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STUDIES OF MEMBERSHIP: CATEGORIZATION ETHNOMETHODOLOGY OR CONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS?

Abstract

Rejecting existing anthropological frameworks, Harvey Sacks developed membership categorization device (MCD) analysis to examine how people use ordinary categories in interaction, rather than analysts' categories. MCD analysis was adapted progressively into membership categorization analysis (MCA), seeking to refine Sacks's original MCD framework to counter the remaining cognitivism from its anthropological origins. Exploring members' categorization activities during interactions in astronomy communication sessions – people looking at objects in the sky through telescopes and using the naked eye – convinced us that the state-of-the-art in MCA is insufficiently sensitive to account for category work within these sessions. Therefore, we propose a distinction between ethnomethodological MCA and constructive-analytic MCA. Extending arguments on formulaic studies of workplaces in ethnomethodology to studies in membership categorization, we suggest that studies in current MCA fail to realize its ethnomethodological potential and retreat into constructive analysis. This is due in part to the preservation

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of a key weakness within MCA, in the move from decontextualized to occasioned Devices and Categories. "Omni-relevance" was coined originally by Sacks yet it is used now at "analytic discretion", a cognitivist template for being seen to "do MCA" rather than describing members' practices.

Keywords: Activity categorization, astronomy communication, constructive analysis, Harvey Sacks, omnirelevance, partitioning

INTRODUCTION

For researchers who have used or are considering using versions of categorization analysis as explananda for a stretch of data, whether naturally occurring, new media, textual, video or vignette, this position paper may seem controversial, even nihilistic. It is important to distinguish "versions" of categorization analysis because Emanual Schegloff [2007] reminded us that Harvey Sacks developed membership categorization device (MCD) analysis. MCD analysis was only redeveloped much later into membership categorization analysis (MCA) in order to remedy the decontextualization of Categories and Devices that Sacks unintentionally introduced [Hester, Eglin 1997]. Thus, in contrast with MCD analysis, MCA was "a critical engagement with unintended consequences of Sacks's treatment of categories in passages where he makes seemingly decontextualized analytic distinctions and stipulations regarding MCDs" [Smith 2025: 216]. The full radicalization of MCD analysis has been incremental and non-linear, which informed and culminated in the logic for reconfiguration [Hester, Eglin 1997]. The following discussion[1] constitutes a further move within this reconfiguration of MCA, by returning to a form of inquiry that is suited to phenomena of study rather than accept MCA as an approach that is now suited for disciplinary alignment.[2]

It is important, from the outset, to say that this is not a denial of categorization practices as members' methods. It would be a gross misreading of this paper to conclude that it sets out to challenge MCA in its entirety, or that it disregards the

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[1]   We thank anonymous reviewers for their encouraging and useful comments, which have improved this paper. We regret the decision that in order to provide "room" for discursive organization in this position statement we refer readers to transcript data contained in other sources.

[2]   Beyond citing references for the study of categorization practices in various fields (conversation analysis, criminology, discursive psychology, media studies, psychology and sociology), we note that current studies in orthodox MCA may itemize re-configurations [Hester, Eglin 1997; Jayyusi 1984; Watson 2015] for purposes of authorizing the study with less regard to the content of these sources. Instead of endorsements or precedents, these sources problematize the very orthodoxy, i.e. the disciplinarily acceptable presentation, of current analyses.

possibility of MCA going forward. Nor is this a dismissal of MCD analysis. One of the important aspects of Sacks's lectures [Sacks 1995] is that the originality of his observations of the social world is balanced by the depth of procedural logic evident in how Sacks arrives at his observations: dismissing MCD analysis involves dismissing *Lectures in conversation*, one of the most lucid, profound and radical resources made available to analysts of social interaction. Further, dismissing MCD analysis undermines the development of MCA, which could not have emerged without MCD analysis.

Following Sacks's death, significant moves in MCD analysis were the specification of membership categorization using ordinary language philosophy, published as *Categorization and the moral order* [Jayyusi 1984] and Watson's [2009] categorial specification of the practice "going for brothers", both of which facilitated non-cognitivist, praxeological approaches to ethnographic and textual inquiries. Watson produced influential directions for the analysis of categorization practices [Wowk, Carlin 2004]. These included the move from categorial activities to categorial *predicates*, which is now taken for granted within MCA literature. At the same time, however, Watson introduced another "new direction" with reference to a Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" model for the selection of categories. In "Going for brothers"[3] [Watson 2009: 37–55] explicates how the procedural work of category selection reported in *Tally's corner* [Liebow 1967], in terms of "relational pairs", is the concerted accomplishment of participants in the setting, the participant observer (in this case, Elliott Liebow), and readers of the ethnography. Furthermore, even though Liebow provides an "instructed reading" of the ethnography for readers unfamiliar with the routinized phenomenon of invoking family ties as unproblematic, non-challengeable scenic features of settings, the procedural work of doing "going for brothers" remains unexplicated. In this way we regard Watson's specification of "going for brothers" as members' practice to be analytically prior to considerations of the textual organization of ethnographic texts, and the achieved plausibility of ethnographic accounts [Lury 1982]. Further, that analyses of members' categorization practices[4] facilitate praxeological approaches to plausible ethnographic and textual inquiries.

"Achieved plausibility" has become a feature of current studies in MCA, according to the adherence to Device-based architectures – re-worded as "con-

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[3]   First published 1978 in the discontinued microfiche journal *Analytic Sociology*, the significance of the advance was missed until its revised iteration [Watson 2009]. The original study was complemented by a project report [Watson 1978].

