

Respecifying Stigma and the Language of Relationships: Attributes and Categories as Contexturally-Achieved Phenomena in the Search for Help

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This article revisits Goffman's original formulations of stigma. In doing so, the discussion focuses, specifically, upon his emphasis that a "language of relationships, not attributes is needed." The analysis is intended to demonstrate how Goffman's observations offer a starting point for an inquiry in to just how members produce and orient to "spoiled identities" in specific courses of action. While much recent work has sought to "move beyond" or "resituate" Goffman's observations by invoking structure and dualisms of micro and macro, such moves miss or obscure the practical actions that, in the first instance, provide the interactional grounds of what comes to be called "stigma." The article makes this argument in two ways: first, it demonstrates that Goffman's call for a "language of relationships" can be radically respecified by treating it as members' language; second, it shows how "stigmatizing conditions" are produced and oriented to through categorization practices in naturally-occurring interaction and self-organizing settings. The argument is made via a re-analysis of Harvey Sacks' (1967) corpus of calls to a suicide prevention center. In attending to actual practices involved in potentially stigmatizing contextures, an alternative approach to understanding stigma as a contextured phenomenon—occasioned, contingent, and achieved through members' practices—is proposed, offering new directions for a praxeological interactionism and studies of moral order.

Keywords: stigma, suicide, gestalt contexture, interaction, Membership Categorization Analysis

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Symbolic Interaction, (2026), p. n/a, ISSN: 0195-6086 print/1533-8665 online.

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INTRODUCTION

This article revisits Goffman's original formulations of stigma to highlight and develop key significances that have been missed or misunderstood in the development of the sociology of stigma. In what follows, the analysis attends to *just what* people do to produce and negotiate “stigmatisable” activities and conditions in calls to a suicide prevention center hotline (Sacks 1967, 1972). The article argues, and aims to demonstrate, that Goffman was correct in principle—in locating the production of stigma in social settings and categories—but wrong in detail, by not fully specifying the practical work through which this is accomplished in any actual case. In providing some access to the routinely overlooked praxeological foundations of “stigma,” the centrality of contextually conditioned categorization *practices* for specifying Goffman's (1963:10–11) insistence that for describing stigma “a language of relationships, not attributes is needed” is shown. The article aims to demonstrate *just how* stigma becomes a “thing in the world,” generated in and as the contexture of a given setting in which it is orientated to by that setting's members. In other words, it demonstrates the significance of taking seriously the “language of relationships” as a language of members and as lay sociologists of their situation. In focusing on the detail of ordinary language practices, an alternate sociology of stigma is proposed. One that adequately describes the contextually cohered structures of production which provide for the relevance of “attributes,” stigmatisable conditions, and social categories in the first instance. In other words, the article offers a radically alternate response to a troublesome question: namely, “where does stigma come from?”

Goffman (1963:10–11) recognizes that “Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” and that “Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there” but does not develop an adequate description of just how such phenomena are achieved in any actual case. In working out what the work of “establishing” might be, this article contributes to an ethnomethodological and critical praxeological approach to stigma (e.g., Hutchinson 2022; Manzo 2004). It approaches stigma as a conceptual gloss for a range of situated practices, some of which are described herein. More specifically, the analysis focuses on membership categorization practices (Watson 2015; Smith 2025a; Fitzgerald et al. 2026) as a central part of the occasioned interactional “machinery” with which “stigma” is built. This approach views social categories, their predicates and their organization into “collections,” not as obdurate features of societal structure but, rather, as always occasioned and accomplished-in-use. This includes notions of “macro phenomena.” As such “who someone is” is not a matter of identity, nor of fixed attributes, but is approached as a contextured production, through and through. In taking membership categorization *practices* seriously, then, the article moves “beyond” Goffman not by looking toward social structure or to historical processes, as if

they exist outside of the situation, but through a closer examination of the “incourse-ness” of actual settings in which “stigma” is produced and oriented to.

The re-analysis of the suicide prevention center calls explicates membership concerns with potential “stigma” associated with making the call to the hotline and, commensurately, with managing the potentially “spoiled identity” of someone who might need professional help. Several excerpts are analyzed which show the work of (a) talking inferentially about problematic information, (b) the potential categorization of parties to call on a suicide prevention hotline, and (c) orientations to potential future stigmatization of the caller by others. These in situ productions of stigma have practical implications in the search for, and the taking up, of help. The article closes with a recommendation for a situational approach to stigma, and a speculative note on the respecification of the concept of self. In sum, this article demonstrates that the work around “stigma” evidenced in the calls is bound up with present and projected categorial relevancies that are built into the occasion of the call itself; which is to say, it argues for the recognition of stigma as being a by-product of interactional practices and, thus, as a contextured-phenomenon achieved through a *members’* language of relationships.

FROM MOVING “BEYOND GOFFMAN” TO RESPECIFYING THE “LANGUAGE OF RELATIONSHIPS”

A central theme in the various critiques and developments of Goffman’s work — including, in an alternate way, our own — is the claim that Goffman does not sufficiently provide for *where stigma comes from*. The problem is two-fold. On the one hand, Goffman remains ambiguous about “other orders” outside of the realm of face-to-face interaction, and, on the other hand, he does not provide the sorts of interactional detail which offer an answer in terms of the production of “evidence” that can find the possessor treated as a “less desirable kind — in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak” (Goffman 1963:3). The apparently insufficient account of the production of stigma has seen a “structural turn” in the sociology of stigma, to which interactional and situated approaches have, by some, been positioned as answerable to.

