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The (Re)Production, Negotiation, and Navigation of Social Asymmetries-in-Action:

An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This article reconsiders, and argues for, the contribution of ethnomethodological and conversation analytic research (EM/CA) to the understanding of social asymmetries-in-action. As well as highlighting the significance of the approach in describing the interactional ‘machinery’ of supposedly “Big” social issues such as injustice, exclusion, and discrimination, it also considers some of the tensions that have been discussed by key scholars in the field. We discuss how EM/CA provides an ‘alternate’ approach to the understanding of social inequality and argue against assessing the contribution of EM/CA within dominant dualism of formal social science (for example, between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ or ‘structure’ and ‘agency’). We return to some classic and foundational works in the corpus of EM/CA studies as well as more contemporary studies which have, in different ways, informed the articles of the special issue that this article introduces. In sum, the article roughly maps the terrain from which this special issue emerged and aims to advance EM/CA research relating to social issues (e.g., ableism, racism) as they are produced, negotiated, and made accountable in situ.

Keywords: ethnomethodology; critical conversation analysis; membership categorisation analysis; asymmetries; social order; social justice; status degradation; developmental scheme; moral order; blame; accountability.

Introduction

This special issue is concerned with the description and explication of asymmetries-in-action. For readers unfamiliar with the significance of the hyphens in ethnomethodology and conversation analytic research (EM/CA), they signal more than a stylistic practice. The hyphens in our title indicate an attention to how ‘asymmetries’ are observably produced and displayed in and through members’ courses of action whilst, reflexively, shaping the contours of the course of the situation at hand. As the articles gathered in this issue demonstrate, asymmetries can take many forms and it is not our intent here, nor of the authors of the articles, to define what an asymmetry is or is not, or can and cannot be. Certainly, they do not recourse to theoretical stipulations about power and other supposedly ‘macro’ phenomena. What we are concerned with is members’ orientations and membership practices which produce and recognise forms

of unevenness in the course of a setting's activity. We do not discuss or describe asymmetries as has been described in related studies of disabilities (e.g. Due and Rasmussen 2025) but have, instead, invited papers which attend to the (re)production of asymmetries observable in interaction and situated conduct. Such asymmetries are witnessable in actions that claim/display uneven 'rights' to shape the course and outcome of the interaction by, inter alia, 'controlling' the floor in terms of turn-taking, demanding next actions of others and being in a position to sanction them if they are not forthcoming, or categorising self/others in situ and associated practices which provide for where, when, how and by whom can it be said that a person is, after all, really an 'X.' In this framing, we acknowledge that we are adopting an 'ethnomethodologically-informed' position which glosses over some of the serious differences and tensions between EM and CA. Our use of the slash between EM and CA minimally recognises this (for further discussion, see Carlin et al 2025). The various articles gathered in this issue, including our own, adopt and demonstrate different analytic foci and sensibilities within this broad framing.

There are, of course, particular ways of talking about the accomplishment of 'critical' matters within EM/CA. Hutchby (1999: 89) suggested a closer engagement with the sociological agenda, suggesting that, "...the term asymmetry is used to cover far too wide a range of phenomena." Taking the example of doctor-patient interaction (Drew and Heritage 1992), Hutchby (1999: 89) argued that in asking more questions than patients,

...doctors thereby possess control over the agenda for the consultation. The question is whether this, and other features such as "access to conversational resources, and to participation in interaction," can properly be called merely asymmetries. Surely it is more appropriate to describe them as differentials in social power.

