. This is because any attribution of a contextual orientation to the participants also has to comply with the methodological constraints of demonstrable relevance outlined earlier in connection with membership categories. As Schegloff (1992, pp. 196–197) writes:

If one is concerned with understanding what something in interaction was for its participants, then we must establish what sense of context was relevant to those participants, and at the moment at which what we are trying to understand what
occurred. And we must seek to ground that claim in the conduct of the participants; they show (to one another in the first place, but to us as a by-product) what they take their relevant context and identities to be.

Just as it is, then, for membership categories, so it is also that any attribution and analytical use of social context must subscribe, at least in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, to the principle of demonstrable relevance: it has to be shown in the particulars of persons’ talk-in-interaction that some context is relevant for them on the occasion of their production of those particulars. There are two aspects of demonstrable relevance here. The first concerns how the parties to some scene or setting demonstrate for one another that a particular sense of social context is relevant for them, while the second refers to the methodological problem for the analyst of how to demonstrate that a particular sense of context is relevant for those participants. The authority for any claim for the latter clearly rests upon the transparency and availability of the former. Thus, it is one thing to assert that analysts should only deal with context as a members’ phenomenon and not as a theoretically driven imposition, but it is altogether a different matter to produce analyses which satisfy such a constraint and which can adequately display members’ orientations to social context as constituents of their talk-in-interaction or other activities.

There are various kinds of context to which members may be oriented. For any particular utterance or activity, the relevant context may be the preceding turn or configuration of turns at talk, it may be the local scene or setting, such as a lesson in a classroom or an examination in a doctor’s surgery, it may mean something situationally more diffuse, such as “our family” or “this relationship,” or it may be the sort of object more traditionally associated with sociologies of a more structural inclination, such as the global oil economy, the American housing market, or the twenty-first century capitalism, to name just a few possibilities. Likewise, the analyst can have no assurance that these various levels operate independently of one another. Talk-in-interaction may be oriented to several contexts simultaneously, occurring not only “at this late hour” but also “in this family” and “within this relationship,” such that a multiplicity of contexts may be demonstrably relevant for the participants. Nevertheless, whatever level of context one is referring to, the point is that its availability as something that the parties are oriented to can only be witnessed in what the parties do and say.

With respect to the notion of demonstrable relevance in relation to social contexts, Sacks’ writing on the subject of “omnirelevance” is especially instructive. In the 1964–1965 lectures (1992a, p. 515), for example, the discussion is developed from the question as to whether the analyst has any
right to formulate a particular occasion, setting, or context when the participants in it do not so formulate it. He asks (Sacks, 1992a, p. 515):

“have we any special rights to assign name formulations to the actions, upon, say, occasions when they are not assigned by the participants?” This question can be heard, on the one hand, to allude to the problem of demonstrable relevance, and on the other hand, to raise the issue of the use of “formulations” in talk-in-interaction. The two issues are linked. Since “members can’t do pure formulating” (Sacks, 1992a, p. 521), because formulations of some setting are not done for their own sake but are always done as some action for a particular purpose, is the analyst only justified in “assigning name formulations” to occasions and settings when they are so formulated as a course of action other than mere formulating? The problem is that it is frequently the case that persons do not so formulate their settings, either merely or for other purposes. Rather, it would seem that they take them for granted, and so how then can it be shown that they are oriented to a setting?

One direction might be to assume that if the analyst can see “it” (a particular sense of an utterance, a category incumbency, a setting) in some way, using their own cultural commonsense knowledge, then it can be assumed that the participants themselves see it that way too. However, this hardly amounts to a demonstration that some members actually display in their talk-in-interaction their orientation to a setting. Another direction, pursued by Sacks, is concerned with the question of whether members can be said to be oriented to a setting or context even though they do not make use of explicit formulations of its character. Sacks addresses this question in his discussion of the concept of the “omnirelevance” (1992a, p. 594) of a membership categorization device. As Sacks points out, the omnirelevance of a membership categorization device means two things. The first concerns its “effectiveness” – that is, that the device allows the activities within a setting to be “seeable,” intelligible, recognizable, that is, accountable (Garfinkel, 1967) as comprising or constitutive of a particular type of setting. Seeing what the setting or the occasion is involves seeing the participants as incumbents of particular membership categories which are constitutive of the setting. However, the effectiveness of a category collection in “seeing” some activity as an activity of a specific sort does not, of course, mean that the category collection is omnirelevant for a particular occasion or setting. It only means that it is effective for the accountability of the specific instance of the activity in question. The omnirelevance of the category collection and hence the setting accomplished via the activities predicated of its membership categories lies then not just in their occasional use in making
sense of instances of talk-in-interaction but in the “anytime invocability” of those categories, that is, the device or collection may be invoked at any time. In other words, the accountable production of specific sorts of talk-in-interaction is provided for by the omnirelevance of particular membership categories and the collections of which they are a part. Omnirelevance means then that for a given setting or occasion there are activities or actions that are “invocable,” that is, doable at any time, and these are provided for and seeable as “effective” by virtue of their being tied to and expressive of omnirelevant categories and the collections they are a part of and whose enacted incumbency constitutes the setting for what it is.