Analytic and theoretical moves “beyond” the situation find Goffman’s writings requiring remedy by being “resituated” in readings of “structural and structuring factors such as history (time), geography (place), politics and economic conditions” (Tyler and Slater 2018:731). Stigma is seen to be produced “from above” and, at times, “weaponized” (e.g., Scambler 2018) in producing and reproducing inequality in contemporary, capitalist, neo-liberal society. The analytic critique is grounded in the idea that “the work of the micro-analyst necessitates a ‘bracketing off’ of the economic and political imperatives that structure behavioral settings” (Tyler 2018:749). Read from this view, Goffman was simply uninterested in matters of structure, power, and inequality which are seen to have a causal relationship to the “micro” aspects of social life.¹ The consequence is that a “micro-analysis,” so called, misses how social

settings and interactions are “always already structured through histories of power and resistance” (Tyler 2020:99). As such, Goffman’s concerns are seen to be limited:

So, while a relational understanding of stigma is at the core of Goffman’s account, his understanding of normal — stigma relations is divorced from power relations — both the macro-level structural power relations of, for example, capitalism or patriarchy, or the power inflected micro-aggressions of everyday interactions. (Tyler 2018:751)

Goffman is, thus, responsible for the “often individualistic, ahistorical and politically anaesthetized conceptualization of stigma which dominates within the social sciences” (Tyler 2018:746). At the same time, it is recognized that “what is potentially most radical about Goffman’s account” is the “understanding of stigma *as a relation* which emerges in social settings” (Tyler and Slater 2018:729 original emphasis). Indeed, other work that has aimed to move “beyond” Goffman’s situational account has sought to remedy the sociological shortcomings of *Stigma* by developing the sense that stigma is a historical and dynamic process shaped by power relations (Link and Phelan 2014). Other research has further emphasized the processes of *destigmatization* in which stigma is a negotiated product (e.g., Horgan 2018, 2020; Lamont 2018). Such an approach views stigma as a process which, in relation to territorial stigma and stigmatization (Powell 2008; Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira 2014) and through a notion of symbolic ascription, describes how “negative meanings stick to persons, places, practices, or things” (Horgan 2020:10). Notions of individual and group stigma are seen to attach to place and forms of housing, which reflexively shape and impact individual and group stigma and sense of self.

Critiques from within interactionism also recognize the importance of “other orders” and retain a sense of the “value in recognizing stigma as a ‘phenomenon of interaction order’ (Smith, Atkinson, and Evans 2022:890) and incorporating this *within* — rather than discarding it for — analyses focused on power and structure” (Thomas et al. 2025:7). In many ways, this work positions itself as building out from and re-developing Goffman’s interaction order analysis, recognizing how Goffman himself:

... was particularly interested in the implications of the interaction order for individual’s conceptions of self. To this end, Goffman’s careful excavations of the minutiae of everyday interaction and individuals’ anticipations of stigma and presentation of self in strained interactions are the product of deliberate attention to this site of analysis, rather than an oversight or ignorance of structural considerations. (Smith 2006; Hannem 2022:53)

This sympathetic reading positions Goffman’s sociology as a matter of analytic attention and the focus on “interaction order” as a site of inquiry — a position commensurate with Goffman’s (1983) own statements — to which analyses of additional structures of power can be added. Retaining the focus on interaction order is significant in avoiding treating stigma as an “*a priori* category, based on taken-for-granted assumptions about what attributes are devalued”

(Hannem 2022:52). This work — often conducted within the sociology of health and (mental) illness — has seen interaction order as relational to other (discursive) orders of history, biography, while retaining the importance of an empirical attention to social situations (Pescosolido 2015).

We could continue, but the point for the present discussion has been made. Recent sociology, such as that discussed above, has identified shortcomings in Goffman's approach and has aimed to develop, in different ways, a relational, processual, and to different degrees, explicitly political sociology of stigma which “goes beyond” that which holds in interaction in social settings. Such critiques — grounded as they are in traditional sociological dichotomies of structure and individual/agency — have, thus, positioned stigma as a product of relations conceived at different “scales” of social organization.

The various critiques outlined above do recognize “relationality” as the most radical aspect of *Stigma*, but, here, a radically alternate position is adopted in terms of what that relationality might be, which turns on the understanding of category relevancies and social settings. Along with other interactionists (e.g., Atkinson and Housley 2003; Rawls 1987), the approach developed herein does not recognize the dualisms through which Goffman's conception of stigma has been assessed. This critical engagement with Goffman's writings and analyses starts from an alternate non-dualist “third sociology” (Mlynář et al. 2026), drawing primarily on ethnomethodology, that sits quite outside of the structural/individual framing of the discussion of stigma and stigmatization and, as such, offers an alternate view of “where stigma comes from.”

The Looks of Things: Re- and Mis-Reading Goffman

In outlining something of this praxeological, non-dualistic approach to stigma, we can return to Goffman's (1963:2) original formulation of the generation of stigma:

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons, and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his “social identity” — to use a term that is better than “social status” because personal attributes such as “honesty” are involved, as well as structural ones, like “occupation.” We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.

