Categorizational Asymmetries in Context: Producing and Resisting Policeable Scenes

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This article examines categorizational asymmetries observable in the attempted production and negotiation of a "policeable" scene. The case described in the article — an encounter between a police officer and a black male student treated as "out of place" — demonstrates how members accomplish, negotiate, and resist categorial "statuses" and associated rules of application. In dialog with insights from ethnomethodology and critical praxeological analysis, the analysis describes practices through which categorizations and devices relating to legitimate presence are produced, implied, and resisted in situ, and how available relevancies of racial categorization can remain implicit. In attending to the officer's resources of description and categorization which shift the contexture of the scene, and the potential suspects efforts to resists such categorizations, the analysis respecifies Goffman's (1983) remarks relating to how actors can come to "give official imprint to reality." The article contributes to studies of policing encounters in highlighting categorization practices and category relevancies as constituent members in producing and contesting "policeable" scenes and moves the analytic attention from assumedly asymmetrical category pairs to the practice that produce and manage asymmetries-in-action.
Keywords: asymmetry, ethnomethodology, membership categorization analysis, policing, gestalt contexture

INTRODUCTION

This article attends to categorial and descriptive asymmetries produced in the emergent accomplishment and contestation of "policeable" scenes. More specifically, the article describes the sequential-categorial practices observable in a single interaction in which a police officer begins an inquiry into a black male student's presence in the public space around his residence, where he is demonstrably picking up litter.

These practices are understood as constitutive members of a gestalt contexture in which a perceptually-available and potentially-applicable racial categorization remains implicit in the encounter. While members of the public were able to view the encounter as racially motivated, the absence of an explicit statement of a racial category during the interaction might be understood as providing the grounds for an inquiry to find that there was "no proof of racial bias" guiding the conduct of the officer. However, rather than contrasting "professional" or "public" viewings of the encounter (Lynch 2020, and see Elsey et al. 2025), the analysis aims to stay with the possible organizations of the scene itself (for which the methods of any viewing are, of course, part).

The article connects to classic and contemporary treatments of police work as involving "area knowledge" and the procedure for doing incongruities (Bittner 1970; Buscariolli 2023; Raymond, Chen, and Whitehead 2023; Sacks 1972a). It is, however, distinct in aiming to describe something of how the same procedures may be used to "make trouble" in and through the, often implicit, racialization of members of a given scene. The achievement of incongruities is a matter of categorization, bound up with asymmetrical rights to define the situation in the course of its production. The article also respecifies the notion of "the situation" in ethnomethodological terms, as an emergent and contingent contexture. In this sense, the article draws from and contributes to the development of what has recently been described as "critical praxeological analysis" (Diskin and Hutchinson 2024). The analysis presented below advances an understanding of how categorization practices can be understood as constitutive *members* of gestalt contextures. The significance is that what might be considered physical "attributes" — that is, "things like melanin levels, regional accents, visible features like scars or tattoos and such like" — can be approached, instead, in terms of the "significance accorded to and the local practical entailments of such things in specific interactional contexts" (Diskin and Hutchinson 2024:528); a significance that is accorded primarily through describable sequential and categorizational practices. In sum, in attending to the local accomplishment of categorial relevancies, as constituents of a "policeable" contexture, the article aims to progress some foundational matters for interactionist sociology concerning the ways in which, interactionally, "those with institutional authority" can come to give "official imprint to versions of reality" (Goffman 1983:17).

POWER, ASYMMETRIES, AND INTERACTION

A point of orientation for the contribution of this article to broader treatments of asymmetries in interaction is the closing remarks of Goffman's (1983:17) posthumous Presidential Address. He writes:

> If one must have warrant addressed to social needs, let it be for unsponsored analyses of the social arrangements enjoyed by those with institutional authority-priests, psychiatrists, school teachers, police, generals, government leaders, parents, males, whites, nationals, media operators, and all the other

> well-placed persons who are in a position to give official imprint to versions of reality.

The "unsponsored" analysis of such "social arrangements" have, of course, been central to symbolic interactionist inquiry both before and since Goffman's statement. Indeed, interactionism in general has long been concerned with the ways in which uneven experiences are produced and reproduced in interaction. As Dennis and Martin (2005) observed, the contribution of such inquiries to sociology has been limited by a misunderstanding that they only generate insights in to only the "micro" aspects of asymmetrical relations which stand in front of "macro" structures that are seen to be generative of inequality. As such, and at the same time, interactionist insights have been incorporated, or reconciled, in general sociological treatments in which their distinctiveness is dissolved. With specific regard to asymmetry and power relations — which are taken as both formal topic and answer in sociology — the process of erasure via reduction and misunderstanding seems exacerbated. Sociological approaches routinely treat power as an object or "force" — a thing — which somehow simultaneously influences and exists outside of situated social action. This, of course, runs against the general interactionist treatment of power and associated asymmetries which is concerned, like members themselves, with the things people can, and actually *do*, do to one another (Dennis and Martin 2005:200).

The relevance of Goffman's remarks is the recognition that through institutional "social arrangements" specific *categories* of actor are seen to possess rights to define and ratify what is to be treated as true, normal, and proper; that is, to "define the situation." In considering just how such "social arrangements" are interactionally organized, we might immediately recognize that the "power" that these categories "have" is displayed in specific settings in which a second paired category is available: "teacher-pupil," "male–female," "police-suspect," and so on. Harvey Sacks (1972b) referred to these as "standardised relational pairs"; occasioned pairs, that can be organized into various "collections" relating to rights, obligations, and knowledge "domains." As elaborated by Jayyusi (1984), such pairs are not simply a generalized asymmetrical (demarcative) set of categories that represent moral order but indicate, instead, their formation by categorization *practices* that are constitutive of it. Both the categories and their pairs accomplish and display an *occasioned* relationship in settings for which those categories are always-possibly-relevant (Jayyusi 1984:125). For such potential category pairs as "police officer/suspect," the first part is a "stable" categorization while the second pair part will be a "locally occasioned categorization" (Jayyusi 1984:125); that is to say, that the applicability of the second pair part might be understood as accomplished in-situ in encounters with *potential* incumbents. That a category might be considered "stable" should not be taken to mean fixed in a cultural or structural sense, but rather as a matter of "omni-relevancy" in which the occasioned categorization can act as a "control device" in a setting (Sacks 1995 [I]:314; Fitzgerald 2020). The case described in this article demonstrates how matters of categorizational "pairings," as well as category collections and their "rules of application" are themselves contexturally conditioned, contingent, reflexively constitutive

features of a scene. Such an orientation is significant in shifting the analytic orientation further from a conceptualization of categories and devices as "outputs" of a "machinery," toward an alternate treatment of asymmetries in interaction, grounded in local categorization practices, their sequential environment, emergent relevancy and consequential nexts.