Our concern here is to demonstrate that it is possible to examine asymmetries-in-action without adopting the constructive aspects of the sociological agenda. We can differentiate our view on the matter from Hutchby's by highlighting two key terms in his argument. The first is "possess" – the suggestion that doctors "possess control" over the agenda of a consultation is, we suggest, to overlook how 'the agenda' is itself a local product of its participants' actions. Yes, doctor-patient interactions display a relatively stable patterning or 'form' (in a Simmelian sense) – as do others such as police-suspect, teacher-pupil, and so on – but that they do is not a matter of one party "possessing" the power to control the flow of interaction-in-course. Indeed, we might see that 'doing asking questions' is a predicate of the category 'doctor' and, in that sense, forms a practice through which the relevancy of that category is occasioned and achieved, moment-by-moment. We are not at all suggesting that Hutchby might not be aware of the 'radical local' character of category-relevancy, but words do matter and can lead to the constructive analyses criticised by ethnomethodologists. "Access to conversational resources" is also potentially problematic. Whatever the "resources" of conversation might be – turn-taking, repair, categorisation – they are resources always and unavoidably accomplished-in-use. We stress this point because "access" suggests that the resources are pre-formed, somewhere, and 'drawn upon' or 'used' in each setting.

Following Hester and Eglin's (1997:20) remarks on culture-in-action, we argue that the asymmetries described in this special issue are not matters of "possession" or "access" but, rather, that:

Members [do not] use culture to do things... culture is constituted in, and only exists in, action. For membership categorisation analysis, this means that the orderliness of cultural resources ... is constituted in their use rather than pre-existing as a machinery for whatever uses members might want to put them to.

That asymmetries are recognisable to members – as both lay and professional sociologists – is a constitutive order question; that is, "how is the action commonsensically identified as whatever it is in the first place? In order for the moral-regulative 'machinery' to be applied to a given action (or set of collective actions), the action has to be understandable to parties in the first place" (Watson 2009:478). Quite before one can criticise, complain about, intervene in, (and so on), the analytic task is to demonstrate how the given object becomes a thing in and of the world in the first instance, there and then. Observable asymmetries – and, indeed, 'power,' 'exclusion,' 'discrimination,' and so on – are closely tied to the accomplishment, display, and orientation to category-relevancies of, for, and in, those courses of action.

In these senses, among others, there is good reason for EM/CA adopting what can read as an overly technical, agnostic, use of language when discussing such matters. 'Power' is a word found in common use in society and recurrently in sociology as an unavoidable "*folk discipline*" (Zimmerman and Pollner 1974:82). In professional sociology, however, use of the word 'power' is seldom accompanied by a specification of the lived detail of its actual manifestation, accomplishment, and operation in actual social settings; lived detail that the articles gathered here aim to offer. A particular trouble with the gloss of 'power relations' is the temptation to construct a stable sense of relational categories (of the 'powerful,' of the 'excluded,' and so on) quite ahead of any examination of their production and recognition in a given setting or specific situation. In the sociological literature, we recurrently find assertions that X category of person, has power over Y, in Z setting.

In classrooms, for example, it seems reasonable to assume that the teacher holds the power by setting the agenda, asking questions and distributing tasks, and that the classroom maybe 'gendered' by, for example, boys talking more and/or getting more attention than girls. A detailed inspection of classroom interaction, however, presents a far more dynamic, prismatic, practically-achieved categorial-sequential landscape through which the relevancies of 'teacher' and 'pupil' (among others) are accomplished and displayed (e.g. Stokoe 1998; Jimenez and Smith 2021; and in this issue, Gan Tam and Jadamba 2025). The order of a classroom – or a courtroom, or any other setting where a sociologist might find 'power' enacted – is the exhibited order of the local achievements of its participants. As observed by Watson (2025:395), for example, in considering the disproportionality of police violence against persons of colour and the use of video evidence in court "when an officer testifies that a person of colour was perceived as a threat by an armed, trained, and well-equipped officer, the court is very receptive to that

evidence...” There is, then, an asymmetry to the warrantability of a description or account in specific situations. Watson’s point is that the focus for ethnomethodology remains the congregational accomplishment of order; for better or worse. Asymmetrical order is part and parcel of a *setting’s* order, an order produced moment-by-moment by its members (see Smith (2025), this issue, as an example). The way in which things come off as orderly is the foundation of any observable ‘structure’ which, commensurately, refers to the endogenous, congregational achievement of orderliness and its social facts. On the question of the seemingly obdurate character of the asymmetries described in this issue as a ‘fact’ of society, Liberman (2019:104) reminds us that:

Each time the social fact appears in a setting, it appears as part of an always still-developing ethnomethod that is exercised as if it was first-time through, even for the hundredth time. We might as well call an endless practice like this “structure” since it is the only structure there is.