[4]   The membership categorization practices of the ethnographer as well as the participants in the reported ethnography.

textualized", "contingent", "localized", and "occasioned" as ideological, itera-tive cover-terms – mis-directions that claim ethnomethodological status as per previous studies.[5] Both Jayyusi [1984, 1991, 2010], and Watson [1997, 2005, 2009, 2015, 2021; see also Wowk, Carlin 2004], were concerned throughout their studies to advance Sacks's work on categorization practices whilst preserving the ethnomethodological profile of categorization analysis. Their explications of the *logical grammar* of categorization practices were innovations, which made available incremental changes within analysis.[6] The importance of these moves for this current discussion is whether the ethnomethodological profile of current studies in MCA needs revisiting.

This paper elaborates a recent assessment of ethnomethodology and conver-sation analysis [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022] and suggests that some of the observations in this assessment are relevant for MCA, too.[7] In particular, the ap-plication of a preformulated and routinized frame of reference being transposed onto different settings rather than developing a methodological approach that ad-dresses, and is adequate for, the contingencies of specific settings. Attempts to turn MCA into a "qualitative research method" traduce the sophistication realized by Sacks's development of categorization analysis to account for members' methods. The ethnomethodological contours of MCA are endangered also when researchers make slippages between MCD analysis and MCA. Slippages between MCA and MCD analysis nullify the efforts of those who tried to radicalize Sacks's reified and decontextualized Device-based architecture as a non-cognitivist form of inquiry.

Whilst the routinization of current MCA inquiry coheres with misreadings of "normal science" [Sharrock, Read 2002], establishing a Kuhnian, post-Kuhnian or even post-normal profile [Sormani 2024] is not the purpose of this paper. The intention here is not to subvert the logic of MCA but to query whether all the en-tailments of MCA are procedurally necessary. This helps researchers new to the study of members' categorization practices avoid reverting to constructive analysis, by suggesting that there are distinctions to be made between Sacks's MCD work,

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[5]   "Plausibility" is achieved, then, through overlapping but disjunctive language-games.

[6]   Such gradualism was not an agreed "policy" but, following Sacks, was subject to indi-vidual innovation. A significant aspect of these innovations within MCD analysis and MCA was the coherence of Sacks's work as ethnomethodological, and as such these have always represented a challenge to orthodoxy "from within". The "ethnomethodological Sacks" was a thematic of eth-nomethodology teaching at the University of Manchester. For implications of approaching Sacks's work as ethnomethodology, see Button [2026].

[7]   Providing references would entail a book length study. In any case, as Garfinkel [1976] argued, once the constructive-analytic profile is realized these "cannot by any further work of reading and writing about them be made stronger" [quoted in Carlin 2007: 100].

attempts to revivify Sacks's work as MCA, and what the use of both Sacks's work and MCA have now become. This paper thus feeds into the "continued debates relating to the status of MCA as an analytic enterprise in relation to EM [ethnomethodology] and CA [conversation analysis]" [Smith 2025: 223][8]. In a forum that celebrates Sacks's anniversaries and his legacies, it is timely to assess whether MCA, as the redevelopment of Sacks's MCD analysis, still constitutes a form of ethnomethodological inquiry and whether MCA is itself in need of renewal.

Before outlining the forms of setting that encouraged these reflections, we note that the primary goal of ethnomethodology is not to "lose the phenomenon" [Garfinkel 2022]. Garfinkel's concern with "losing the phenomenon" was aligned directly with his studies of the discovering sciences; whereas our concerns here are aligned with the public communication of science. Ethnomethodology is constituted by a range of "study approaches" [Lindwall 2025].[9] These approaches are intended – according to the contingencies of data under study – to preserve the phenomena and make these phenomena available for detailed analysis. Although we recognized the relevance of MCA for the study of astronomy communication in these data, we also realized that MCA, as currently practised, did not preserve the phenomena for us – problematizing "the status of MCA as an analytic enterprise in relation to EM" [Smith 2025].

CATEGORIAL ANALYSIS
OF ASTRONOMY COMMUNICATION EVENTS

These considerations have their origins in corpora of data: video-recordings of astronomy communication events, often known as "observations of the sky", in which interested (or "self-selecting") members of the public attended viewing sessions to look at astronomical phenomena, through telescopes in the open-air and in observatories; and in planetariums. These data occasioned a variety of inquiries, e.g. on "equipmentalism" (requiring and using technical apparatus to access a phenomenon, e.g. to visualize a solar eclipse safely) and turn-taking for observing astronomical objects [Carlin, Marques, Moutinho 2021]; instructional activities, including teaching and learning moments [Marques, Carlin, Moutinho 2020, 2022], telescope use, and the "recipient design" of astronomical knowledge [Marques,

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[8]   An earlier account of the ambiguous position of MCA *vis-à-vis* CA can be found in Watson [2003]. One of the polarities of debate was for a "single rubric" for categorial and sequential analyses, as ethnomethodology [Watson 1997]. Following a new assessment of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (see below) this paper queries the ethnomethodological status of MCA.

[9]   Some of these approaches include "organizing devices", ways of seeing and working with phenomena, which are among Sacks's legacies [Carlin 2021].

Carlin, Gomes, Moutinho 2021]; the adequacy of formal concepts to describe complex environments [Carlin, Marques, Moutinho 2021]; emotions and emotion work within viewing sessions [Marques, Carlin 2025; Marques, Carlin, Gomes 2024]; image work, including authenticity versus aesthetics [Carlin, Marques, Watson 2024]; categorial orders of astronomy communication, which included membership categorization and activity categorization as overlapping, mutually informing contextures of relevance for members [Carlin, Marques, Moutinho 2026].