There are, then, two tests for the omnirelevance of a social context. One is that the parties analyze each other as having produced category-bound activities bound to the categories comprising the collection parties to a particular context. The second test is that of anytime invocability. However, where Sacks addressed issues of omnirelevance in relation to social context in the sense of “setting,” the type of context that we wish to analyze here is the social relationship between the children in our data. Our argument is that it is the nature of their social relationship as oppositional that comprises an omnirelevant context of their interaction.

THE OMNIRELEVANCE OF “PARTIES TO AN OPPOSITIONAL RELATIONSHIP”: EFFECTIVENESS

With respect to the “effectiveness” of the relational pair, “parties to an oppositional relationship,” the issue is whether it is possible to see that this relational pair is the demonstrably relevant context of their talk-in-interaction for the participants themselves. Our claim is that this relational pair is indeed relevant in this way and that this can be seen in how they analyze and respond to each other’s talk-in-interaction. That talk-in-interaction is analyzable by the parties in terms of the device “parties to an oppositional relationship.” In particular, it can be shown that in producing their responses both Russell and Maggie display their analysis of the membership category in terms of which the just completed turn was produced. Such turns are analyzed by the parties as activities bound to the categories comprising the collection “parties to an oppositional relationship.” These categories are effective in making accountable, that is, recognizable, the character of the turn having been taken as oppositional. So, in the response to an activity engaged in by a first party, if the second party responds in such a way that this displays their analysis of the first
party’s action, and if that analysis is one that shows the second party analyzed the first party as the incumbent of an omnirelevant category, in this case “party to an oppositional relationship,” then we have a demonstration.

In nontechnical language, there is an underlying, ongoing struggle and opposition between these “siblings” which “erupts” occasionally (for much of the rest of the time the children ignore each other). Opportunities for expressing this underlying opposition are taken. More technically, when they are taken they are analyzed by the recipient as “first-turn-oppositionals” and they exhibit their analysis by producing a “second-turn-oppositional” themselves. Furthermore, this opposition is often asymmetrical in that the parties do not just oppose one another but do so in terms of an asymmetrical oppositional pair of categories consisting of one who seeks to “get the upper hand,” so to speak, and the other who resists (and occasionally attempts to turn the category tables). As has been shown in the previous section, oppositional talk that arises in this way sometimes develops into dispute. If the excerpts analyzed above are considered again, it can be seen that the sequences which eventually result in dispute commence with some talk or action that is analyzed as asymmetrically oppositional by its recipient.

The analysis of an action as a first-turn-oppositional and as having been produced under the auspices of “parties to an oppositional relationship” can be seen in Excerpt 1 (above), for example, in the two complaints that Maggie makes, first to her mother that “he strangled me” (line 1) and second to Russell himself (line 6) – “But you strangled me, it hurt.” In both cases, Maggie’s response to Russell’s “strangulation” is not just that it was an attempt to strangle her – she is not just reporting the strangulation – but that it is a cause for complaint. He is not described as having “played” with her, “touched” her, “messed about” with her, or even “teased” her. The analysis of Russell’s actions that she produces in her complaint is not, say, that they have just been role-playing a scene from some movie in which he is the “murderer” and she is the “victim,” or that they have been playing a computer game in which Russell’s character has just “strangled” hers. To say that “he strangled me” against such a background would be to report what occurred in the scene, it would not be a complaint about personal injury. Maggie’s complaint, then, exhibits her analysis of the offensiveness of the action complained about. That action was, in other words, produced by an offender, not by a game- or role-player. In responding in the way that she does she is claiming that he has produced an activity which is bound to one of the categories of the asymmetrical oppositional relational pair, bully and victim. In complaining that “he strangled me,” she is describing herself as a victim which is paired with offender (bully in this case). She is analyzing him as someone who is trying to be offensive toward her. The asymmetrical
oppositional relational pair, offender and victim, is therefore “effective” for the members in understanding the nature of this piece of interaction because the actions produced are analyzed as category-bound to those categories. Furthermore, in addressing her complaint to her mother, Maggie can be heard to enlist her support against Rowan, and this suggests it is not a “fight” among equals.