“Critical” EM/CA?

The study of critical social issues and forms of discrimination by EM/CA scholars has seen significant growth in recent years (Stokoe and Albert 2024; Rawls 2024). Yet, despite there being a history and growing corpus of EM/CA studies of asymmetries-in-action, misconceptions about the contributions of such studies persist, and debates, rightfully, continue within the field (Icbay 2025). From without, the question seems to turn on whether such a ‘micro’ approach can meaningfully deal with such a supposedly ‘macro’ matter as power or inequality. From within, there are well-placed, serious, concerns with how EM/CA studies might proceed to study ‘critical’ issues without incorporating the kinds of sociological assumptions briefly outlined above in a constructive analysis (Button et al 2022). We do not intend to spend so much space dealing with the (old and misplaced) critique that EM/CA provides only a detailed analysis of ‘micro’ aspects of society and is, as such, unable to tackle ‘big’ sociological questions of power, racism, and so on; this view being thoroughly rebutted (Carlin et al. 2025: 291; and see, e.g., Schegloff 1987, 1997; Sharrock and Button 2016; Watson and Sharrock 1988). Suffice to say that it is “absurd” (Rawls, 2002: 63) to consign the sorts of research gathered in this issue to the ‘micro’ side of a distinction produced by the insistence on a dualism – along with ‘scientific’ versus ‘common sense’ reasoning, ‘mind’ versus ‘body’, ‘structure’ versus ‘agency’ and so on – that EM/CA (and, indeed, some versions of Interactionism (Atkinson and Housley 2003) does not recognise. As noted by Carlin et al (2025:xxiii), ethnomethodological indifference (Garfinkel and Weider 1992:186-187) – another oft misunderstood study policy – refers to an indifference “to the terms, or logical entailments, set by these dualisms.” This is not to say that EM/CA does not recognise ‘macro’ phenomena or social ‘structure’ but, rather, that the recognition stays with how *members’* themselves invoke such formulations in their ‘laic’ (and, indeed, professional) sociology (Watson, 2008). This can and does include matters of inequality, differentiation, exclusion, and so on. EM/CA remains focused on the things people actually do to one another in actual settings because if one is serious about the ‘workings of power’ in society, where else would one look? And there is certainly a good deal to be found. As neatly summarised by Richard Fitzgerald (2015:9):

From a traditional social science direction [E]MCA is seen as not being able to deal with wider social science concerns such as class, race, and gender. For [E]MCA, however, these issues are approached as locally accomplished and the focus is on how such issues are made visible and oriented to *by the participants within particular instances or events*. This in situ approach has highlighted, for example, how race is locally oriented to within a normative framework, the locally achieved morality work of gender, and the way social categorizations shape the forms of questions and responses within the mediated public sphere.

Indeed, a series of recent publications have demonstrated, for another first time, the utility of EM/CA in examining what might be called ‘critical’ social issues and various ‘isms’ (see Waring and Tadic 2024). It has also been argued that whilst the field was born from an ‘unmotivated’ interest in the *how* of the possibility of social order, issues of social justice were present in the early publications of Harold Garfinkel and, at least, some of the early lectures of Harvey Sacks. Direct examples of an attention to what we might call the ‘unevenness’ of the by-products of members’ situated practices are exemplified by, but certainly not restricted to, the early works of Garfinkel on criminal statistics, and the Red as an ideal object, Sacks on ‘problematic’ categories and their categorisation practices, and, together, their proposed research on ‘developmental schemes’ (Garfinkel et al. 1982). The significance, we want to stress, is not that Garfinkel and Sacks were pursuing a ‘critical research agenda’ but, rather, that they were pursuing studies of members’ practices of *any possible* kind. Viewed ethnomethodologically, settings in which asymmetries might be observed, are no more *and no less* important than the practices observed in a formatted queue. The focus remains on the ‘vulgar work of the streets’ which provides for the possibility and accountability of social order in all its forms and abundant availability (Garfinkel and Sacks 1974).