    Figure 1

At first glance, a categorial ordering of these events was amenable to what Sacks called category pairs, where the pairing was constituted by the activities of "visitors" and "guides" who were party to the viewing session. Astronomer guides were able to demonstrate viewing devices and what was being seen with them. As such, analysis could move beyond the recitation of *standardized* category Devices and examine *occasioned* category Devices which, even if these occasioned

Devices included versions of a visitor/guide pair, were session-specific. A question remained pending, however: given the range of settings for the delivery of astronomy communication and astronomy education[10], was it feasible to characterize the "achievement" of astronomy communication, even session-specific activities "in its organizational variety" [Garfinkel, Sacks 1970: 341], in categorial terms?

Figure 2

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[10]   Similar actions occur within different astronomy communication settings, e.g. showing and telling [Figure 1] (according to Rose [2003], "showing and telling" was the original description of the "commentary machine" metaphor [Sacks 1963]) and using telescopes [Figure 2], though in the characterization of the "organizational variety" each setting has specificities. Although observations of the sky are purposive arrangements, these are distinct from the activities in an observatory which, in turn, differ from a planetarium [Figure 3].

Figure 3

Unfortunately, when engaging with these data, the "paired" nature of visitor/ guide illustrated Garfinkel's self-reflective critique of the documentary method of interpretation:

> The gloss is convenient and somehow convincing. It is also very powerful in its coverage; too powerful. It gets everything in the world for practitioner/analysts. Its shortcomings are notorious: in any actual case it is undiscriminating; and just in any actual case it is absurdly wrong [Garfinkel 2002: 113].

In studying these video data, a substitution of "decontextualized Devices" with "occasioned Devices" (such as "parties to an astronomy observation session", as constituted by visitors and guides), and to use this occasioned Device as "omnire-

levant to" the astronomy session, would have been a theoretical convenience or "principled solution" to a problem that was manufactured by analysis, i.e. for the analysis of astronomy communication sessions to remain within a recognizably MCA framework.[11] A problem with *recognizable frameworks* is that

> they are the currency of any discipline, and so if one is able to speak in the terms of a celebrated theory, one can find a ready readership …. This places considerable professional pressure upon researchers to translate their descriptions of any local affairs into the disciplinary language, and students learn to do this *before* they learn how to attend adequately to the looks of the world for the parties they study [Liberman 2007: 97, emphasis in original].

The "organizational variety" of astronomy communication events glosses both the "wild phenomena" [Robillard 1999] that constitute individual sessions as well as categorizations available to setting participants and researchers that are not reducible to category pairs: for instance, though some (but not all) of the sessions we studied contained visitors and guides, a visitor/guide pair is not always salient within these events. Furthermore, and establishing a connection between Garfinkel's repudiation of the documentary method of interpretation with an assessment of formulaic studies that make claims to ethnomethodological status (discussed in the next section), for the analysts of these astronomy observation sessions to replace "decontextualized" Devices with "occasioned" Devices would be reiterative, no more than "familiar practical reductions of detail ", which are dismissed as "worse than useless" [Garfinkel 2022: 74].

Video had preserved phenomena that were amenable to categorial analysis. To follow through with a Sacksian analysis of these data would require engaging with Sacks's discussions of "category partitioning"; but "Because there is still something more" [Garfinkel 2002: 177], how could these be described without "losing the phenomenon" [Garfinkel 2002: 264ff.]. Category partitioning, in Sacks's work, was reliant upon a Device-based architecture and, as a hangover of decontextualized MCD analysis it was extremely problematic for use in and as a reconfigured version, i.e. MCA.[12] Discernible within these recordings were further phenomena of "partitioning". However, and inconvenient for analyses of

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[11]   As discussed below, "principled solution" was a term that both Garfinkel and Sacks had used to characterize orthodox forms of sociology, where an analyst devises a model or theory in order to gloss phenomena that escaped description. By "remain within a recognizably MCA framework" we are alluding to an orthodoxy in a purportedly ethnomethodological approach.

[12]   To reiterate, the achievements – members' achievements and analytic accounts of these – leading to reconfiguration are documented elsewhere [Hester, Eglin 1997]. Crucially for categorization analysis and those interested in the histories of categorization and interaction analysis, it is this innovative source that formulates these achievements as MCA.