As demonstrated by Hester (2016) in a study of referral talk between a teacher and educational psychologist, the relationship between categorial asymmetry and "power" remains a matter for inspection in any given case. While some standardized-relational pairs of the sort discussed above can appear as asymmetrical in terms of the rights to perform certain tasks (for example), this is not necessarily viewed by participants as "power" or "domination." It is, rather, a matter of situated sequential-categorial relevancies *in context*:

> The psychologist decides the order of cases for discussion. The psychologist closes the meeting, and rules out certain topics. It may simply be observed that "stating the order" of referrals for discussion is another activity bound to, and constitutive of, the category of educational psychologist, whilst acceptance of that order is tied to and constitutive of the category of teacher. (Hester 2016:93–94)

If rights and obligations — to ask and to answer questions, or to instruct others as to the use of their time and for those others to follow the instructions — can be said to be "bound" to a given category, then those rights and obligations are not available *because* a person happens to be perceptually available, and thus categorizable, as a "teacher," "a police officer," "a psychologist," and so on. The switch is to see how the category-relevancy is *displayed* in relation to actions (Schegloff 2007) and, as such, emergent properties of the scene, reflexively tied to the display of the relevancy of that category, for that action, as constituent elements of *just that* contexture.

In considering such supposedly asymmetrical relations, in the actual settings of their relevance, we might thus approach Goffman's "social arrangements" as practical contingent achievements. We might also approach such arrangements as interactional phenomena through and through, produced/displayed and oriented to by participants in the course of their activity, rather than manifestations of unequal social structures. The "social arrangements" that Goffman suggests might be the focus of "unsponsored analysis" are thus respecified as produced and displayed during the interaction and as endogenous autochthonous phenomena of the scene. Here, then, an ethnomethodological orientation that combines contemporary developments in what has been called "critical praxeological analysis" (Diskin and Hutchinson 2024) and developments in ethnomethodology, and membership categorization analysis (MCA) in particular, offer some ways forward.

Contra to misunderstandings — that seem to have some of their roots in a conceptual confusion concerning the ethnomethodological study policy of analytic indifference — questions of asymmetry, power, and inequality are not "absent" from ethnomethodological concerns. Ethnomethodology does not deny that people can and do organize their affairs in ways which have uneven outcomes for participants. How could it? What ethnomethodology does deny is that a "sociological

imagination" or *any* form of professionalized approach of theory and method is required to see that is the case (Sharrock and Button 2016). An ethnomethodological approach thus accords no special interest to "power" as a topic above any other but insists upon staying with the description of how "common sense understandings of social structures" come to feature in the organization of a given setting or course of activity without the requirement of "the creation of a set of purpose-built professional sociological concepts" (Sharrock and Button 2016:50). Importantly, for ethnomethodology, the standard professional sociological approach to power relations:

> … presupposes rather than understands the ways in which people actually deploy power and, if it as a means, how it is effected in pursuing the end. Classic definitions of power as involving the means to coerce people to do what they would not otherwise do might sound reasonable enough. Whether or not they are, however, is beside the point because the definition cannot give an indication as to how in any instance one person can get others to do what is wanted of them even over their opposition. This question is a starting point for an ethnomethodological encounter with power, not an explanation of action. What power relationships amount to will be displayed in the particular circumstances of "this interaction" between "these people" for "whatever purposes", and done "somehow" …

SEEING RACE?

In developing this orientation, the article thus describes an instance of the local production of the "power relationship" that can be said to exist in the United States (and other countries) between police officers and racialized individuals by staying with the "somehow" of that interaction. This is an important distinction in that the analysis does not offer to simply point out that racialized individuals experience discriminatory treatment or comment on that treatment's distribution. A pertinent question is, for whom would such observations provide news (Williamson 2024)? The analysis below, instead, aims to point to some of the troubles produced, and navigated in the course of their production, as troubles relating to the situated relevancy of categories in establishing and contesting a "policeable" contexture, of which racial categories are only one potential. Categorizations — including those of race — are not assumed to have a prior existence or significance in the organization of the scene and are, as such, respecified and de-reified in the course of attending to categorization *practices* (Watson 2015). The encounter described below is thus approached as a dynamically-assembled gestalt contexture in which membership — with "membership" providing for the "varieties of ways of looking and thinking" (Garfinkel in Hill and Crittenden 1968:121) — is at stake.

In developing previous studies of "power" and asymmetry that have attended to membership categorization practices, this article also takes forward the "radical local" model of MCA (Francis and Hester 2017; Hester 2016; Housley and Fitzgerald 2009; Smith 2025; Watson 2015) in dialog with recent discussions of Garfinkel's "misreading" and praxeologization of the Gestalt psychology of Aaron

Gurwitsch (see Garfinkel 2021; Lynch and Eisenmann 2022). Significant among recent writings is the orientation of what has been called "critical praxeological analysis" (Diskin and Hutchinson 2024). The following is a highly relevant example for the current article (p. 527):

> There is a queue at the boarding gate for a flight and the flight steward asks those who have priority boarding for first class passengers to approach the gate. A black traveller joins the queue, follows the established rules of the queue, yet is approached by a member of the ground crew who says to him, and only to him, "this queue is only for first class passengers."