Similar conclusions can be reached with respect to Excerpt 2 in which Maggie’s response to Russell’s initiating oppositional turn where he accused her of “not asking” is evident. Russell’s turn is thus analyzed by her as an oppositional one, putting her in the position of an offender and subject to the enforcement activity of her accuser. “You could have asked” is not, then, as far as Maggie is concerned a “reminding,” it is rebuking; it is not a piece of neutral running commentary, it’s an instance of a rule-invocation. The relevant and effective membership category for rebuke and rule-invocation is not “reminder” or “commentator,” it is rule-enforcer. Furthermore, such a category is paired with “offender.” Her analysis, then, is that he sees her as having broken a rule and is now enforcing that rule, while she is being allocated incumbency of the category “offender” or “deviant.” As we have seen, this analysis is made evident in her counter to his enforcing turn: she did not break a rule; she behaved properly in terms of the rule’s jurisdiction and did “ask” as required by it. Again, then, the asymmetrical category relational pair “rule-enforcer/offender” is displayed by her as effective in understanding his action toward her and her response.

Finally and similarly, in Excerpt 3, Maggie’s response, that is, what we have referred to as her “resistance” indicates her analysis of his prior turn as something to be resisted, something that is produced in opposition to her, and which attempts to put her in her place. In saying she knows what the rule is she resists his self-categorization as a rule-enforcer. The point is that her resisting turn can be seen to display her analysis that his turn was produced in terms of the auspices of the SRP “parties to an oppositional relationship.”

THE ANYTIME INVOCABILITY OF “PARTIES TO AN OPPOSITIONAL RELATIONSHIP”: THE NONCONTINGENCY OF FIRST-TURN OPPOSITIONALS

It has been shown that the two siblings make use of the asymmetrical oppositional relational pair – “oppositional siblings” – in analyzing each
others’ actions, that is in making them seeable, recognizable, intelligible, etc., and that therefore this relational pair is “effective” as a method for producing and understanding their actions. However, by itself, this effectiveness of the category relational pair would not indicate that this category relationship was omnirelevant. In this section we will show that their oppositions meet the second “test” of the omnirelevance of a category collection, namely, its “anytime invocability.”

Excerpt 4.

1. J:  No (1.5) nobody’s noticed [anythin’]
2. M:  [Oo::::oh ]
3. J:  heh-heh-heh-heh you you just noticed Maggie was swinging round the pole where it used to be and
4.   didn’t even mention it
5.   Which pole?
6.   Next door’s washing line pole
7.   hhhh.
8.   Do you notice anything Maggie?
9.   ((shakes head))
10. J:  No?
11. M:  What do you say?
12. J:  Do you notice anything outside?
13. M:  No
14. R:  Huh thicc:::
15. J:  What have I done then Russ?
16. R:  Nu - thing
17. M:  Don’t know - tell me please please quick
18. J:  Cut down the tree heather
19. (2.5)
20. M:  Mmm ooh yeh hah hah the tree
21. J:  Let’s see if Daddy notices
22. R:  Don’t tell him okay Maggie? ’cause you spoil every little ((high voice)) “Guess what Dad ner ner ner ner ner”
23. J:  No she won’t she doesn’t spoil things when she says
24. R:  guess what she’s just (6.0)

On two occasions in the course of this excerpt, Russell uses the planned surprise for “daddy,” namely, to see if he “notices” that a tree has been cut down, to degrade his sister. First, at line 15, he calls her a “thicko::” and then at lines 23–24 he describes her as someone who spoils “every little ‘guess what dad ner ner ner...’.” The first of these degradations is not contingent on anything oppositional that Maggie has said to Russell in the present context. It is a comment on Maggie’s conversation with her mother, and specifically her failure to notice that her mother has chopped down a tree-heather in the garden. As a “first-turn oppositional” Russell’s derogatory name calling clearly comes “out of the blue.” That it does so, of
course begs the question of how it is understood by its recipients. Even though “thicko::” is said in response to Maggie’s admission that she had not seen the tree stump, it is not Maggie who produces an analysis of the degradation, but Jen, the mother. She can be understood to be speaking on behalf of Maggie at this point when she says “What have I done then Russ?” (line 16), a question which can be heard to say, “it’s all very well to degrade her, but have you actually seen what I have done?” and by implication if not, “are you ‘thicko’ too?.” In other words then, Jen takes up the oppositional character of Russell’s name calling and counters it with a challenge to him to demonstrate that he is not also an incumbent of the category that he has attributed to Maggie.