phenomena in the data rather than adapting the "off-the-shelf" MCA architecture to a different setting that *could* account for these data, partitioning was not necessarily "category" partitioning in its identity-based terms but was made visible through partitioning *activities*: cohorting, equipmental manipulations, self-selection, and turn allocation. Such partitioning moves were setting specific, too, where equipmental manipulation differed between those sessions using a telescope and sessions in a planetarium [Figures 4–5]. In the attempt to *characterize* astronomy sessions, it became necessary to account for the categorial order without relying upon the received or standard approach to category partitioning. For, to accept category partitioning as currently conceived would be to *mis*-characterize astronomy sessions.
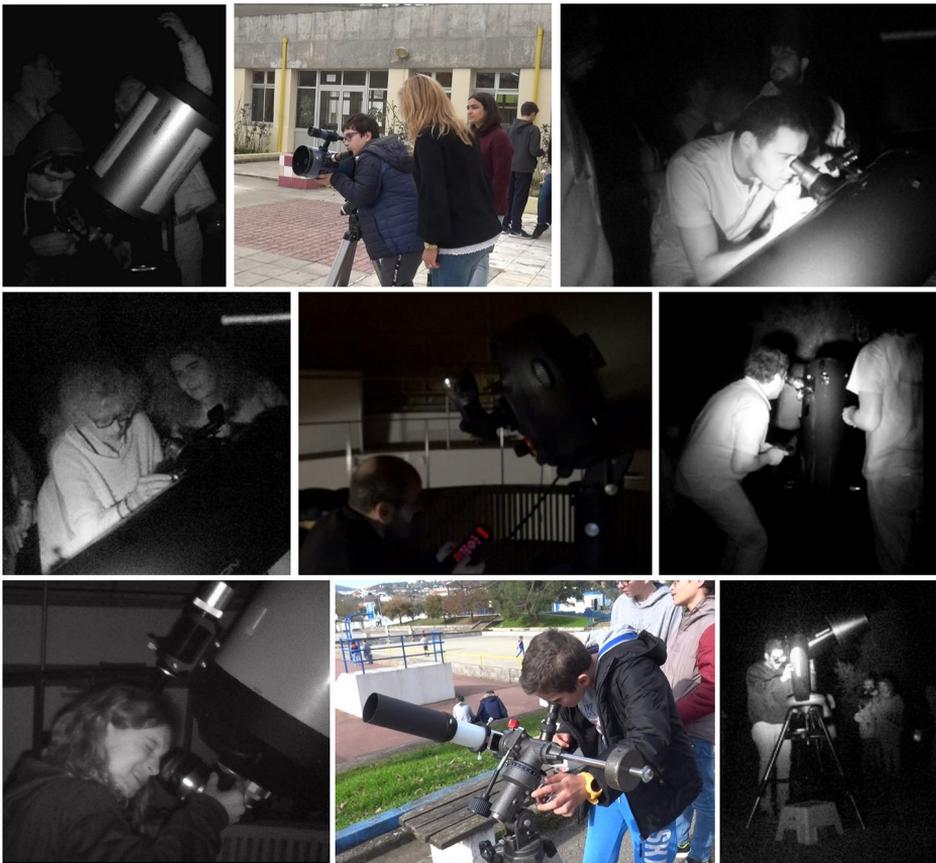

Figure 4

Figure 5

Indifference towards the methodological entailments of category partitioning and being instructed, instead, by the data to hand, enabled an empirical inquiry into a categorial order of astronomy communication as an achievement by parties to these astronomy communication events. Importantly, this inquiry cohered with a study policy of ethnomethodology:

> to locate that achievement as a phenomenon and to specify some of its features; to describe some structures in the practices which make up that achievement; and to take notice of the obviousness, enormous interest, and pervasiveness which that achievement has for members, be they lay or professional analysts of ordinary activities [Garfinkel, Sacks 1970: 341].

The sections that follow are considerations that have been occasioned both by careful viewings of the astronomy communication data, and our attempts to use MCA to characterize these [Carlin, Marques, Moutinho 2026]; and these considerations are informed by an assessment of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022]. Being indifferent to the recognizable

frameworks of MCD analysis and MCA, and indifferent to extant MCA studies, enabled us to realize a form of inquiry that was praxeological and contingent upon the data, rather than producing analyses contingent upon the "terms and determinations" [Bittner 2015] of the MCA literature. As such, the following sections unpack a logic for rejecting the theoretically adduced entailments of category partitioning, in particular "omnirelevance".

A NEW ASSESSMENT OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL STUDIES

An assessment of ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022], in which the criterion for assessment is a particular iteration of ethnomethodology [Garfinkel, Sacks 1970], observes how various studies in EMCA [ethnomethodology and conversation analysis] manifest a return to constructive analysis. One of their self-reflective arguments is that taking prior studies in a field as templates for new studies risks turning *approaches to* research into research *methods*. For instance, the "workplace studies" program, as a cumulative field, is constituted as a field through the emergence of further studies in different workplaces but these studies are not necessarily contributing new insights for ethnomethodology[13] beyond those that have already been identified, e.g. members' use of *ad hoc* practices.[14] The cumulation of self-replicating studies using an extant, external framework rather than analyses remaining endogenous to the setting produces constructive analysis – what Garfinkel & Sacks [1970] cautioned us against. Importantly, the assessment [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022] does not limit itself to individual studies. Instead, the authors identify *patterns* and *trends* within EMCA that are returning to constructive analysis, which are problems for the teaching of EMCA and the reproduction of further generations of EMCA scholars; and for the coherence of EMCA fields in themselves.

In this position paper we suggest that this assessment applies to studies in membership categorization, also. For MCA specifically, rather than EMCA, the description of studies as constructive analytic is grounded not in the incorporation

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[13] Creating "new insights *for ethnomethodology*" is a separate issue: are we treating ethnomethodology as a field in itself or as a field always associated with practical activities? [Ikeya 2025; Jenkings, Lindwall, Carlin, Mair, Dennis 2025].

[14] Although not mentioned by Button, Lynch and Sharrock [2022], such disingenuous claims to novelty had been subjected to criticism [Bittner 1973], though in a different context and not flagged as endangering the discipline. For ethnomethodology in the twenty-first century, the jeopardy is twofold: taking studies further away from Garfinkel and Sacks's [1970] version of ethnomethodology; and thereby, taking studies back towards constructive analysis.

of research instruments that are characteristic of constructive analysis but, as with the example of workplace studies, the use of a formulaic template for analysis. Following the logic of the assessment [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022], a further distinction is available: between *ethnomethodological* MCA and *constructive-analytic* MCA. Considering studies in MCA in the light of Button, Lynch and Sharrock [2022] it seems not only that the advisory "another first time" [Garfinkel 1967] has lost its methodological edge and is no longer required, but that the advisory on "particularization" [Sacks, Schegloff 1979] has been sacrificed as well.