There is more to be said about these issues and what a ‘critical EM/CA’ might look like, and, indeed, whether there is a need for such a label. In the meantime, the suitability and usefulness of EM/CA for studying asymmetries-in-action across diverse settings continues to be explored, tested, and evidenced. Consequently, to continue to question the utility of EM/CA for studying critical social issues, is to ignore evidence to the contrary (see for example Whitehead and Stokoe 2015) while assuming and reinforcing the idea that these issues are not routinely present in the mundane everyday interactions of members doing sociality. Put another way, members’ accomplishments of everyday tasks are not somehow different or separate from social injustices. Social injustices and ‘isms’ are not artifacts on a shelf, nor are they produced by ‘hidden’ forces to be revealed by the sociologist. People experiencing or subject to inequality know very well what is happening to them. One does not, after all, need sociology to see that racism exists (see Williamson 2024b). The recourse of formal sociology to view social inequality and injustice through false binaries, often articulated as big/macro versus small/micro issues (Rawls 2024), obscure the hidden in plain sight accomplishments of asymmetrical social orders and the practical ways in which some people can come to do things to others. Questions of social justice are, then, part and parcel of describing “order at all points” (Sacks 1984:22) whether that order constitutes enactments of

“isms”, inequities or not. When racism, for example, is treated as a concept or typification then the data driven analyst avoiding *a priori* assumptions is in a bind. In the spirit of EMCA, the analyst with an orientation towards sequential actions and categorisational practices, is well positioned to analyse actions establishing asymmetrical social order as it is produced, moment-by-moment. To put things another way, the instruction to “unmotivated looking” does not necessarily preclude the description of practices of inequality and asymmetry. There is a distinction to be made between the selection of materials for study (they do not, after all, ever simply fall into our laps or on to our desks) and the manner in which they are analysed. For EM/CA the challenge remains in producing inspectable and warrantable analyses from available materials and avoiding the ‘frontloading’ (Diskin and Hutchinson 2024:526) of any analysis with ‘critical’ concerns that themselves produce particular formulations of social order(s); in short, to continue to “let the materials fall where they may.” Yet, despite the importance of recognising challenges and difficulties, we might ask why EM/CA analysts would *not* attend to matters such as discrimination and inequality as practically-achieved phenomena of everyday life?

Respecifying ‘isms’

In developing this special issue, we found the respecification of socialisation to be a useful blueprint for respecifying ‘isms’ as forms of asymmetries-in-action produced through the varieties of sequential-categorical practices gathered here. The “classical formulation of socialisation” (Speier 1976:98) confounds topic and resource, using socialisation as a gloss that presents folklore as scientific findings, where adults’ views on children’s ways are taken-for-granted rather than examined in terms of the structures of their production (Mackay 1975; Zimmerman & Pollner 1970). With socialisation being a member’s term – like many others of sociology and psychology, as natural language disciplines – orientations to it should be studied because:

When adult-child interaction is formulated as the process of socialisation, children as a phenomenon disappear and sociologists reveal themselves as parents writing slightly abstract versions of their own and other children (Mackay 1975:181).

When studying isms and social injustices, we cannot afford for the phenomena to disappear into abstraction by reducing them to conceptual glosses. So, we argue that drawing lines between matters of social justice and everyday social order, is to confound topic and resource, glossing over the actual practices that constitute discriminatory acts and acts of injustice, and thus adopting the normative study of critical social issues as topic when we should be exploring members’ resources for their production/recognition/resistance. Afterall, “Learning to see *differently* sociologically means learning to see social orders in their details as they are achieved in real time by persons through the enactment of those details, instead of through conceptual glosses on those details after the fact” (Rawls, on Garfinkel 2006:6) and we must take note of asymmetrical social orders in action, just as we do sequential order of the actions.