To provide something of a re-analysis, this vignette demonstrates how categorial relevancies (of race, in this instance) are achieved *locally* and become operationally-relevant in relation to the viewing of a praxeologically gestalt — a queue, in this case — where the "established rules" of the queue that designedly provide for local sequential-categorial "first come, first served" order are thus overridden by an occasioned, racialized, "control device." The initial partitioning category, "first-class," is thus locally (re-)organized in relation to racial categories, and in turn, as exclusive of the category "black" in *this* contexture. As Diskin and Hutchinson (2024:520 original emphasis) remind us, the analytic task is "to look closely and see the relations as they figure in the production of the gestalt whole by the members and then identify the methods *they* employ, in-situ, in the production, maintenance and repair of the gestalt." In developing this approach, MCA may be useful in further explicating the sequential-categorial practices through which the relations of a given gestalt contexture are achieved. This approach is, then, in contrast with that of mainstream sociology which decides the grounds of an analytically-assembled unequal society, including features of inequality, power, and stigma, and so on ahead of any actual instance of the accomplishment of relevant categories thereof.

To move toward the case at hand, then, we might approach the policing of "public space" in the same way — not as an analytic category to be distinguished through a priori theoretical definition but as a concerted production of its *members*. The scene of "normal appearances" (Goffman 2010 [1971]) may be thus conceived of a coherent contexture in which the constituents mutually "belong." As with the example of the airport queue described above, membership of a "normal" scene can be questioned by observers with the responsibility of "keeping order;" flight stewards with airline queues, police officers with public space. Indeed, this is the foundation of the "incongruity procedure" which produces people as "out of place" (Sacks 1995 [I]; Buscariolli 2023; Smith 2020); a procedure which recurrently finds racialized minorities in the USA and the UK receiving undue attention from law enforcement officers.

Racial Categorization and Policing

The uneven distribution by racial or ethnic category of interactions with the police is stark and bears a geographic organization. Writing of the racial profiling of motorists in the United States, Meehan and Ponder (2002:401) note that:

> African Americans are subject to disproportionate surveillance and stopping by the police when they drive through white areas of the community under study. Furthermore, profiling significantly increases as African Americans move farther from stereotypically "black" communities and into wealthier, whiter areas: a phenomenon we call the race-and-place effect. Being an African American driver in a whiter area has more negative consequences than being an African American driver in a blacker area of the same community.

The significance of Meehan and Ponder's analysis, standing in front of an ethnographic engagement with police practice, is the recognition of practically-produced relationship between place and race as constituent features of a contexture in which the category "black" is produced as relevant in police-specific ways which are then consequently available as "incongruent" in *that* setting. As shown by Meehan and Ponder (2002), racial profiling is tied not only to practices of "seeing race," but to officers' practical conceptions and treatments of place, of what should typically occur in an area, and who belongs there. Activity, category, and place are then produced and oriented to as relational configurations which shift depending on, whils forming, the specificities of a given contexture. More recently, Buscariolli (2023) has described how place formulations feature in officers' accounts produced during encounters with members of public and form a central part of the repertoire of producing "policeability" for participants, as well as how categorization operates in establishing the accountability of a suspect.

What such treatments of the "policing contexture" help us to start to see is how "white spaces" and "black spaces" are not straightforwardly geo-demographic "facts" (although they can certainly be produced in this way), but are themselves contingent, local, accomplishments, produced and made relevant in and through lay and official acts of the policing of observable presence in which racial categories come to have a relevancy in the first instance.[1] It is this relation between category, predicate, and contexture that is developed in the article in a way intended to complement more sequentially-focused analyses such as the recent work of Raymond, Chen, and Whitehead (2023) on "sequential standoffs" in police encounters. In part, what I aim to show is how escalation, and matters of compliance and resistance, are related to what might be called the contextural-legitimacy of policing actions. We might, then, understand such officer-initiated interactions as that described below as displaying the work of praxeologically assembling and resisting the production of a "policeable" scene in relation to an individual — in this case, a black man — being found to be "out of place" while engaged in seemingly "normal," non-policeable, activities. Here then, "giving official imprint to reality" (Goffman 1983:17) is shown not to be straightforwardly imposed by an "agent" privileged by institutional social

arrangements, imposing "power" on an individual who lacks it, but as a dynamic, contingent, and contestable matter.

The remainder of the article is organized across two extended sections that describe the work of 1) Producing as someone "out of place" and its categorial contestation in and through a "legitimate presence" device, and 2) giving official imprint to a policeable scene through institutional and situated (re-)categorization practices of actions and objects.

SEEING SOMEONE AS "OUT OF PLACE": PRODUCING POSSIBLE DESCRIPTIONS IN ASSEMBLING A POLICEABLE SCENE

The case described across the remainder of this article was gathered from YouTube as part of a broader project which is, in part, concerned with the relationship between visual technologies and forms of accountability and sense-making relating to police practices as visible on social media. The incident in question took place on March 1, 2019 in Boulder, Colorado, United States, and involved Officer John Smyly (JS) and a black, male student, Zayn Atkinson (ZA). The full incident lasted for around 20 min and begins with ZA being questioned by JS in relation to potential trespassing. The encounter escalates, culminating with a further nine police officers arriving on scene and drawing their weapons. It is finally de-escalated by the arrival of a faculty member of the college who confirms ZA's identity. The incident was initially brought to the attention of the public after a video was uploaded to social media by resident of the apartment block. Following an inquiry, which found "no proof that racial bias was a motivating factor," the officer's body-worn camera video was released. It is that footage that is analyzed here.

The case was selected for analysis due to an initial interest in how an available racial category was seen and used by the public to view the encounter as "racially motivated," despite no racial categories being uttered during the interaction. As such, the available racialized character of the interaction is not directly available in the transcribed talk, which may provide for the lack of "proof" found by the inquiry. We will return to this broader point in the discussion, but for now, the initial concern is how the lack of an explicit statement of a racial category can be treated as visible in its absence. There are also some significant aspects of the categorization of space and objects that are often overlooked in narrower versions of MCA but are constitutive members of the "policeable" contexture that is attempted assembled by JS's actions and its contestation through ZA's.