In putting this assessment to use for considering the state-of-the-art in MCA we can see immediately that the adoption of a categorial framework is an analyst's gloss, reiterated from previous settings rather than a radical analysis that is adequate for the setting under study; and as such constitutes a form of "methodological irony"[15], i.e. analysts' inventions designed to look like "hidden" phenomena. In this paper we suggest that entailments of this categorial framework – slippage between MCA and MCD analysis, the use of ideal-types in and as a Device-based architecture, omnirelevance as a "principled solution" to matters that cannot be established empirically – are characteristics of constructive analysis.

OMNIRELEVANCE AS CONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS

A re-examination of the Epistemic Analytic Framework (EAF) compares formulations of the ethnomethodological analytic mentality with methodologically ironic "turns" towards constructive analysis:

> What was, and is, radical about EMCA was the sighting of a world already in possession of its methods, its analysts, its achieved structures of order, regularity and recurrence, before the first credentialed social scientist ever stepped onto the scene. Perhaps especially "radical" was the abandonment of modern social science's competition with ordinary worlds of vernacular reckonings, as though "practical sociological reasoning" were a peasants' estate, to be eclipsed by the achievements of academic sociology [Macbeth 2018: 2].

From Macbeth's discussion, what may be seen to be vulnerabilities in EMCA are only so seeable from the vantage point of constructive analysis.[16] Further,

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[15] For comprehensive discussions of "methodological irony" – its manifestations, entailments, and original identification by Harvey Sacks – see Watson [1998, 2003].

[16] Other vulnerabilities in and for ethnomethodology are identified [Livingston 2025] though some of these conflate the teaching of ethnomethodology with the teaching of orthodox sociology as faculty-specific activities. Yet this return to "older" ethnomethodology, which through the field-specific changes it has undergone since its inception, can be seen as "innovation" [Anderson, Sharrock 2018].

Macbeth exposes the fallacies of attempting to shore up these perceived vulner-abilities by further accommodations of constructive-analytic strategies. There is a parallel between what Macbeth sees in the EAF and what we see as construc-tive analytic MCA.

Emanuel Schegloff's "Tutorial" distinguishes sharply MCD analysis from MCA, and his introduction foreshadows rebukes to proponents of MCA: "[Sacks's texts on membership categorization] have often been subject to misunderstand-ing, and the misunderstandings have led work based on them astray" [Schegloff 2007: 462]. Although Schegloff was correct in his assertions that Sacks's category analysis as it had been formulated originally was not the form of category analysis proposed by MCA, in our view [Carlin 2010] one of Schegloff's errors was in not recognizing how MCA addressed the vulnerabilities within MCD analysis. MCA provided a way forward by examining occasioned, thoroughly contextual-ized categories and Devices that were endogenous to settings. Yet Schegloff's cautionary note is applicable *a fortiori* to current MCA inquiries.

MCA, as "a separate form of analysis" [Lindwall 2025: 180], was intended to move away from the cognitivism that characterized MCD analysis. However, what is evident over the past ten or so years is a retreat into the reifications of the Device-based architecture. The touchstone of this retreat is the notion of "omni-relevance", which we have come to regard as "a kind of metaphysical stop-gap for a misconceived *system* of explanation of human conduct" [Coulter 1979: 108, emphasis in original]. What is happening is that studies in MCA are taking omni-relevance as a plausible, disciplinarily acceptable means to reintroduce cognitivism; using it as a cover term for "reading people's minds", imputing what participants find to be relevant using the settings of interaction as the reference point. This produces a routinization of subject matter, which in turn results in a reification of fields:

> Kuhn insists that during "normal science" scientists [or membership categorization analysts] are not in search of fundamental innovations. They are working within pretty well defined limits with respect to what can be brought into question – what *they need* to question. Their scientific activity really amounts to the realization of the potential that the paradigm is expec-ted to provide, and the promise that drew scientists to the paradigm to begin with [Sharrock, Read 2002: 38; emphasis in original].

Omnirelevance marked a liminal moment in Sacks's development of MCD analysis. In looking to the quiddities or "settled-ness" of conversational data, Sacks encountered a particular problem: how to describe a setting in terms of participants' definitions of the context if participants themselves do not explicitly formulate that context? This unstate-able aspect of categorial order – "unstate-

able" because members have not done so themselves – is recoverable from the scenic features of the setting, i.e. place or setting, and activities within these settings. Omnirelevance, or using the setting to account for the analysts' inferential work, thus enables the cumulation of MCA studies within subfields, e.g. studies of doctor–patient, parent–child, police–suspect and teacher–pupil interactions.

According to constructive-analytic approaches to settings such as consultation rooms, family homes, interrogation rooms and classrooms, designations of participants, e.g. as doctor, teacher, etc., may be accurate but that does not confer adequacy of description: "the *correct* use of a membership category is not settled by whether or not the person so designated *is* [an incumbent of that category]" [Lynch 2004: 179; emphasis in original, our parentheses]. An issue raised by analysts' inferential work is a paradox: categorial pairs are overdetermined and reified as subfields; yet at the same time, the profile of these self-same categorizations is underdetermined. This paradox fails to meet the standards of rigour in orthodox sociology, of which Sacks was so scathing: "To employ an undescribed category is to write descriptions such as appear in children's books" [Sacks 1963: 8].

As we noted above that Watson [2015] observes that Sacks was addressing puzzles that his own apparatus provided, in a lecture discussion on "settinged activities" Sacks is already alert to the problem of analysts using these as a technique for constructive analysis:

> Is it possibly the case that […] the phenomenon of a "setting" needs be recognized as also a Members' phenomenon, and not, for example, one of those things which, as social scientists, we construct and manage? [Sacks 1995: 516].