Across this collection of papers, the authors explore means of avoiding *glossing over the actual practices* that generate unequal outcomes (Rawls 2024) by focusing on the interactional accomplishments of asymmetries in social order as and when they occur. This is why the papers in this issue describe various asymmetries-in-

action, including those observable in entitlement, competence, vulnerability, ownership etc, some of which may be categorizable as enactments of isms by participants and/or viewers. It may be better to write of “a/symmetries” because participant actions in sequence can shift the contours of a particular situation from asymmetrically-ordered in one moment to being symmetrical in another and back again. *That* is the purchase of a moment-by-moment analysis which avoids an *a priori* formulation of where, when, how, and for whom inequality might be produced. As the papers in this special issue demonstrate, asymmetries of social order are everyday momentary interactional affairs rather than exceptions. Of particular importance, is how prior EM/CA findings on actions such as assessments, prove to be essential analytic ‘keys’ for analysing asymmetries-in-action which shapes the EM/CA project as well as broadly contributing to critical studies. For example, multiple papers in this issue analyse complaints in the form of why-prefaced questions and the asymmetries these invoke by drawing on work by Drew (1998), Bolden and Robinson (2011) and Koshik (2003). Others analyse the ways in which categorisation practices are consequential for “making trouble” for parties to a given scene. Consequently, we hope the debate on EM/CAs usefulness for critical studies can be put to rest by avoiding an analytic gloss that falsely partitions isms and other asymmetrical orders from everyday actions, when they are an unfortunately and unavoidably pervasive means of accomplishing sociality and, as such, a part of everyday life. While not enough work may have been done on asymmetries-in-action, we wish to shift the conversation away from methodological ‘utility’ to exploring analytic possibilities that would aid in the production of more overtly critical work born from the existing and growing body of knowledge produced in EM/CA that demonstrates how sociality gets done, for better or worse. To explore these possibilities, we returned to some of the foundational work in EM/CA, particularly Garfinkel’s exploration of schemes and Sacks work on categorisation.

Foundational Works

In an early work, Garfinkel (1956) proposed that members establish asymmetrical “schemes” of local social types. Drawing from and developing a critical ‘misreading’ of Schutz’s treatment of types, Garfinkel suggested that the “local scheme of types” is a resource for, and is made particularly visible in, what he called the “status degradation ceremony”. This ceremony is a means by which an individual can, through public moral indignation, be degraded by another. The denouncer produces another as a social object within a scheme of social types in which the denounced is recognisably relegated to the lower type in the eyes of a local ‘moral community’. Such ceremonies publicly relocate an individual to a lower social type within the overall organisational schema (Garfinkel 1956). Indeed, in an earlier study, Garfinkel (1949) observed asymmetrical ‘schemata’ in operation in the accountably differentiated treatment of criminal justice cases by racial category. In a remarkable work of criminal statistics coupled with observation of court proceedings, Garfinkel (1949) demonstrated how ‘justice’ was configured in and through dominant understandings of legitimacy and morality and so on, which found the outcomes of the cases embedded in initial framings of culpability and motive. This work was closely related to his writings on the conditions of successful degradation ceremonies, and both were largely conceptual. However, many papers in this issue explore how status degradation can be actioned and resisted in situ

(see the papers of Henderson and Tennent; Tam and Rafaely; Richardson, Heini, Jenkins and Stokoe). Garfinkel, however, was not interested in the existence of schemata but in the way in which it could be achieved:

“...the critical question is not whether status degradation occurs or can occur within any given society. Instead, the question is: Starting from any state of a society's organization, what program of communicative tactics will get the work of status degradation done?” (1956:420-421)

Moving away from the notion that members ‘used’ schema and typifications in social situations, he aimed to describe how they were observably and accountably accomplished (vom Lehn 2016). For example, Garfinkel, Sacks, Livingston, and Girtton (1982), proposed a potential asymmetrical scheme: “the developmental scheme”. In a research proposal, Garfinkel et al (1982) aimed to explore how *a priori* assumptions of children as *developing* and adults as *developed* operated as a common-sense view of childhood. The approach was radical in the sense that instead of observing children’s behaviour through a scheme that positioned them as ‘proto-adults’, the observed actions were to be addressed in their own right; as observable-reportable instances of ‘kids’ cultures’. They argued that analysts should study members’ orientations to such a scheme along with members’ methods for managing their social positions (Keel 2020); something that papers in this special issue also aim to achieve (particularly those by Rafaely; Gan, Tam and Jadamba; Tam and Rafaely). Significantly, Garfinkel et al. (1982) attribute the ideas of a ‘kids’ culture’ to Harvey Sacks, in fact, schema are observably at play in the early lectures of Sacks.