As regards the second degradation, namely, Russell’s first-turn oppositional that Maggie “spoils every little thing” (line 23), this again is not contingent upon anything oppositional that Maggie has just said to Russell but is rather a recollection of how she has behaved on previous occasions. From Russell’s point of view she “spoils” these guessing games by giving the game away. It is, then, an opportunistic derogation, occasioned not by anything that Maggie has actually done in opposition to Russell; it is not contingent on her having occasioned the relevance of their oppositional relationship. Rather, it is something that Russell non-contingently chooses to invoke himself. Again, it can be seen that his first-turn oppositional is met by a response from Jen which displays her analysis of its oppositionality. Thus, Jen contradicts Russell’s claim not only that Maggie will spoil this game but also that she generally spoils “everything.” Clearly, Jen analyzes Russell’s derogation as having been produced in terms of the relational pair of categories, “degrader” and “degraded.”

Excerpt 5.

1. R: Can I [have] that?
2. M: [K k ] p-ink
3. R: ‘cause I’m sad (0.5) The Famous Five: Five on a Secret Mission i-[i-it’s]
4. J: [you’ve] probably got that one
5. R: It’s a computer game
6. J: Huhhh. ((sighs))
7. M: Her-he’ her-he’ her-he’ [her-he’] ((sings loudly))
8. R: [when a ]plane crashes on Kerian Island the Famous Five discover that the pilot is a secret service agent who thinks he’s on a secret mission but he’s actually been tricked into smuggling.
9. The Five quickly get involved in trying to solve the
This excerpt confirms the findings which we have made in connection with Excerpt 4. Just as Russell’s degradations in Excerpt 4 were produced opportunistically and without reference to any prior oppositional, so here Maggie’s derogatively calling Russell “sucker sucker” (line 32) is produced not in response to something directed at her by Russell. Rather, it seems to take advantage of an opportunity afforded when the mother comments that the original author of the “Famous Five,” Enid Blyton “didn’t write it like that” (line 30) in response to Russell’s reading of the description of the Famous Five video game included in a catalogue. There is no evidence that Jen intends this is as some kind of put-down or rebuke; it is not that Russell got something wrong here, it is simply that the kind of language used by Enid Blyton in the “adventure” stories about the Famous Five is a far cry from the kind of language used in advertising and promoting video games. Furthermore, the described content of the game indicates that the “Famous Five” are engaged in activities very different from those found in Enid Blyton’s books. However, while this is not a criticism of Russell, Maggie nevertheless produces an oppositional turn by calling him a name: “sucker sucker.” It can be heard to attempt to belittle him, to portray him as foolish,
and thereby to invoke their opposition. As we have said, this name-calling is not produced in response to a prior oppositional and is therefore “not contingent” on his action toward her (even if it is contingent on something, i.e., the “opportunity” at hand to make an oppositional remark). As Russell’s response indicates, he certainly takes it that way, telling her to “shu’ up.”

Excerpt 6.

1. J: Do you want one Maggs (2.0) [do you?]
2. R: [Can I ] have a side plate
3. please mother?
4. M: Thank you ((falsetto))
5. (12.0)
6. R: (...) yuch!
7. M: Huh huh huh huh yeu!
8. R: ((s.v.)) Yuch
9. J: Do you want some
10. R: No thank you
11. J: Try a bit
12. R: No thank you
13. (1.5) ((cheering is heard on the radio))
14. M: Yeu! I like this ((cough))
15. R: You’re weird
16. M: Wha?
17. J: Get a side plate please (2.0) do you want some baked
18. beans Maggs?
19. M: No thank you (in a false voice) (3.0) Am I allowed a
20. side plate?
21. J: Can you get one for Maggs please

A similar state of affairs is found in this excerpt. Here, again, the categorization “you’re weird” appears “to come out of nothing.” Minimally, it comes out of Russell’s previous characterizations of the food with “yuch.” With Russell having made his assessments, then possibly those of Maggie are now relevant, but not conditionally so. As it happens, her “yeu” can be understood as a response to the previous turn which is the actual serving of the food that she now greets with enthusiasm. Rather than being an oppositional to which his response is an oppositional of his own, her nonoppositional assessment is met instead by a unilateral derogation of her as “weird.” He does not like the food and his assessment is the “correct” one. The fact that Maggie likes the food is an indication that she is “weird.” Again, it would seem to be the case that the any time invocability of the context of their oppositional relationships has to do with the ability of the children to find opportunities to turn some or even any previous utterance,
into an oppositional. In this particular case it is his categorization of her as weird which invokes that category relationship. He is the “normal” one, whereas she is something lesser in the scheme of taste in relation to items of food. The simple expression of the fact that she likes the food is turned into an opportunity to put her down, to call her a name, to characterize her in a negative way. In other words, it is another instance of the underlying asymmetrically oppositional category relational pair being invoked non-contingently but opportunistically at any time.