The video begins as an officer (JS) makes his way around from the back of an apartment building toward the front streetside where ZA appears to be engaged in picking up litter — holding a plastic bucket and a litter-picker — listening to music on earphones (Figure 1 and Excerpt 1).

The opening of the encounter by JS is done through an account of a prior noticing of ZA "sitting on the patio out there" (l.1); an account formulated in such a way that produces the activity as an *unavoidably* salient, foregrounded, element of the

FIGURE 1. Approaching ZA with Bucket and Litter-Picker in Hand

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1. JS: I couldn't help but notice you-r just sitting on
2.     the patio out there

3. ZA: what's that?

4. JS: I couldn't help but notice your sittin on the
5.     patio behind this building?

6. ZA: ye:ah

7. JS: yeah I ju- its- theres- the signs for no trespassing
8.     [private property that] kind of thing

9. ZA: [i      live      here]

10.JS: yeah I wasn't sure what you were doin (.) if you lived here or
11.    you worked here
12.ZA: yeah=

13.JS: =it looks like you're workin doing [something picking stuff up]

14.ZA:                                    [yeah I live here an I]
15.    and I work here

16.    (1.4)

17.JS: Okay (.) gotcha (.) what's the actual address then?

18.ZA: 22-33 Rapahoe

19.JS: Okay what unit are you in

20.ZA: I don't think I have to actually tell you that
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EXCERPT 1. Accounting for a Noticing

scene. As with the example of the queue above, "sitting on the patio" does not necessarily invoke associated membership categories — in the sense that anyone could be doing it — and so, taken at face value, the "investigability" of the scene poses the question "why that now?," for which the available racial membership category can provide a possible resource for finding ZA sitting on the patio to an incongruous element of the scene. The non-question account of the noticing by JS, is met with a non-answer response (Stivers 2010), which does not recognize the opening as in need of account: what's that? (l.3). The account of the noticing is repeated, with the addition of a location, "behind this building" (l.4–5). The repetition is met with a minimal recognition, "yeah" (l.6), which again resists the relevancy of the noticing as an accountable matter.

JS proceeds to account for the noticing by producing elements of the scene (whether the signs are actually there, or visible or not) — the "signs" for "no trespassing" and "private property," as well as leaving the collection open with an extender term: "that kind of thing" — which introduces a potentially applicable deviance category of "trespasser" (l.7–8). In so doing, the officer assembles a "policeable" description of the scene, through asymmetrically oriented category work which establishes a language game of policeability within which the categories "civilian"/"potential suspect" are relevant features. Although, of course, why ZA was viewed as a potential trespasser while sitting on the patio is, again, not made explicit. Regardless of the potential racially oriented viewing of the "sitting on the patio," ZA produces an overlapping turn, immediately following the invocation of the signs, with a directly contrasting self-categorization as "resident" (l.9); "I live here." This is not only a matter of person identification, but via the preference for categorial consistency (Sacks 1972b), produces resistance through a contrast category from a locally-assembled category collection relating to practical and moral predicates of spatial presence and associated rights to be, or not be, in this space, at this time.

Indeed, the next turn of JS (l.10–11) produces a dual potential categorization of ZA — "lived here" or "worked here." The "worker" categorization displays a recognition of the visually-available activities of ZA — and the category-relevant objects of the bin and the litter-picker — as "work like" predicates (Hester and Eglins 1997). At the same time, this is treated as ambiguous in relation to the prior self-categorization of ZA as "resident." Both, however, remain consistent with the emergent "spatial rights" device (residents and workers have rights to be in this space, trespassers do not) which is at the center of the "policeable" scene being assembled. Again, the category-relevancy issue posed by JS is followed by a minimally-aligning response (l. 12). JS continues to account for the prior introduction of "working here," in that ZA is appears to be "doing something picking some stuff up" (l.13). In an overlapping turn, ZA (l.14–15) resolves the category-selection "problem" being pursued by JS by claiming dual incumbency of "resident" and "worker" in such a way that is tied presence in the location: "I live *here* and I work *here*."

Following a significant pause, a question is formulated in relation to the categorially claimed legitimacy of ZA to be present in the setting; namely, knowing the address (l. 17). In answering, ZA turns and points to the front of the building where the address is written. With the scene emergently established as investigatable, the visibility of the address appears to be treated as insufficient "evidence" of the applicability of "resident" by JS (that is, *anyone* could read the address from the wall). JS continues to test the claimed incumbency of "resident" by asking ZA to name his unit within the building. At this point, ZA directly resists the questioning of JS and invokes category-based rights of "non-suspect/civilian" to not divulge details to a police officer who has failed to produce an account of "reasonable suspicion" in both a legal and, more importantly, situated moral sense (l. 20).

If the opening turns of the encounter can be said to be marked by an asymmetry, it is observable in terms of the ability to assemble this 'normal' scene as worthy of further investigation on the part of JS. The turns from JS emergently find/produce the appearances of the scene as an investigable matter in relation to a testing of the "rules of application" in this context for the contrastive categories of "non-suspect" or "suspect" operationalized through layered relevancies of "legitimate presence" and "deviance." What is significant here, is despite the recognition of the visual-availability of ZA's work activities by JS, they are not treated as tied to legitimate presence and the claim of incumbency as a "resident" is directly pursued in terms of a matter to be formally verified in the course of the investigation in specific relation to ZA's presence in this location. All the while, the potentially-applicable racialized categorization is kept off the table.

JS continues the inquiry into the legitimacy of ZA's presence by explicitly stating what was implicit in the opening turns of the encounter (Excerpt 2).