Unless treated with extreme care, which few have done since Sacks, appeals to omnirelevance using Sacks's *imprimatur* license constructive analysis within inquiry.[17] It is not (or not only) the risk of remaining at an individualistic, non-sociological level; but the imputation of categorization practices, inferences and motives on the basis of such individualistic orientations: self-confirming and self-authorizing stipulations under the banner of "reflexiveness".[18]

The broader risk involved with misreading Sacks on omnirelevance has echoes in the sociological treatment of "official statistics". Identifying a divide between "externalist" and "internalist" approaches to official statistics, Eglin [1987] suggests that orthodox (externalist) approaches to official statistics preserve intended meanings for their collection and interpretation, whilst internalist approaches

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[17]   To draw attention to a remark by Harold Garfinkel: "It is all very well to be talking this way but you are not Sacks" [Hill and Crittenden 1968: 49].

[18]   Elsewhere [Carlin 2016] this is characterized as the "Mildred Pierce phenomenon".

resist and undermine externalist motives. However, we note that "internalist" approaches may be deficient, too, for the externalist/internalist distinction does not map onto quantitative/qualitative or macro/micro distinctions.[19] What is discernible in accounts of omnirelevance is such a divide: omnirelevance as an analyst's matter, i.e. analyst imputed or externally imposed omnirelevance; *versus* omnirelevance as a member's matter, i.e. endogenously produced omnirelevance, what members themselves regard to be omnirelevant. Omnirelevance has become a constructive analytic procedure, what Garfinkel [1967] referred to as "let it pass" – though what Garfinkel had identified as a member's method is, within constructive analytic MCA, another step in what is becoming a research method.

Sara Keel avoids this reading of omni-relevance[20], instead producing a field-specific critique in a reminder that omni-relevance is for members, not for analysts, to decide:

> Studies on parent/adult–child interactions do not reflect much upon, let alone focus on, members' observable orientation to ["the developmental scheme as a "members' phenomenon" in its own right] as a topic of investigation […]. Instead, it has generally been taken for granted that the developmental scheme device is "omni-relevant" for the interactants themselves and, thus, consequential for the sequential organisation of parent/adult–child interactions [Keel 2021: 159].

Omnirelevance, as a member's matter, is not necessarily coterminous with what analysts stipulate are oriented-to phenomena. In the following section we suggest how such constructive-analytic assertions are made operative.

ANALYTIC DISCRETION: OMNIRELEVANCE AS EXPLANATORY FICTION

Omnirelevance suits the purposes of constructive analytic research methods as it constitutes what Bittner [2013] called a "theoretical short-circuit". As a step towards the reification of categories and Devices, and towards a research method, omnirelevance *undermines* a praxeological version of categorization analysis

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[19] Thus, emphasising that for ethnomethodology, features of constructive analysis within research approaches, such as methodological irony, analytic discretion, and cognitivism, are not the preserve of operationalization and quantification: "qualitative" research can be constructive-analytic, also. See notes 14–15 above and Schegloff's [1995: liv] cautionary principle: "the constraint […] requires working out in any occasion being examined"; for a full discussion see Sharrock, Watson [1988].

[20] A discussion of witness' testimonies [Nishizaka 2024] also realizes *non*-categorial and *not necessarily* categorial determinations of omni-relevance which, like Keel quoted above, highlight how MCA has a distinct language-game and as such constitutes a separate form of life.

[cf. Sharrock, Anderson 1991] by requiring work on behalf of the reader to second-guess the orientations of participants as described by the analyst:

> short-circuiting takes place whenever an object is described without a separation being made between the description of the action by those implicated in the action and those describing it as a practical, professional task [Manning 1971: 245].

Familiarity with Sacks's lectures [Sacks 1995] and the recent assessment of ethnomethodological inquiries *vis-à-vis* constructive analysis [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022], the jeopardy for MCA *as ethnomethodologically conceived* comes into focus. The asymmetries of ethnomethodological and constructive-analytic approaches were difficult to establish, and are difficult to maintain:

> EMCA was leveraged on a penetrating critique of the ambitions of professional social science. […] It has entailed a disciplined effort to set aside formal-analytic relations and appointments, and a question […] is whether and how those very appointments are being re-issued [Macbeth 2018: 3].

Unless claims to omnirelevance are resolutely praxeological, endogenous to the data of study and are indifferent to what Garfinkel called "«strong reading»"[21], i.e. the organizing preferences of its analytic framework – and we are yet to encounter such a claim that meets all these criteria – then what may be treated conventionally as "internalist" approaches accommodate constructive analysis through the introduction of "explanatory fictions" [Coulter 1979]. The imposition of omnirelevance, or the assumption of category relevances based upon the analyst's readings of studies in the literature that discuss categorization practices in such settings, or the analyst's prior experience of researching cognate settings, reinstates a constructive-analytic profile to MCA studies that had been expunged from MCD analysis. To borrow a phrase from Alec McHoul's [2025] paper in this issue, omnirelevance becomes a "quasi-philosophical reference to the private interiors of individuals".