In a well-known but perhaps underutilised lecture, Sacks (1995[1]) details what he calls the ‘membership inference-rich representational (MIR) device”. This device is used by members to make sense of and orient their subsequent addresses to individuals which are treated as representative of a given category. This can be found in operation in everyday practices such as formulating next questions when meeting someone for the first time as well as how individual actions can be taken as representative of the potential actions of members of an entire group. Sacks (1995[1]: 42), for example, considers how the question of “who shot JFK?” was a *categorical* question, and when asked by members of ‘minority’ groups in the period that followed, was asked in the sense of “was it one of us?”, which is also to ask “will we have to pay for it?” A more recent example is, of course, the ‘War on Terror’ that followed the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. The ‘routine procedure’ was followed whereby the names of the attackers were removed, and largely forgotten, and a category inserted in their place. Thereby, an entire population came to be viewed as responsible for 9/11 and the legitimatable target of any response. The significance is that the *categorisation* of the doer of a (negative) action can be used to modify what is known about the category. The practices of relating actions to doers, categorially, can provide for a ‘teaching’ of what it is that representative members of that category can, and *do* do. At the end of the lecture, Sacks (1995[1]: 48) muses that “two-class sets” of categories – black/white, rich/poor, adult/child, man/woman – might be a “basic mechanism of social control”. Sacks’ observations and methodological approach, combined with Garfinkel’s notion of local schemes, suggest the possibility of

describing at least one mundanely powerful and powerfully mundane device for the (re)production of interactional asymmetries in providing for “who we are, what we are doing, and what we are doing next”.

Developments in EM and CA research have advanced those foundations in various ways, some of which have lost a connection to the overriding concern with the possibility of social organisation and observable-reportable phenomena of order as a situated local achievement of its ‘staff’ (Garfinkel, 2002). We do not spend time on those various debates in this issue, but, rather, each paper works with recent developments in EM and CA to reconnect with that early work of Garfinkel and Sacks, concerned as it was, in different ways, with matters of social justice and social control. This work is, we suggest, very much worth returning to, particularly in combination with more recent work such as advancements in membership categorisation analysis (e.g. Shrikant 2022), Stevanovic and Peräkylä’s (2014) proposal to explore three social orders – deontic, epistemic and affective – and aligned approaches such as that of Diskin and Hutchinson (2024) which draws on natural language philosophy and ethnomethodology in developing “critical praxeological analysis” or Williamson’s (2024a) development of an analytic approach to “humanising and dehumanising psychological dynamics” born of the resonances and tensions between ethnomethodology and theorisations of black methodologies.

Collection

In this special issue, scholars from across the globe (New Zealand, South Africa, China, and the United Kingdom) demonstrate analytic possibilities of EM/CA approaches to studying asymmetrical social order and, at times, matters of social in/justice. We present six papers that engage with different interactional practices across diverse settings to elucidate ways in which asymmetries can be (re)established, negotiated, navigated and, importantly, resisted or claimed by members from one moment to the next. While being grounded in data internal evidence, the authors take up a range of questions relating to the practical (re)production of categorial asymmetries and situated schema in describing the “communicative tactics” that do the work of categorisation, asymmetrical rights and status degradation. The papers examine asymmetries-in-action in data from a variety of contexts including online music lessons (Gan, Tam and Jadamba), radio talk shows (Rafaely), government hearings (Henderson and Tennent), viral videos (Tam and Rafaely), police-citizen encounters via body camera footage (Smith), and police interviews (Richardson, Heini, Jenkins and Stokoe).