The explicit questioning of ZA's "right to be here" by JS is responded to by a restatement of the two relevant categories from the previously established "legitimate presence" device (l. 23, 25) and an appeal to JS that those categorial claims, along with the previously acknowledged availability predicates of the "worker" category by JS, should "be enough for you" (l. 27). JS proceeds with the inquiry in terms of the requirement for a verification that ZA does "in fact live here" (l.28–29), to which ZA asks what form that verification might take. JS requests "an ID with your address on it" as, potentially, ending the inquiry, to which ZA expresses frustration at the situation; "this is fucking unbelievable, man" (l.33).

This non-aligned response is followed by a further account of the inquiry constructing the wider geographic area as a potentially policeable space in which there has been "stuff going on." We do not, as analysts, need to investigate whether this is the case, or "what kind of neighbourhood" this, but can, instead, treat this account as an "occasioned corpus" of the setting (Zimmerman and Pollner 2017). In turn, this occasioned corpus provides for the claim that the officer is *just* engaged in routine police work, and that work involves inquiries such as this; that is, "I am just doing my

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21. JS: well I'm just checking to make sure that you have a right
22.     to be here that's all

23. ZA: well-I just told you I lived  [here]

24. JS:                                     [okay]

25. ZA: and I told you that I'm working as well

26. JS [okay   ]

27. ZA: [should-] shouldn't that be enough for you

28. JS: well, I- I gotta verify it just so I know that you do in
29.     fact live here

30. ZA: Are you kidding me (.) wha do you- what do you need from me

31. JS: well, if you have an ID with your address on it that'd be
32.     great

33. ZA: this is fucking unbelievable man

34. JS: well we've had some stuff goin on in this area (.) I'm just
35.     [doin my] job just making sure you belong here* and if you
36.     do then great and I'll be on my way
                                                 *ZA hands ID to
        JS

37. ZA: [I know]

38. JS: okay (*0.2) hey Zayd do you have anything with your address on
39.     it
            *inspecting ID

40. ZA: no look man here [why don't you why don't  you  follow me] and
        I just fucking beep the building dude

41. JS:                 [hey hang on hang on (.) just relax]
42.     hey just chill [out man]

43. ZA:                [it's- d]ude this is ridiculous
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EXCERPT 2. The Right to be Here

job" (l. 35–36). The account that there has been "stuff going on" is hearable as relating to criminal/policeable matters. This *may* be heard as a collection which includes the predicates of "people who look like ZA" but, of course, this is not explicit and thus deniable in terms of ZA being targeted *because* of his appearance. Indeed, the inquiry turns on whether ZA does indeed "belong here" (l. 35) which again may or may not be heard as relating to race.

During the account of "stuff going on," ZA hands JS an ID which JS reads, before rejecting it as sufficient "proof" and restating the request for "an ID with your address on it" (l. 38–39). The requests by ZA to resolve the matter by other means—that is, suggesting an alternative "proof procedure" that involves "beeping the building"

and, presumably, speaking to another resident — are rejected, in overlapping turns by JS with appeals to ZA to "hang on" and to "just relax" and to "chill out man" (l. 41–42).

In the following Excerpt 3, JS continues to ask for "something with your address on it" which is again resisted by ZA, this time in terms of its possibility (l.49).

The response to ZA's questioning of the reasonableness of asking him to produce an ID with his address on it is formatted by JS in a category-free account that "a lot of people" carry an ID (l. 50–51), providing an example of such, a "driver's license." ZA responds to this account with incredulity (l. 52–53) and a complaint that the request is "ridiculous" (l. 55). This resistance may be heard in terms of ZA "knowing his rights"; however, the officer has not only failed to provide grounds for the request in a legal sense but also in terms of the accounting of the reason for the inquiry in the first instance: the observation of ZA "sitting on the patio." The resistance can thus be understood as tied to an unsettled contexture of emergent policeability, rather than, necessarily, as a strategic result of a head filled with legal knowledge.

Through the resistance of ZA, the authority of JS is questioned in relation to the legitimacy of the attemptedly produced "policeable" contexture. The resistance, developed sequentially, is occasioned in relation to the details of the scene in which demonstrably "normal" activities were being done (sitting on the patio, picking up litter) and in which the viewer's maxim — or, rather, the local accomplishment of relation of activity and category (Reynolds and Fitzgerald 2015) — as handled and negotiated here, is assumedly sufficient for *not* treating the scene as one in which a police investigation is warrantable. Regardless of any actual verifiable status as a resident, ZA is demonstrably engaged in work-like activities, a viewing acknowledged

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44. JS: I'm just asking you if you have something with your
45.     address on it [then that would help me]

46. ZA:               [oh my gosh   (.)   no I]

47. ZA: don't ha-

48. JS: Ok

49. ZA: how am I supposed to have something with my [address on it]

50. JS:                                          [well a lot of]
51.     people have a [driver's license]

52. ZA:               [they jus-      ] they just carry something
53.     with their address on it

54. JS  yeah an ID

55. ZA  that's ridiculous bro
```

EXCERPT 3. Verification Procedure

by JS in the opening turns of the encounter. In this sense, both authority and resistance are emergent motile properties of the scene. Indeed, ZA's continued rejections of the instructions of JS are built in relation to the continued observable relevancies of the alternative category pair of police-citizen and the previously occasioned "legitimate presence in space" device collecting both "resident" and "worker." At the same time, the potential relevancy of racial categorizations in seeing a "trespasser" in this location remain implicit but notable in absence.

CATEGORY ESCALATION AND GIVING "OFFICAL IMPRINT TO REALITY"

The encounter progresses with ZA sitting on the frontage of the apartment building. JS approaches him, taking out his notebook and pen, and asks ZA — addressing him as "Mr Atkinson" — for his date of birth. ZA responds, "why?" ZA stands and begins putting on gloves. We rejoin the encounter (Excerpt 4) with JS issuing ZA with an instruction to "have a seat please," an instruction that ZA flatly rejects.

Following the verbal and embodied resistance of ZA, who continues to return to his prior activity of picking litter, JS produces the second action of "giving official imprint to reality" — with the "reality" being the production of a policeable scene (the first being, arguably, the switching on of the body-worn video camera) — by stating "code twelve" over the radio (290 is JS's identification number, following the protocol of radio talk). "Code twelve" is officially defined as a request for "non-emergency cover"[2] and flags the situation to the dispatcher and non-present "listening" officers as possibly escalating or that the subject may flee. Following this address to a distal overhearing institutional audience, JS again asks ZA to "Please have a seat" (l. 59), an instruction which is, again, directly resisted (l. 60). JS then instructs ZA to "put that down" (l. 61), referring to the litter-picker and bucket, with which ZA is continuing to collect litter from the kerb outside the apartment.

The continued resistance by ZA to issued instructions — or, to put things another way, his returning to his work of litter-picking — occasions an explicit institutional