While it is possible to take up an argument with both “interactionist” and “structuralist” sociologies of stigma by pointing to different understandings of interaction order as a radically situated *production order* (Rawls 1987; Smith 2011), I want to make a clean break by moving to an ethnomethodological mis-reading of the above

passage. In this view, Goffman opens ways into a situated treatment of stigma phenomena but did not follow them through to their more radical conclusions, a path which would have meant abandoning the constructive analytic character of his work (Watson 1992). Goffman does not go far enough in pursuing a more radical notion of situated interaction order by analyzing *actual* practices of telling, concealing, managing, passing, categorizing, and so on. Indeed, it is perhaps instructive that Goffman wanted to include Harold Garfinkel's (1967) famous study of the passing practices of Agnes² in an earlier version of *Stigma* which would have made for a very different book indeed (see Rawls 2023).

Beginning with the *production* of attributes and categories as relevant within a given setting marks something of the distinction between interactionist approaches and the ethnomethodological respecification proposed here. Put simply, respecification refers to Garfinkel's (2002:67) radical "working out" of Durkheim's aphorism in demonstrating how social facts are local productions of "immortal ordinary society." A "mis-reading" is, then, to provide an alternate view of a practice or phenomenon as described in the sociology (or professional) literature such that it can be shown as a product of the practical methods that provide for its objectivity in the world. Attributes, categories, and structures of society that are seen by sociology to produce stigma are not to be treated as obdurate "things" but as *accomplishments*, through and through and at all points. For Garfinkel, the trouble with "structure" (and, indeed, the reification of concepts such as "stigma"), is that "... reifying them in a formulaic description risks the loss of the praxeological validity of the formulae" (Garfinkel 2002:169, in Liberman 2019). A radical alternate to the debates briefly outlined above is to begin by "praxeologising descriptions" of stigma in such a way that avoids "putting a name" in the place of *practices* and "operating the name" (Garfinkel 2002:169, in Liberman 2019). It is a similar "operation" that finds sociologists treating stigma as a "thing that does things" in society at the expense of an attention to the lived detail through which the phenomena in question are available for theorization in the first instance.

The depths of this proposition separate the ethnomethodological notion of *production* from the interactionist notion of "construction."³ Asked by an interviewer (Wiley 2019), when discussing Agnes and the passing study, to elaborate on the troubles with the term "construction," Garfinkel replies that "construction" is "only one small move away from making it entirely subjective," adding "it looks then as if the sexuality of persons were simply a matter of 'negotiated interaction' ... and I think that's an intolerable relativizing of the looks of the world." Garfinkel goes on "... the achieved, familiar looks of the sexed presence of persons and that it's a production, not a construction: that it itself consists in the embodied presence of just these interactional practices." It is, then, the looks of things that is at stake, as they appear as significances with an achieved Gestalt contexture of a given scene (a notion described in more detail below). It is in this sense that our argument and analysis stand outside of discipline-internal debates relating to "micro" or "macro" sociologies of stigma and the "dangerously misleading" (Garfinkel 2002:63) configurations of "structure"

and “agency” that come with them; misleading because they miss the very grounds of the production of their social organizational phenomena of interest.

In starting over by “mis-reading” the initial formulation by Goffman presented above, and praxeologizing it through an attention to observable ethno-methods, the article set out to describe the work of the foundational operations found in those first three sentences. In this way, the question of “where stigma comes from” can be addressed in terms of: (a) the situated production and “objectivation” (Liberman 2018) of an “attribute,” (b) the situated production of the relevancy of a “category,” (c) the self-organizing and generative character of social settings, and (d) the relation of the three aspects within and as a *Gestalt contexture*.

A key starting point for a non-dualist, praxeological, sociology of stigma is that it does not begin with “individuals interacting in a setting” but rather “in the midst of things” which, “*necessarily* involves the analysis of how the action or setting renders itself recognizable as what it is” (Watson 1992:6). Goffman seems to get half-way toward this position when he writes that “the normal and the stigmatized are not persons, but rather perspectives” but retains an “acting individual” at the center of his analysis: “Stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated in two piles, the stigmatized and the normal ... [It is] a pervasive two- role social process in which every individual participates in both roles” (Goffman 1963:137–8). In respecifying Goffman’s statement, however, the sense of “individuals playing roles” can be substituted for an attention to just how an individual comes to be *categorized* in specific contextually-conditioned ways. Drawing on Harvey Sacks (e.g., 1972) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA, described in more detail below, and see Smith 2025a), it can be argued that the relevant categorization is *generated* in relation to relevant attributes (what have been called “predicates” in MCA) and finds meaning in the contexture in which they are viewed or heard. Thus, category, predicate, and setting form part of a *mutually elaborative* whole. Not, then, individuals interacting with one another, somewhere, but with *members*.

“Member,” properly speaking, does not at all refer to individuals or persons but, rather, local *practices* and *relevancies* observable in the ongoing course of some activity (Hill and Crittenden 1968:121). A Gestalt contexture is, then, a scenic whole in which the individual parts are *members* of a whole and, as such, the meaning of which is produced, and only available, in and through one another, which is to say, *relationally*. Such an orientation retains a view of the *practices* through which the processes that Goffman (1963:2–3) describes as relating the “evidence of possessing an attribute” to “what makes them different from others in the category of persons available to them” are achieved. In other words, the analysis offers to describe *just how* perceptually or informationally available “evidence” of discredited identities is accomplished as a foregrounded “attribute,” as an indexical property of a scene or setting (see Hutchinson 2022:862). As Diskin and Hutchinson (2024:528–9) observe:

Attributes are not things like melanin levels, regional accents, visible features like scars or tattoos and such like, but are, rather, the *significance accorded to* and the

local *practical entailments* of such things in specific interactional contexts. It is in such interactional contexts that the meaning of blackness (or queerness, disability, sexuality, class, etc.) are produced, maintained, repaired, and contested ongoingly.