Once "omnirelevance" is recognized as an explanatory fiction, a retreat into cognitivism, invoking "omnirelevance" becomes a characteristic or hallmark that the study is not ethnomethodological MCA but constructive analytic MCA. Although we appreciate that some researchers may not be unduly concerned to remove themselves from ethnomethodology, the integrity of both the MCA approach and, more importantly, the phenomena of inquiry, are at stake. The "self-confirming" entailments of omnirelevance are hallmarks of "*theoreticism*",

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[21] "[P]resupposing a unity of meaning as an overriding project in reading […] A strong reading is one that is undertaken with the aim that an internally consistent reading is possible" [Garfinkel 2019: 170–171].

which "automatically precludes recourse to evidence" [Crews 2000: 185]. For MCA to be described as ethnomethodological, the options for "analytic discretion" [Sormani 2015: 303] are circumscribed. Using commonly available or discipline-specific vocabulary, options for analytic discretion include "occasioned relevance", "repair", and "respecification".

- One option evident in current MCA literature is to claim that omnirelevance is endogenously locatable, "occasioned" by the contingencies of the setting.

To borrow one of Sacks's [1985] distinctions, while this "transforms" omnirelevance from an entailment of reified Devices to occasioned Devices, it "preserves" the status of omnirelevance as an entailment of a cognitivist Device-based architecture.

- Another option is to "repair" omnirelevance (that in any given case which, coincidentally, is the setting being studied), such as analysts treating members' actions as members' orientations to (what analysts insist are) operative Devices.

Not only is such repair work echoic of what Garfinkel and Sacks [1970] argued in regard to indexical expressions, this procedure retreats into a correspondence theory of truth (otherwise known as a correspondence theory of reality), which is incommensurate with "coherence theory" used in and as ethnomethodology. This "repair" option seeks achieved plausibility between observable actions and analytically imposed orientations.

- The analyst cannot "respecify" omnirelevance; for, within a Device-based architecture, what would it mean to enact a respecification on something that has not even been specified?

Whilst this point parallels Sacks's [1963: 8] observation on the description of categories quoted above, we suggest that "respecification" has become an example of the "sloganeering" that Garfinkel and Sacks [1970] warned us against.

CONCLUSION

The publication of *Culture in action* [Hester, Eglin 1997] highlighted how studies of membership categorization were distinguishable as decontextualized or as occasioned, ethnomethodological inquiries. Following a recent assessment of studies within the EMCA corpus [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022] we identify further distinctions within purportedly ethnomethodological or occasioned studies of categorization practices. In this paper we suggest that the praxeological program of ethnomethodology is compromised by appeals to cognitive theorizing within membership categorization analysis (MCA), such as "omnirelevance" and

its continued reliance on Device-based architectures, which are contingent upon analytic discretion. We do so by moving outwith the recognized literatures of MCA because these literatures "lose [the phenomena] to the plenums that they need with which to speak of «real worldly organizational things»" [Garfinkel 2022: 74]. A discussion of Talcott Parsons's ways of working is coherent with omnirelevance, for omnirelevance is an artefact of a Device-based architecture. Rather than accounting for members' methods, we see omnirelevance as a constructive-analytic technique

> for the use of the sociological investigator to reconstruct observed activities in treatment of, and members' knowledge of, everyday environments of interaction so as to produce an account of socially ordered activities that consists of procedurally warranted answers to the questions: What is the member of stable everyday social groupings really looking at? What is he really doing? What is he really talking about? [Garfinkel 2019: 170].

"Member" and "membership" were used as tendentious terms, the sense of which Garfinkel allowed readers to arrive at for themselves but are subject to "principled definition" [Baccus 1986: 7] within Sacks's explications of the logic of MCD analysis [Sacks 1972a, 1972b]. Reading exchanges between Garfinkel and Sacks [see Fitzgerald 2025], we can suggest that omnirelevance works as what they call a "principled solution" to a problem of social order. However, this problem is a problem of the Device-based architecture of categorization analysis and has been produced by the very ethno-methods that the analyst claims to reveal, i.e. the principled use of categories, by members, as recognizable descriptions. Omnirelevance, as the principled solution to the problem, is theoretically introduced. The coinage "principled solution" was Garfinkel's gloss on the achievements of professional sociological accounts of its disciplinary methods yet, if MCA is considered as a research method, it is appropriate to bring Garfinkel's gloss to consider the accommodation of constructive analysis in studies of MCA.

Identifying constructive-analytic casts of purportedly ethnomethodological programs, e.g. through homogenization of procedures, iterative studies, using principled solutions to address members' practices, has had a vibrant trajectory [Anderson, Sharrock 2018; Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022; Watson 2008] and in this paper we continue these explorations with regards to MCA. Although we limit the boundaries of our discussion to a constructive analytic profile in current MCA work, made salient by engaging with video-data of astronomy communication events, it parallels a trend towards the "hybridization" of academic fields [Dogan, Pahre 2019]. The analytic profile of "hybridization" in the social sciences is not coterminous with Garfinkel's [2002] methodological notion of "hybrid studies", where a technical skill and an ethnomethodological study of that

technical skill mutually inform each other: "the results of the work would stand as contributions *to* the practices investigated" [Ikeya 2025: 313]. Hybridization, in the constructive-analytic sense, refers to innovations in topical inquiries that occur when researchers leverage interstices of research specialisms. For this constructive-analytic notion of hybridization, the "logical grammar" [Ryle 1949] of individual specialisms and their commensurability for combination is less of an issue than potential benefits of hybridization. Likewise, incorporating theoretical devices (such as omnirelevance) in the explication of members' practical reasoning results in incoherence, as researchers are mistakenly adopting incommensurable programs, i.e. "asymmetric, alternate" [Garfinkel 2002] forms of inquiry.