```
56.ZA: no (.) no
57.JS: Mr Atkinson
58.ZA: no (.) no I'm not (.) I'm not
59.JS: two ninety code twelve (1) can you please have a seat
60.ZA: no
61.JS: put that down
62.ZA: nope
63.JS: stop
64.ZA: no
65.(7.3)
```

EXCERPT 4. Code 12

account of that resistance from JS (l. 66–67). This, again, marks the production of an "official version of reality" in attemptedly shifting ZA from "possible suspect" to being actively engaged in an unlawful activity; "obstructing a police officer." Note, however, that this is not issued in relation to the making of an arrest, but, instead, as a warning in relation the potential consequences of ZA's actions-as-defined by JS. This is followed by another instruction for ZA to "sit down" (l. 67–68) (Excerpt 5).

ZA resists this formal categorization of his actions through a turn with a double orientation to the actions of JS (l. 69–71). The first — "I'm not doing anything wrong" — orients to ZA's immediately present activity, and the immediate prior turn which presented the policeable matter of "obstruction." This is paired to the activity of "arrest" which is formulated as an illegitimate second action in this context. Again,

```
66. JS: Mr Atkinson right now you're obstructing a police officer which
67.     is a jailable offence (.) I'm asking you one more time to sit
68.     down

69. ZA: I'm not doing anything wrong and you're not gonna arrest me and
70.     you're not gonna do anything because I live here and I didn't do
71.     anything wrong

72. JS: last chance, sir

73. ZA: for what?

74. JS: have a seat

75. ZA: for what? (.) [for what]

76. JS:              [sit down]

77. ZA: you're gonna arrest- [someone ((unclear)) arrest
        someone              ((unclear))]

78. JS:                      [right now I am detaining you and
79.     investigating you for trespass  ]

80. ZA   you're gonna- i fucking live here dumbass

81. JS   sit down (1) sit down=

82. ZA   =no
```

EXCERPT 5. Delegitimization

this can be seen as an attempt to make relevant the viewer's maxim — or, rather, the visual constituents of the scene — for the relation of his ongoing observable activities to the categorization of "worker" and the "legitimate presence" device. The second part of the turn can be heard as an upgrade and a handling of the scene as a whole. The switch to the past tense removes the specific activity of "arrest" and delegitimates *any* further police-related activity through a restatement of his incumbency as "resident" and not having done "anything wrong." "Anything wrong" is intelligible in and as the context of the police encounter and is thus heard as "any actions relevant for police attention" rather than a more general sense of inappropriate behavior. JS produces the first part of an ultimatum which standardly enables a topicalization of the absent part (or I/you will) through a questioning response (or what/you'll what?). Here, the questioning takes the form of a continued delegitimization of the JS's attempt production of a policeable matter with "for what?" (l.73). The instruction/resistance pair is repeated by ZA again topicalizes the legitimacy of "arrest" as an appropriate response to his action. This appears successful as JS steps back from the projected activity of 'arrest' which is downgraded to "detaining" (l. 78). This is also accompanied by a re-invocation of the previously implied and stated deviance category "trespasser."

The restating of the continued applicability of "trespasser" (l. 79) occasions a strong restatement of the "resident" category as the directly contrastive relevant category (l. 80) from the "legitimate presence" device. So, although the possible relevancy of the "worker" category remains available through ZA's actions (picking up litter), it is "resident" that takes sequential priority in response to the immediately prior use of "trespasser." This turn also includes the introduction of an insult category (l. 80), and an attempted degrading of the officer's status relative to their actions (the actions of a "dumbass"). These insult categories, once introduced, are then upgraded across the following excerpt and are responded to with what might be called a "descriptive asymmetry" characterized by the rights and capacity to shift the contexture of the scene and give it "official imprint" (Figure 2 and Excerpt 6).

Following ZA calling JS "a fucking idiot" (l. 83), JS again speaks on the radio, restating a "code 12" (l. 84). ZA continues to call JS a "fucking idiot." JS again asks ZA to take a seat, adding "please" (l. 85–86). At this point, in reference to his continued resistance and possibly to JS's prior ultimatum of "last chance" (l. 72), ZA introduces a potential next escalating action of JS, "you're going to tase me."[3] Note also how the moral contexture of the potential, illegitimate, "tasing" is built with a locative formulation, "outside my residence" (l. 88) again invoking the "legitimate presence" device. ZA is thus not only a "resident" in a demographic sense but the category is locatively generated (Smith 2021) and thus has additional moral implicature for the foundational matter of "who we are," "what we are doing," and "what is happening next;" that is, I am a resident *and* I am standing outside of my residence (and thus not a trespasser). This is followed immediately by an orientation to the body-worn video camera of JS, "I hope that thing's on" (l. 88–89), repeated again, following a further instruction from JS to "put that down" (l. 92). The reference to

FIGURE 2. I am Working, I Live Here (l. 93).