The argument presented here strongly agrees with this formulation. To this, however, it might be added that an attention to just how these “attributes” are jointly accomplished, within a given context, with the relevancy of a category which comes to stand as an *operational* relevancy in that context. The relevancy of the “attribute” and the “social category” are, then, both accomplished in and through natural language competencies and belong to, and find their sense within, the ongoing organization of a social setting. This, then, is not, then, a “bottom up” approach to stigma but, rather, a view of the “shop floor” in which the components of stigma — attributes and categories — are assembled and assembled, in our view, primarily through sequentially ordered, membership categorization *practices* (see Smith 2025b). So, while we might agree with Goffman that it is the *setting* that determines the “normal” or expectable categories that might be found there, it remains to be described how attributes become significances and members of categories come to be “out of place” or “deviant” within a given social setting, in any actual case. As Harvey Sacks (1995[I]:92) responded to a student who raised a question relating to “Goffman’s argument”:

Now the fact is, Goffman talks about incongruity, but he does not tell us what incongruity is ... *How* it is that one sees it. He has not analyzed how it is that you do “an incongruity,” what makes it an incongruity.

The upshot of this understanding is if we are to take “stigma” seriously as a social phenomenon then it should not be seen as an abdication of responsibility to pay careful attention to the local practical structures through which an attribute *becomes* relevant and *then* becomes tied to practices of degradation and discrimination, and experiences of shame. Indeed, there is need for a more detailed, more attentive description of the “language of relationships” that recognizes the local practical assembly of context and its reflexive relation to action and categorization in terms of their availability within a Gestalt contexture. It is this situational, contextured approach that is explicated and developed below.

METHOD AND DATA

The data analyzed below are the recorded telephone calls to the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Centre, appended to one of the few formal publications of Harvey Sacks (1972). The corpus comprises some 150 calls made to the Los Angeles Centre for the Scientific Study of Suicide, Suicide Prevention Centre hotline and were analyzed for Sacks’ doctoral thesis, submitted in 1966. The transcripts of the calls, along with other collections such as the “group therapy sessions,” were foundational for the development of conversation analysis (CA) and what became MCA. Sacks worked

alongside Garfinkel in developing ethnomethodology (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970) and studied with Goffman. As is well-known, Goffman removed himself from Sacks' committee, but there remained a clear respect for Sacks' attention to the detail of interaction, if not agreement as to how to study it (Mlynář et al. 2026). From these materials, and a panoply of others, Sacks sought to develop a rigorous sociology grounded in the detailed observation of the orderliness of talk.

The foundational status of the materials and their history aside, these data were analyzed for this discussion of stigma because, simply, they were there. On reading them through for quite a different purpose, it seemed that there was a good deal going on in them worth analyzing. Moreover, the materials are naturally-occurring and feature discussions of "stigmatizing conditions" (Manzo 2004) *within* the very setting in which those conditions are being produced. This is rare, and the data stand in contrast to the majority of stigma research that makes use of interview materials where people are answering questions, as "category representatives," and talking about stigma in a setting that is not necessarily stigmatizing. A further issue is that the speaker in an interview is taken as representative of an assumedly stigmatized category, the selection and operation of which should be a matter of analysis, rather than data collection. These materials were, of course, recorded some 60 years ago but it is *practices*, not content, analyzed and described here. It should also be recognized that these materials are recorded telephone calls and so the analysis might be seen to be limited in terms of the extent to which it applies to visual attributes. There are, however, very good reasons to assume that the categorial organization of visual perception bears at least a family resemblance to that of talk (Hester and Francis 2003).

Negotiating "Problematic" Identities and Attributes

Sacks' primary interests in these materials were two-fold: the sequential ordering of the talk between the "caller" and "called" and the ways in which "the search for help" was *categorially* organized by working through "membership categorization devices" (that is, collections of categories plus rules of application). To introduce both the materials analyzed in this article, and its analytic orientation, we can turn to a first excerpt in which a "discreditable identity" and "blemish of character" is topicalized by the speakers.

Sacks (1995[I]: 46) introduced the excerpt by noting that the caller to the hotline (Excerpt 1; "a suicidal man") has already said that he's "been married three times, he's not working and not married now:"

EXCERPT 1. Floating a "problematic" identity.

- A: Is there anything you can stay interested in?
- B: No, not really.
- A: What interests did you have before?
- B: I was a hair stylist at one time, I did some fashions now and then, things like that.

They go on for a couple of minutes. Then:

A: Have you been having some sexual problems?

B: All my life.

A: Uh huh. Yeah.

B: Naturally. You probably suspect, as far as the hair stylist and, uh, either one way or the other, they're straight or homosexual, something like that.