During police investigative interviews in England and Wales, suspects and witnesses can be categorised as being vulnerable which entitles them to additional legal protections aimed at protecting their wellbeing while preserving evidence. This legal categorisation is usually treated as a stable and internal phenomenon, but Richardson, Heini, Jenkins and Stokoe demonstrate how it can be an interactional resource for establishing accountability. Within interactions between police interviewers and suspects/witnesses, the participants refer to, assert and negotiate vulnerable categories as a means of accounting for the behaviour of the vulnerable suspect/witness. One such category is that of ‘disabled’, with an example of a witness claiming this “less-than” category to account for their own behaviour as reasonable during a criminal incident. Another vulnerable category is that of ‘child’ and the authors identify how an officer works to invoke the vulnerable incompetent child category of a suspect in contrast to the invulnerable competent adult category thus reducing the child’s

culpability. Rafaely also explores matters relating to vulnerability, culpability and blame but does so within the context of asymmetrical entitlement to experience in radio talk about incidents of child death in South Africa.

When describing events from the news, there is an expectation of neutrality in the reporting of facts (Clayman 1988). However, when the newsworthy event is a child death, Rafaely demonstrates how speakers on a radio talk show (including presenters and invited speakers) display a moral stance toward such news. To manage the moral accountability of talk about child death, speakers go beyond describing an event offering assessments of it. Rafaely returns to Sacks' (1984, 1992) work on membership categories, and entitlement to experience as a moral domain, as well as Garfinkel et al.'s (1982) notion of the developmental scheme in analysing the delicate moral work of assessing a child's death without claiming disproportionate entitlement to experience in doing so. Categories are routinely used in establishing children "as a special and vulnerable class of person" distinct from adults, marking child deaths as distinct violations of moral order and in establishing asymmetrical entitlement to (mostly emotional) experience when assessing such an event. A speaker can claim entitlement to the experience (as a community member, witnessing reporter, stranger etc.) while working to position themselves as less entitled than those with primary entitlement to the experience of the child's death, the parents and immediate family. In some cases, once entitlement to experience has been established, the assessments include implicit or explicit attributions of blame and culpability towards perpetrators and in a deviant case a parent's culpability is in question. Gan, Tam and Jadamba also explore orientations to the developmental scheme but do so in relation to claimed asymmetrical deontic rights during online music lessons.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, two key socialising institutions (education and family) converged with teachers and students connecting online from their homes. In such online music lessons Gan et al. explore participant orientations to the developmental scheme through asymmetrical deontic claims to influence the course of the learning project. Co-present omnirelevant categories across familial and pedagogical projects are artfully reproduced when a great aunt initiates and self-authorizes a pedagogical activity becoming a teacher and her grandnieces and nephews as responding students defer to her authority over the activity, by for example, asking for her permission to influence the trajectory of it. The age-old ideological tension between the need for adults to guide children in their development and the pedagogical imperative to centre students rather than teachers in educational settings, is shown to also be an interactional tension. To encourage student involvement in the learning activity, the teacher utilises resources, including puppets, to balance acts of influence with those of affection to create interactional space for students to participate. In another exploration of asymmetrical deontic, epistemic and affective rights in interaction, Tam and Rafaely explore an attempted but resisted status degradation ceremony.

In a single case analysis, Tam and Rafaely examine a viral video of a white student urinating in the dorm room and on the belongings of a black student at a South African university. Rather than assuming the relevance of the student's racial categories in labelling the incident as racist, leaving space for the counter argument that the white student's actions were fuelled by intoxication rather than racism, they examine members orientations to race and whether actions were produced by members and for members as racist. To do this,

they examine how the students' actions establish momentary relationships as a part of an attempted but resisted status degradation ceremony. The actions of the white student position the black student within a racialised asymmetrical developmental scheme and the black student resists this degradation by filming the interaction to make it public and by responding in a manner that establishes a symmetrical relationship of brotherhood. Unlike the asymmetrical scheme used for degradation, the symmetrical scheme in which both students have equal deontic, epistemic and affective rights, is used to resist degradation. Sequential analysis indicates how the white student's actions changed on seeing that he was being recorded. In private, he treated his own actions as acceptable within an apartheid style moral community, but in public he abandons his attempts at degradation that he would have to account for in a post-apartheid moral community. Importantly Tam and Rafaely show that moral "communities can and do come into being through shared orientations to past and present sociopolitical structures and can furnish the basis of intelligible and (a)moral actions in private and public settings." Within a different context of a public government committee meeting in New Zealand, Henderson and Tennent also explore an attempted status degradation ceremony and means of resisting degradation.