```
83. ZA: You're a fucking idiot

84. JS: Two ninety code twelve

85. ZA: A fucking idiot (.) that's what you are
86.     you're a fu[cking idiot

87. JS:              [have a seat please=

88. ZA: =you're gonna tase me outside of my residence (.) I hope
89.     [that  thing's   on    ]

90. JS: [drop that (.) put that] down

91. ZA: I hope your camera's on sir

92. JS: Put that[down        ]

93. ZA:          [I really do] NO I'm working (.) [I live here (.)you've
                                          got my] address

94. JS:                                          [you need to listen to
95.     what I'm telling you to do right now]
```

EXCERPT 6. You're Gonna Tase Me?

the camera and, through it, a distal future "auditing" audience, might be said to be done in relation to the notion that the illegitimacy of the officer's action will be plain to see.

It is also worth observing the indexicality of the "that" (l.90, 92). ZA is holding a plastic bin and a litter-picker, which is treated by ZA as a general reference to "work

objects" which occasions a restatement of the "tied" category; "NO I'm working" (l. 93). This is followed by a restatement of the status of "resident" and a connection back to the previous giving of the address in the first stage of the encounter. Both these categorizations are accompanied by gestures — first by banging the bin with the litter-picker tied to "I'm working" and pointing to the building with "I live here" — which appeals to the visually-available categorial legitimacy of ZA to be in the area (which JS offered up at the outset of the encounter, l. 10–11).

JS again offers an ultimatum without specified consequence (l. 94–95), although it can possibly be heard as a threat tied to the now-relevant TASER. Across these turns, ZA maintains appeals to the "legitimate presence" device. The relevancy of the objects being held by ZA as foregrounded members of contexture of the scene is further worked up by JS in the following excerpt (Excerpt 7).

ZA continues to provide an account for his resistance. The first turn features a self-repair where ZA follows "I'm not doing anything-" with "I'm not doing anything illegal" (l. 96), heard as tied to the relevancies of the police officer and their actions in the scene. The authority or "power" of the police officer is then rejected on these grounds. More specifically, the account works directly against the categorizational-relevancy of "police officer" in a context where no crime has been committed. This account demonstrates not only the *occasioned* relevancy of categories, but also the contexturally configured legitimacy of the ability of an 'incumbent' of that category to instruct another what to do. Without legitimate grounds to be "doing policing," the categorial significance of "police officer" can be attemptedly negated. Indeed, following the insult categories, ZA continues to treat the officer as an individual — "I don't know you" (l. 88, 89) — rather than straightforwardly a representative of an institutional category (as in Gofman's formulation). ZA again invokes a spatial categorization of the location they are

```
 96. ZA: I'm not doing anything- I'm not doing anything [illegal I
 97.     haven't done anything wrong so I'm not gonna listen to you (.) I
 98.     don't know you (.) YOU're actually on my property and I feel
 99.     unsafe]

100. JS:                                       [two-ninety (.)
101.     we're on the east side of 23-33 Folsome (.) subject's failing to
102.     comply (.) not sitting down and he has some kind of a] blunt
103.     object in his hand