In the call, the caller (B) and call-handler (A) are engaging in establishing the reason for the troubles that the caller is experiencing in their life. When asked about “interests,” the caller opens a list of inferentially category-relevant activities: “hair styling” and doing “some fashions now and then.” Note that the list is left open in terms of “things like that,” inviting the inferential work on the part of the call-handler. As the call continues, the call-handler asks about “sexual problems” which elicits an account of the likely categorization of “male hair stylists” within a “sexuality device” comprising, here, of two categories: “straight” or “homosexual” which, within the contexture of the call, can be heard as an admission that the problems which prompted the call are tied to the caller being homosexual.

The point, here, is not that being a homosexual was a “discreditable identity” in 1960s America. That is not a finding of any sort. Sacks’ interest is in *how* the information provided by the caller (B), in the context of the call, can be heard as tied to a particular identity category — that is “homosexual.” As Sacks (1995[I]:46) observes:

Where it might not be proper to say certain things about another person, or that matter about oneself, what one can do is to propose membership in some category, where that category stands as the adequate basis for inferring those certain other things.

This is no analytic speculation but is evidently available in the response of the call-handler (A) which topicalizes “some sexual problems” which, in turn, is responded to by the caller in relation to a sexuality category collection (“straight” or “homosexual”) that was already available. In line with Sacks’ early concern with describing the “categorical machinery,” this relationship between predicate and category was formulated as “category-bound activities” (hairdressing and doing some fashions) operationalized via a “viewer’s maxim,” that is, “If a member sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one can see it being done by a member of a category to which it is bound, then: see it that way.”

These insights, and many others, are taken up in what later became MCA. MCA is not, then, a “method” to be “applied” in the analysis of talk-in-interaction but is, instead, a collection of *members’ methods* for producing the orderliness of activities and the sense they have in the world and for accomplishing culture-in-action. As Hester and Eglin (1997:20) had it:

Members [do not] use culture to do things ... culture is constituted in, and only exists in, action. For membership categorization 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.

The information provided by the caller is viewed as emergent details in a dynamic phenomenal field. The details of the caller's prior activities and current troubles and the context of being on the call to the suicide prevention line, *at this point* of the call, are not so much "added together," in iterative fashion, and then "interpreted" by the call-handler to conclude that the caller is homosexual, as they become *emergently available* as relevant details. Equally, the relationship between a male doing hairdressing and being a homosexual is not a given. Rather, the predicates and their relation to a category and any sense of a "collection" and its "rules of application" appear as a unity, and dynamically so. So, while the notion of Gestalt contexture might be read as a theory it is better thought of as an accomplishment of its members and, thus for analysts, a methodological orientation to the ways in which activities, "attributes," person categories, and settings come to have meaning in and through their relations as parts of a practically-assembled, "kaleidoscopic" singularity (Watson 2015:37).

Members are, then, concerned with actual situations and the practices through which problematic membership-identities, and their relation to "deviant" activities, are at stake. It is the explication of a *members'* sociology of "stigmatizing conditions" (Manzo 2004), and related categorization practices which accomplish it, that is the target of this article. In aiming at that target, the re-examination of Harvey Sacks' original corpus of calls to the suicide prevention center hotline demonstrates how "stigma," and its management, is a live concern of parties to the call.

STIGMATIZABLE CATEGORIZATION AND STIGMATIZING CONDITIONS IN THE SEARCH FOR HELP

A key problem in these materials identified and worked out by Sacks is how the callers to the suicide prevention hotline come to conclude that they have "no one to turn to" and how the call-handlers participate in building this conclusion in order to convince them that it is necessary and appropriate to turn to a professional for help. Sacks' observations were characteristically elegant. In simplified terms, Sacks observed that callers and call-handlers would work to assemble and assess a collection of categories — a social structure, if you will — of assumedly relevant persons who may be in the position to support the caller. This is not, then, a "micro" or "subjective" work of "interpretation" but, rather, social-structure-in-action (Housley and Fitzgerald 2002). The categories, as Sacks observed, came in "collections" and appeared to be selected through certain "rules of application." The first collection — gathering categories of family, friends, and other personal relationships — thus forms a membership categorization device. Significantly, these categories are hearable as "pairs;" sons might turn to mothers, sisters to brothers, friends to friends, and husbands might turn to their wife (unless, as is the case in one call, an affair is the source of their trouble). Here, then, the category pairs

form resources through which relations of rights and obligations are organized and understood. Sacks called this category collection, “Collection R.” This “personal relationships” device thus organizes the “search for help.” Recurrently, the calls demonstrate an orientation by both parties to “Collection R” as the primary method for identifying and confirming the exhaustion of personal relationship as sources of help. Once Collection R is exhausted, then a second collection — exemplified by a therapist or psychiatrist in these instances — becomes relevant. Sacks called this collection of experts “Collection K” and the transcripts demonstrate the work that gets done in bringing the caller to see that a member of this category might be a “person to turn to.” Significantly — as shown below — this turns on the callers’ recognition that to accept help from a professional occasions a further categorization of them as “a patient” (through what Sacks called a “standardized-relation pair” [SRP]); that is, someone who *really has* mental health problems. This potential stigma appears at stake across the corpus and shows as a major barrier to progressing the call to accepting help. Of course, this is a well-known and recognized phenomenon. However, *just how* this problem appears and how it is worked with and around is our interest here (Excerpt 2).

EXCERPT 2. The categorial organization of candidates in the search for help.