CONCLUSION

In the first part of this chapter we analyzed some demonstrably relevant membership categories which were used in organizing some disputes between a brother and his sister. One implication of our analysis is that no matter whom disputes are between, the persons involved are not just disputants. They are engaged in disputes about something-or-other and it is that something-or-other which provides the categories in terms of whose incumbency the disputes are then produced. For example, a dispute might be about the ownership of some object such that one of the organizing categories is “thief” and the other “victim of theft.” Or it might be about the disproportionate use of violence such that what was at issue was one party to the dispute had “bullied” the other. In our data, by using asymmetrical standardized relational pairs of categories such as “offender-victim,” “teaser-teased,” and “rule-enforcer-deviant,” these “disputants” demonstrate their competence in using categorical resources in their everyday social relationships and, in particular, in analyzing each other as having produced activities under the auspices of category collections and membership categories. In short, they demonstrate their ability to use formal structures of membership categorization as well as those of a sequential character.

In the second part of the analysis we indicated that these local expressions of asymmetrically oppositional category relational pairs were “mapped” onto an omnirelevant oppositional social relationship between the disputants (Watson & Weinburg, 1982). The omnirelevance of this relational pair of categories was shown to consist in its effectiveness in analyzing (by the participants) their talk-in-interaction as oppositional and in its invocability at any time.

The relationship between the local expressions of opposition analyzed here and an omnirelevant category collection “parties to an oppositional relationship” also serves as a reminder of the “occasionality” of category collections
Oppositional relationships can be constituted in a variety of ways, and thereby oppositional categories can have various activities predicated of them. The relationship between predicates, categories, and the collection “parties to an oppositional relationship” is a contextual rather than a decontextualized one. In the instances analyzed here, the predicates of the categories in the omnirelevant collection “parties to an oppositional relationship” considered in the second part of the chapter are those produced in terms of the various SRPs analyzed in the first.

NOTES

1. The major source here is Sacks (1992a, 1992b), though he did not distinguish “MCA” as a field of inquiry in its own right. His studies in this area were part of his wider interests in the analysis of conversation. For more recent works, see, for example, Jayyusi (1984), Hester and Eglin (1997), Antaki and Widdicombe (1998), Eglin and Hester (2003), Francis and Hester (2004), and Butler (2008).

2. The history of various “revolutionary” struggles can be seen as methods for rectifying these categorical asymmetries. See also Sacks (1979).

3. The transcript was reviewed with one of the participants – the mother – who also provided valuable information about some of the gestures and other nonverbal actions which accompanied the talk, some of which turned out to be relevant for our analysis. Pseudonyms are used for the participants.

4. It might seem that the status of Russell’s utterance as a “deviance-imputation” is equivocal, and could perhaps be described alternatively or additionally as a “complaint.” However, the “test” for the resolution of any such equivocation lies with what the recipient of the utterance makes of it rather than with the analyst. As the excerpt shows, Maggie resists and denies having done what Russell accuses her of.

5. In saying that this is a “dinner-time rule” we are referring to the fact the mother invokes this rule and several others, such as not talking with a mouthful of food, at various points in the course of the meal.

6. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing to our attention the work of Marjorie Goodwin on the constitution of oppositional relationships among children. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to explore the compatibilities between Goodwin’s analysis of the production of oppositional relationships through talk and our own analysis of the invocation of such omnirelevant relationships in talk at this point.

REFERENCES


Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for typesetting, some questions may have arisen. These are listed below. Please check your typeset proof carefully and mark any corrections in the margin of the proof or compile them as a separate list.

**Disk use**
Sometimes we are unable to process the electronic file of your article and/or artwork. If this is the case, we have proceeded by:

- Scanning (parts of) your article
- Rekeying (parts of) your article
- Scanning the artwork

**Bibliography**
If discrepancies were noted between the literature list and the text references, the following may apply:

- The references listed below were noted in the text but appear to be missing from your literature list. Please complete the list or remove the references from the text.
- **UNCITED REFERENCES:** This section comprises references that occur in the reference list but not in the body of the text. Please position each reference in the text or delete it. Any reference not dealt with will be retained in this section.

**Queries and/or remarks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location in Article</th>
<th>Query / remark</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AU:1</td>
<td>Should the term “paper” be changed to “chapter” at all instances in this chapter? Please check and advise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU:2</td>
<td>Please provide publisher name in ref. Hester &amp; Eglin (1997).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>