104. ZA: yeah

105. JS: I'm just gonna follow until my cover gets here
```

EXCERPT 7. Some Kind of Blunt Object

in — "my property" — which offers further potential delegitimization of JS's policing actions in this situation.

At the same time, JS begins a three-part formatted message on his radio. JS offers a geographical formulation (Schegloff 1972) of their location ("23–33 Folsome") and a formal gloss of ZA's actions as "failing to comply" and a specific description of the resistance: "not sitting down" (l. 100–103). In the final part of the message, JS states that ZA has "some kind of a blunt object in his hand" and formulates the seriousness of the situation as requiring back-up (l. 105). I suggest that this is not merely a misdescription of the litter-picker, but, rather, a categorization with specific contextural consequences.

In the context of a police-suspect encounter — and as produced for the dispatcher on the other end of the radio and overhearing BPD units following the previous "code 12" — the statement that ZA is holding "some kind of blunt object" can be heard as a *categorization* of the object in terms of how it shifts the contexture of the scene. A "blunt object" is a way of categorizing an object as a weapon and, as such, makes relevant a possible collection of objects such as hammers, bricks, dumbbells, pickaxe handles, baseball bats, truncheons, and so on. The prefix "some kind" of blunt object provides some space for the radio audience to use their "routine procedures" (Sacks 1995 [I]:42) to hear this as a weapon in just this way. This "descriptive asymmetry" is visible in how whether the litter-picker *really* is or *really* is not a "blunt object" is, again, a moot point. Via the categorization, the kaleidoscopic contexture, to use Watson's (2015) apt phrase, has been turned. And while it is quite possible for ZA to continue to resist the instructions of JS, as well as the notion that he is holding a blunt object and not a litter-picker, in siu, the formulation spoken over the radio shifts the contexture of the scene from one of "suspicion" to one of "threat." Indeed, the next turn of JS, also spoken over the radio (l. 105), that he will just "follow until my cover gets here" accounts for this shifted contexture to another overhearing, institutional, audience.

Although there is no room to continue with a close working through of the full encounter, over the following turns — after JS continues to instruct ZA to have a seat a further six times, and ZA continues to refuse, JS again states he is detaining ZA to investigate trespass which finds ZA again stating that he lives there. ZA also introduces the category "student" at this point, another category from the locally assembled "legitimate presence" device. Following one more instruction to sit down, JS makes a projective account of the action saying "then you're probably gonna get ta:sed in a second." When ZA asks why, JS responds "Coz you have a weapon, put that down."

DISCUSSION

This article has aimed to describe local instances of the practices through which the "social arrangements" that Goffman (1983:17) outlined in his closing remarks are established, and contested, in interaction and, as such, how those "in power" can

come to give "official imprint to reality." In doing so, the article has considered the "reality" of a scene as a dynamically assembled, and shifting, gestalt contexture, demonstrating the relevancy and contributing to the development of critical prax-eological analysis (Diskin and Hutchinson 2024) and MCA at the points at which they intersect. The import of this orientation for the understanding of asymmetries in interaction is that whatever might be said of the organization of "powerful" cate-gories is a matter of the observable operational relevancy of these categories in and for the shifting contexture of a scene; in this case, an inquiry initiated by a police officer as to the legitimate presence of a black male student, picking up litter, at his place of residence.

As outlined in the opening of this article, the ways in which such categories as "teacher," "judge," "priest," "white," and, of course, "police officer" form asymmet-rical category-pairs remains a matter of situated relevancy and reflexive practical action. As the initial stages of the encounter demonstrated, the policeability of the scene was contested on the grounds of the applicability of the category "trespasser" against other competing categories in the local assembly of a "legitimate presence device," gathering "worker" and "resident." The encounter and, indeed, the poten-tial viewing of the scene as a "policeable" scene turned on "who we are" to one another in *this* context; with context glossing time of day, location, the viewable activ-ities of ZA, the construction of the area as having had 'things going on' and so on. The categorial "authority" of the "police officer" thus rests on, and is resisted through, the negotiated relevancy and applicability of those categories in relation to the avail-able features of the scene. This scene can thus be seen as what Hutchinson (2022) has described as a discordant contexture which is not "settled" in terms of the local struc-tures of "what is going on here." In this sense, it is the rights and practical resources to "settle" this contexture that form a primary, practical, asymmetry.

Following the contested categorial work around ZA as citizen/suspect and the efforts to delegitimate the relevancy of the category "police officer" in relation to the "policeable" scene, we also see JS engaged in assembling a second "layered" contex-ture of the scene over the radio. It is here that we see a settled contexture established for a distal audience in terms of the assembly of a contexture for the radio dispatcher and the incident log, and overhearing officers following the "code 12" calls. Con-sequently, the "nth" police officer arrives at a scene featuring a "subject failing to comply" holding a "blunt object" and, hearably, a "weapon." Fortunately, after those other officers arrived and things escalated to the point where guns were drawn, the situation was calmed and, finally, stood down as a policeable event. This instance is, of course, by no means an isolated incident and we would expectably find the same membership categorization practices underpinning the (attempted) production of this "policeable" scene in any number of others, with far worse consequence (see also the examples analyzed in Rawls and Duck 2020).

In aiming to describe the organization of ordinary action in relation to what might be called "power" in sociological terms, it is incumbent upon the analyst not to simply point to the presence of some available category but to show how it is *operationally*

relevant for the participants (Coulter 1996:343). Whether or not JS was "seeing" ZA via a racialized category as relevant for the doing of police work (of this sort) is undecidable but also, ultimately, irrelevant. We can well recognize that the ways racialized categorizations operate in encounters such as this and, indeed, in social life more generally, are routinely "designedly hidden" (Shrikant and Sambaraju 2023:10). One routine consequence of this is to see the police officer — and, indeed, the airline workers policing the first-class queue — as "just doing their job." At the same time, we can avoid setting out from a position that feigns ignorance in seeing what members can see — as demonstrated in the comment sections of videos, news media reports and other subsequent treatments of the case — just because the resources for doing so are not available in a transcript (Sacks 1995 [I]:83). This article has aimed to demonstrate how the inference of the relevancy of the racial categorization was available in spite of an absence of its explicit statement. Besides, we can find ample material for seeing what it is that members-as-audience do with what we might call "latent" categories in a scene and a members' analysis of "possible racism" (Whitehead 2020). None of this is to offer a way to take time out from technical analysis (Schegloff 1995[I]:xxiii) but, instead, to demand it in describing all too common instances of situations such as this, marked by an asymmetrically distributed potential to "give official imprint to reality."

The possibility of seeing the encounter as "racially motivated" is itself a praxeological accomplishment, produced in relation and as a constituent member of the scene. What seems to be in play is a procedure of "recognising what someone is doing" which provides for the *absence* of an explicitly stated category which can, nonetheless, be understood to be operational in the officer's inquiry. Following Sacks (1995 [I]:803), the matter turns on the question of

> what methods they use so as to provide the relevance and propriety of the category collection which contains the categories they employ. Only when such methods have been described can the sociologist other-than-trivially assert that some person X is "white" or "male" or "middle class" where, when he does so, he intendedly conveys some information relevant to his analysis.

A members' recognition of the possibly "racially motivated" grounds for the inquiry might thus be grounded in an analysis of that first account of "sitting on the patio there." Members can, in Sacks' (1995 [I]:89) words, "decompose some event, situation, complex, whatever you want to call it" and "having taken something apart … put it back together again so as to find what it is that's strange." He goes on to say that the "way they do this involves treating something that they see as a combination of parts, some of which have names. And to those nameable parts are affiliated standardised procedures for producing those objects in some combination." This is a procedure used by the officer in the first instance in accounting for the noticing he "couldn't help" but see. It is also the procedure used by members to see that noticing was one of racial categorization without it being stated. Such procedures for "producing the objects in some combination" is the work of the

accomplishment of a gestalt contexture. And in this way, the reasonableness of the category-relevant inquiry, that follows a noticing of "someone" "sitting on a patio" can be pursued through the procedure of inserting a category in finding the occasion as orderly — and a category that turns out to be available is one of race. In the context of the discussion of asymmetries-in-action, attending to just how categories become relevant in the course of an action, and how they are available as such, provides for a treatment of descriptive possibilities in the scene and, indeed, practices in and through which discordant contextures of "versions of reality" are produced, negotiated, and managed in situ. If, as Goffman (1983) suggested, the warrant for descriptive work that characterizes interactionist sociology is to be addressed to social need, then attending to the praxeological grounds of the production of "versions of reality," and the sequential-categorial organization of the "social arrangements" that are the stock and trade of formal sociology, is one way in which that project might be realized. What we find, then, is not so much the asymmetrical treatment of others by those in power but, rather, the autochthonous production of the relevancy of those categories (white, black; rich, poor; male, female, and so on) in the first instance. The significance is that such an approach might realize that project without recourse to theories or framings of studies which do not set out with or, worse, straightforwardly replicate the divisions and inequalities that are known to exist in society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. See Anderson (2022) for a range of further examples.
2. Source: https://assets.bouldercounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/radio-protocols.pdf (accessed October 11, 2024).
3. "Tase" refers the use of a TASER, an electric weapon carried by many police forces in the USA, UK, and elsewhere.

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