- C1.** Maybe it was a mistake to call. I don’t know. But I mean —
- S1.** Why do you think it might be?
- C2.** Well, you know, it seems to reach out for help from strangers is, I don’t know. It seems to be very — like I shouldn’t do it. Like my family and friends don’t help me, I mean why should I go to a stranger for help, you know?
- S2.** Sometimes you need professional help.
- ...
- C3.** Well I’m going to tell you something. I have tried for many many years to get my family to help me. To understand and make myself clear to them. Try to tell them exactly what I was, and what I was trying and they refused to listen and oh, everything’s all mixed up and now I’ve been just thrown over to my grandmother’s, and of course I’m — oh, I don’t know.
- S3.** You have parents in town?
- C4.** No. They’re in Texas. I have nobody but my grandmother.
- S4.** Well, you know sometimes when the people close to us don’t come through when we need them, we get sort of hopeless and feel as if no one will.

In the above excerpt, relevant devices or collections of categories are collaboratively worked through by caller and call-handler. The first is that an occasioned collection of “personal relationships” (with “friends” and “family” as the initial categories) is assembled with a contrast-category of “strangers.” Note that the call-handler (S) replaces this broad category with that of “professionals” (a recurrent feature across the corpus). In the second part of the excerpt, the “family” category becomes a collection to be worked through in terms of candidate constituent members; here, parents and grandmother. Note also that geography is significant (C4, “they’re in

Texas”) and can be heard as doing broader partitioning work of “those not available to help.”

This excerpt demonstrates the local establishment of “meaningful relationships.” By attending to the categorial organization of the search for help, a good deal is learned about the expectations of “teams” of categories that are built up around individuals and, indeed, the expected obligations to be accessible and provide help and assistance in times of difficulty. Here, then, is the building of a (normative) social life via membership categorization practices which provide for practically accomplished relation of the individual to social-structure-as-assembled. In returning to these materials, the analysis recovers how parties to the calls orient to emergent, contextured, and potential future “stigmatic” categorizations tied to the activities of “feeling suicidal” and “asking for help” and the immediate consequence for the phone-call’s “staff.” This work can begin to be explicated more fully, and in relation to matters of stigma, in the next example.

Topicalizing the Call and Its Members as a Gestalt Contexture

In this excerpt, the caller (C) is describing their feelings of wanting to “just flash away and be gone with me” to the call-handler (S). Here, the talk explicitly topicalizes the context of the call and, indeed, the “categories likely to be encountered there” (Goffman 1963:2). In addition to the sequential order of turn-generated categories of “caller” and “called” (Watson 1997), we find an explicit orientation to categorizations of “parties to a call to a suicide prevention line,” providing for a contextual relevancy to be worked through (Excerpt 3).

EXCERPT 3. On the “proper” grounds for calling a suicide prevention hotline.

- C5.** Well, that’s exactly how I feel. I feel today as though I would just like to go out and say — to hell with the whole thing and just flash away and be gone with me. That’s exactly how — you know I shouldn’t of called you to start with. I mean, I wanted to, to really wanted to. I thought maybe I might get a few answers, but I shouldn’t have, because I feel as though it’s a deceit. I really do.
- S5.** What? To ask for help?
- C6.** Yes. I really do, and because I — help, ask for help and somebody might say, he’s mentally — well, he needs help or something. You know that type of thing.
- S6.** Well, let’s get something straight. Anybody can get into a spot that he can’t get out of by himself, where he needs some outside help.
- C7.** Yeah, so then we have to call strangers to get some help?
- S7.** Yes. If you break a leg, you wouldn’t think anything of calling a doctor to have him help you.
- C8.** Yes, but that’s different. But your own family should help you, don’t you think?

- S8. Maybe they should, but they're not.
- C9. Yeah, but I really do think, I mean —
- S9. Actually I don't think your family could help you with this. I think this is something you're going to have to struggle out inside yourself, and you will need professional help with this. Now are you afraid that this means you're crazy?
- C10. No. I don't really think that I'm crazy.

Following an account grounded in a temporal orientation of their feelings and “the situation” that brought them to call the hotline *today*, C5 shifts to question the “proper” status of “caller-to-a-suicide-hotline” and the expected attributes (in Goffman's words) of parties to this call and calls like it. There is minimal formulation of the expectations of the call (to “get a few answers”) before an expression of regret for calling due to it being a “deceit.” S5 asks for clarification of the prior turn, although ties the trouble to “asking for help” and, thus, the context of the call. C6 elaborates the deceit in relation to potential categorizations of “caller-to-a-suicide-hotline” for which the categorization of “mentally-ill” — and the self-repair to “in need of help,” as a predicate thereof — is treated as a *possible* categorization of the caller in this context; that is, not only the call to the hotline but its course of action. Although this potential categorization (C9) is attributed to being “applied” by a generalized third-party — “somebody” — its potential applicability by “anybody” serves as a topicalization of the context of the call and is tied to indications of a possible reluctance to talk further. The analysis of the caller is, then, that any “auditor” of the call could and maybe would make the categorization of “mentally-ill.”