This paper has outlined, in sketch form, a critique of *constructive-analytic MCA*. The purposes were threefold: while an assessment of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022] paid less attention to MCA, the observations therein on workplace studies seem to apply to MCA, also. Hence, the first purpose of this paper was to elaborate upon the assessment. The second purpose was engaging with data on astronomy communication events, and the constraints of these data on the sufficiency of MCA as an explanatory framework. The challenges presented by these data were originally posed by Sacks [1963] and Garfinkel [2002]: How to describe events in ways that were adequate to practitioners; and, how to characterize these events without losing the phenomenon. Further, achieving analytic description and characterization without resorting to cognitive residua [Watson 1998]. In this paper, the Sacksian notion "omnirelevance" is identified as one of these residua.

Whilst we [Carlin, Marques, Moutinho 2026] characterized the categorial orders of astronomy sessions in terms of "partitioning", we realized that methodological entailments of "category partitioning" were intrinsic to a Device-based architecture. Hence, we embarked upon a struggle to disengage from the standardized capacities of MCD analysis in order to produce an ethnomethodological study. "Off-the-shelf" MCA did not provide an analytic approach that enabled us to preserve the phenomena evident in the videos.

The third purpose of this critique, then, is pedagogic. In a preliminary way, this paper outlines the dangers of following formulaic, disciplinarily acceptable templates for MCA inquiries, which result in constructive analysis; versus seeking studies in *ethnomethodological MCA*, which prioritize the "embedded pedagogies" [Lynch, Livingston, Garfinkel 1983] of the phenomena specific to a particular setting. The development of MCA was intended to move away from the residual cognitivism located within the Device-based architecture of MCD analysis; but the considerations above suggest that this move was insufficient.

There are two orders of pedagogy at stake here, namely what is made available by the phenomenon [Bjelić 2003]; and, the corpus of literature encountered as part of training in ethnomethodology [Carlin, Jenkings, Dennis, Lindwall, Mair 2025]. The "pedagogies" of ethnomethodology and ethnomethodological MCA are located "*within* the phenomenon" of study [Baccus 1986: 2, emphasis in original] yet the risk of claiming to do ethnomethodology is treating its pedagogies as within extant studies. It is notable that preserving the integrity of the phenomena seen in the astronomy observation videos entailed moving beyond MCA literature. In order to avoid constructive analysis, "doing" ethnomethodological MCA requires engagement with data not textbook accounts or previous iterations of empirical MCA inquiries.

This paper has specified some options for analytic discretion in claiming omnirelevance, which are available in the MCA literature, i.e. since Sacks, but these claims are based on constructive analytic methods, such as 1., the assumption of categorial and/or activity relevances, in order to gather data from particular cohorts in the first place; 2., the analytic discretion to impose a categorial order, which may or may not be coincident with the categorial orders that are operative and oriented-to for members party to the setting; and 3., the repetition of an inchoate "stage" in MCA study on the basis that previous MCA studies have made such claims to omnirelevance. For ethnomethodological MCA, omnirelevance constitutes a doubling-down upon a cognitivist – rather than a praxeological – approach to categorization practices.

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BADANIA KATEGORYZACJI UCZESTNICTWA: ETNOMETODOLOGIA CZY ANALIZA KONSTRUKCYJNA?

Streszczenie

Odrzucając istniejące antropologiczne układy pojęciowe, Harvey Sacks rozwinął analizę urządzeń kategoryzacji uczestnictwa (ang. *membership categorization device*, MCD), aby badać to, jak ludzie stosują w ramach interakcji zwyczajne kategorie, a nie kategorie sformułowane przez badaczy. Analiza MCD została stopniowo przekształcona w analizę kategoryzacji uczestnictwa (ang. *membership categorization analysis*, MCA), co wiązało się z próbami oczyszczenia oryginalnego, sformułowanego przez Sacksa układu pojęciowego MCD, mającymi na celu przeciwstawienie się kognitywistycznym pozostałościom wynikającym z jego antropologicznych źródeł. Badając aktywności kategoryzacyjne uczestników (ang. *members' categorization activities*) podczas interakcji w ramach sesji naukowej komunikacji w dziedzinie astronomii (ang. *astronomy communication*) – polegających na obserwacji nieba za pomocą teleskopu lub gołym okiem

– przekonaliśmy się, że analiza kategoryzacji uczestnictwa (MCA) w jej obecnym stanie nie dysponuje wystarczającym wyczuleniem, by zdać sprawę z tego, jak używane są kategorie w ramach owych sesji. Dlatego proponujemy rozróżnienie między dwoma odmianami analizy kategoryzacji uczestnictwa (MCA): etnometodologiczną i konstrukcyjno-analityczną. Rozszerzając argumentację dotyczącą schematycznych badań miejsc pracy w etnometodologii na badania kategoryzacji uczestnictwa sugerujemy, iż współczesne badania w obszarze MCA nie pozwalają na pełne wykorzystanie ich etnometodologicznego potencjału i prowadzą z powrotem do analizy konstrukcyjnej. Wynika to po części z tego, że przejście od zdekontekstualizowanych do sytuacyjnie ulokowanych urządzeń i kategorii (ang. *Devices and Categories*) zachowało kluczową słabość MCA. „Wszechistotność" (ang. *omnirelevance*), termin zaproponowany przez Sacksa, jest dzisiaj stosowany z „analityczną dowolnością" jako kognitywistyczny szablon w większym stopniu dający wizerunek „uprawiania MCA" niż faktycznie umożliwiający opis praktyk uczestników.

Słowa kluczowe: kategoryzacja aktywności, komunikacja naukowa w dziedzinie astronomii, analiza konstrukcyjna, Harvey Sacks, wszechistotność, rozdzielanie (ang. *partitioning*)