Garfinkel speculated that a process of degradation, is a process of making the denounced "strange" through the ritual placement of the denounced outside of an expected order. In Garfinkel's 1967 analysis of Agnes, gender is explained as an expected order or taken-for-granted "natural attitude" towards a binary scheme. This attitude towards gender as dichotomous is accompanied by expectations of compliance and pathologizing of deviations from the binary scheme. Henderson and Tennent draw on these ideas in examining transmisogyny as an act of denying category membership and the making of transwomen as strange. In an online meeting in which a spokesperson for a women's group provides an oral submission to a government committee, transwomen are placed outside of the natural order by 'un-gendering' with the making of sex, rather than gender, the relevant membership category device. They also show how a government minister treats these actions as problematic and challenges them setting the spokesperson apart from those witnessing the submission. Importantly they demonstrate how context matters for category generation and recognition, where "even innocuous-seeming category usage" can accomplish "isms". Smith also describes categorisation practices that treat someone as being strange or "out of place" in his examination of the production and resistance of a scene as "policeable".

An incident in the US between a police officer and a black student that did not include explicit reference to racial categories was treated by the public as racially motivated while an official inquiry ruled that there was no proof of racial bias. The release of the body camera footage on YouTube provided an opportunity for Smith to explore "how the lack of an explicit statement of a racial category can be treated as visible in its absence". Utilising MCA and critical praxeological analysis, Smith describes practices through which a "legitimate presence device" is assembled by the black, student, resident, in contrast to the police officer's efforts to produce a 'policeable contexture' via the invocation of categories of (potential) deviance such as "trespasser" and "resisting arrest." Within the "policing contexture" the police officer as an institutional authority gives "official imprint to versions of reality" (Goffman 1983:17). The student, however, resists being categorized as

being “out of place”, a suspect, or as holding a blunt object thus rejecting the officer’s persistent attempts to “define the situation”. The paper is a clear example of why analysts need to avoid assumptions of asymmetrical category pairs and to pay analytic attention to asymmetries-in-action.

Conclusion

We have briefly presented some of the foundations, orientations, and tensions in EM/CA studies of matters of social justice and discrimination and introduced a broad framework for the contribution of EM/CA studies of asymmetries-in-action. In this special issue, six papers explore the interactional ‘machinery’ of social issues and “isms” by examining how a/symmetries are produced, negotiated and made accountable in action. All the papers variously engage with membership categorisation practices, in relation to their sequential environment, to demonstrate that parties to a scene do not necessarily “possess” the power to shape the interaction or exhibit differential “access” to conversational resources but, instead, draw out the members’ methods through which asymmetries-in-action are accomplished. In examining asymmetries-in-action, analysts revealed how members can, not only establish asymmetries through interactional practices, but how they can resist or even claim them. Just as asymmetries are established from one moment to the next through members actions, resistance is also accomplished through situated action, which in some cases involves the (re)establishment of contrary symmetrical orders. Furthermore, one cannot assume asymmetries will be treated as problematic with symmetry being a default ‘good’, as seen in the case of members claiming asymmetrical entitlements or vulnerabilities. In grounding analysis in data-internal evidence and examining actions in and as sequential and categorial praxeological order, we intend this special issue to demonstrate the interactional grounds of some of the “Big” topics in disciplinary sociology and, indeed, the ethnomethods, practices, and actions through which a/symmetries are produced and impact people in the course of their lives. Our aim is that the studies gathered here further evidence the relevance and significance of the contribution of EM/CA as an analytic sensibility and orientation as well as encouraging other researchers in the field to address some of the ‘Big’ issues from the very grounds of their lived detail.

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