This work-in-train progresses via a category-neutral formulation from the call-handler that “anyone” can find themselves in the situation where “outside help” may be required (S6). Following this, turn C7 maintains the relevancy of personal relationship categories via the invocation of the category “stranger,” that is, someone/anyone outside of “known relations” which is, in this turn, hearable as a dispreferred option. The “we” in C7 hearably formulates the situation of the caller as a *categorical* rather than individual matter — that is, “people in my situation.” S7 formulates “asking for help” in more general terms by introducing a possibly-comparable second situation — serious physical injury. This, hearably, does work in attempting to transform, or perhaps “map,” the category “stranger” onto a second category of “professional” as the appropriate provider of assistance (be it physical or mental). At the same time, the formulation occasions the relevancy of “patient” as a second pair-part, thus avoiding explicit reference to the category “mentally-ill” (which had already been introduced as a source of trouble in C6). C8, however, emphasizes the difference between their (mental) troubles and physical injury and explicitly states a relation category “team” of “family,” suggesting that “having someone to talk to” is *preferably* not a professional matter. Here, that the help that *should* expectably come from within a collection of personal relationship categories is formulated as a moral matter (Jayyusi 1984). S8 provides a partial

agreement with this assessment but notes that, given the situation, “family” has not proved an adequate option. C9 then begins to formulate a response (likely related to pursuing Collection R/“family”) which is interrupted by S9 in a turn that stresses that, much like with a broken leg, “family” cannot, actually, help with this situation. They then explicitly (re-)introduce the category “professional” as providing the appropriate support to assist with struggling the situation out “inside of oneself.” With strong relevancy for the current discussion, S9 immediately follows up the recommendation of seeking professional help by returning to the trouble source introduced in C5/C6—that is, that seeking professional help might “mean that you’re crazy.” Here, then, the “language of relationships” is directly topicalized in lay terminology for the consequence of the categorial predicates of “someone who is speaking to a professional about their mental health;” that is, that person can be categorized as “crazy.”

In terms of the current discussion, the categorial work in this excerpt has a double significance for the consideration of the local production of stigma. The first is in the ways in which a discreditable identity is *generated* in and through the very activity in which the individual is engaged. The putative categories with which the caller is concerned — “mentally ill/crazy” — *emerge in and as context* for the speakers and their activities. Moreover, they are also understood to be possibly and expectedly applied by someone/anyone to someone contemplating suicide/calling a suicide prevention hotline. While there is, of course, a long history of the social construction of mental illness that may be used to “explain” the excerpt, it is the practical and local relevancy of the *category-in-context* that is the participants’ accomplishment and concern.

The categorization work observable in these materials is work that displays *and* constitutes context, the meaning of a given category, and its (possible) organization into some (possibly) relevant collection, accomplished in and as the ongoing flow of a specific activity (that is, participating in a call to a suicide prevention center). What we are dealing with, then, are accounts of possible stigmatization and its practical consequence — that is, seeking help or resisting the offer — as those categories are produced in situ. To be clear, the point is not that “mentally ill” or, indeed, “crazy” is a “stigma category” of the attribute “feeling suicidal” or “seeking help from a professional” in any stipulative sense. Rather, it is being produced as such by the speakers in this contexture, from and with those actions. This, then, produces the call as a contexture in which “stigma” is at stake in relation to both a distal future potential hearer/categorizer *and* the self-conception of the caller. It is argued that the two are inseparable, and this matter is returned to in closing the article.

CONTEXTURAL TROUBLES FOR CALLER AND CALLED: MANAGING STIGMATIZABLE CATEGORIES IN THE SEARCH FOR HELP

In the following extract, we join a call with the call-handler (S) directly asking the caller (C) to further reflect on having been “contemplating suicide.” At stake, in a

similar manner to the previous excerpt, is the management of the *potential* stigmatizing categorizations that are an expectable product of the contexture of the call. The caller is initially concerned to separate suicidal intent from a related (potentially stigmatizing) category of “insane.” It becomes, then, the job of the caller to produce “contemplating suicide” as a “normal” outcome of their situation which forms a second track in the talk and a second stigmatizable category which, in turn, can be heard as implicated in contemplating suicide as a reasonable conclusion (Excerpt 4).

EXCERPT 4. Thinking of suicide as rational activity.

- S1. Now you say you are contemplating suicide?
- C1. That is right. I have been contemplating it now for three months. But I finally reached the end of my rope, I think.
- S2. You think that the only pressure on you is financial?
- C2. That is right. I don't think I'm insane. In order to think of suicide, I understand you've got to be insane.
- S3. That's not necessarily true. Suppose we talk about your financial condition then.
- C3. It's in a muddle, that's all. When I say it's in a muddle there is no embezzlement involved. It's just a lot of money that I have borrowed and I can't meet my obligations. A lot of it is personal, dear friends of mine, and a good portion of it I owe to the bank. The payments are due, and it's just pressing me and I have no other alternatives. I can't turn anywhere; that is, I still could. I could still go to friends of mine, but I've got a lot of pride and I don't want to do that anymore.

In response to the invitation to talk about their contemplation of suicide, we again see a temporal account (C1) which produces the situation as going on for some time but having now reached the point of acting on it. Indeed, a recurrent feature of the calls is the handling of “why I am calling *now*.” The account of the duration of the contemplation might be heard as working in terms of “being taken seriously” and against possible treatments of the caller as “acting rashly,” “not thinking things through,” and so on. Following this account, S2 continues with what can be heard as a summary of previous talk (not included in the excerpt) describing the source of the trouble as “financial pressure.” The insertion of “only” may provide opportunity to introduce “other troubles” while also getting to the heart of the matter as the next topic. C2 aligns with the summary before immediately stating that “I don't think I'm insane” which can be heard as contrasting with “contemplating suicide” due to “financial pressure.” C2 then builds an analysis of the relevancy of the label “insane” in terms of “their understanding;” that is, that those who “think of suicide” are categorizable as insane and, indeed, that “being insane” might be a pre-condition for contemplating suicide. The possibly-stigmatic categorization of “people, like me, who call this hotline” and, moreover, “those who receive help from professionals” is again at stake.

While “feeling suicidal” might be seen as a “naturally relevant” attribute for this context — and, indeed, for a category device of “mental health” in relation to the context of the call as a consistently oriented object for its parties — what we see in the materials is that while callers acknowledge “contemplating suicide” as the reason for the call in the first instance, they do not treat it as a *categorization*.⁴ Rather, “feeling suicidal” is oriented to as a *possible* predicate of stigmatic categories such as “insane” which occasions work on the part of the call-handler (that is, “that’s not necessarily true” S2). S3 then suspends the analysis (of “insane” as a natural predicate of “suicidal”) and specifically pursues the caller’s “financial condition.” This move can, in part, be heard as producing the financial condition, and its detail-to-come, as providing for a “rational” treatment of the reasons for feeling suicidal. The work from the caller might be seen to be oriented to the potential stigma of “feeling suicidal” which, in this case, may produce resistance to “seeking professional help” which, after all, is the task of the call-handler (rather than to provide help themselves).

In further accounting for their having called the hotline, C3 does work around potential negative understandings and stigma relating to their “financial situation” by immediately establishing the nature of the “muddle” (which is itself a minimal presentation) as not involving “embezzlement” but, only, “being in debt.” This is not, of course, to insist that either “debtor” or “embezzler” are necessarily stigmatized category/activities in a decontextualized sense but to, tentatively, point to local practices for “stigma management” through which an activity, action, or identity can be formulated. This point would require further analysis but here we might see something of the assembly of what might be called a “positioned” stigma category device (akin to a “hierarchy of stigma” for, example, in the categorizations of users of different drugs, by drug users [Long and Jepsen 2023]); that is, “I may be a Y, but that’s better than being an X.”

In the final turn, the account of “being in debt” is constructed in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the “search for help” in relation to mental health with the significance being that C3 has exhausted both possible collections for hearably different reasons; the bank for, presumably formal reasons relating to credit limits or similar, but his remaining “lots of friends” cannot be approached due to “pride.” This, of course, is a direct statement of the shame involved in asking for money from, and owing money to, close personal relations. C, having exhausted the avenues through which they can feel they can ask for financial help, thus, leads to the *reasonable* contemplation — if not conclusion — that suicide is the “way out.” This, then, aligns with the project of the call-handler — that, by extension, there really is no one to turn to, and thus any potential stigma of speaking to a “mental health professional” must be a secondary concern.

CONCLUSION: FROM “CONSTRUCTION” AND “NEGOTIATION” TO “PRODUCTION” AND “ORIENTATION”

The article has been concerned with the adequate description of the production and recognition of local practices which produce “attributes” and categories of

“stigma.” Following a brief review of the debate between “structuralist” and “interactionist” approaches to stigma, the discussion returned to Goffman’s (1963) original formulations of stigma with the aim of respecifying his observation that a “language of relationships, not attributes is needed.” A second important emphasis drawn out from Goffman’s “preliminary conceptions” is an analytic focus on the generative character of *settings* which takes precedence over interactions between “individuals” or between individuals and social structure. In adopting an alternate “non-dualist” sociology, the discussion moved beyond binary “micro” and “macro” approaches to stigma, and aimed to offer a view of “stigma” as a by-product of the locally achieved naturally-organized activities that Goffman recognizes but does not adequately describe. By re-analyzing a corpus of calls to the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center (Sacks 1967, 1972), the analysis aimed to provide a respecification of the “language of relationships” achieved by practices that “staff” the calls (Garfinkel 2002:163). In doing so, the praxeological grounds for Goffman’s (1963:2–3) observations that “Society establishes the means of categorizing persons, and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” and that “Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there” are described. The unspecified “routines of social intercourse” (Goffman 1963:2–3) are respecified in the actual practices employed in producing and orienting to the (emergently, potentially) “stigmatizing conditions” of making a call to a suicidal prevention hotline and receiving professional help. Taking categorization *practices* seriously — as a members’ methodical accomplishment — the article aimed to demonstrate how “stigma” might be better understood via the achieved practical objectivity of the concerns of the parties to the call. The article has, thus, aimed to “move beyond Goffman” not through recourse to the constructive analytic sociological edifices but, instead, by examining the practical action that provides for the lived infrastructure of Goffman’s conceptual descriptions. In answering the question of “where stigma comes from,” “stigma” is approached as an analytic gloss for a range of practices (Hutchinson 2022), some of which are described herein, which primarily relate to membership categorization and the practical accomplishment of significances within and as a Gestalt contexture.

Although there is not room to expand this point here, we might note that in the excerpts and, indeed, in others across the corpus of calls, the accounting and categorization work of the callers are bound up with notions of “the self” and, indeed, of passing. Thus, the situational and praxeological approach outlined here may be potentially developed further in respecifying theorizations of the self as an interaction order phenomena. Such a project might be pursued in the analysis of members’ productions of relationships with others which, at the same time, may yield insight into the practicalities of passing or, in Goffman’s terms, maintaining face, within the context of that relationship’s structures and settings. It seems this is one way of examining the relationship between stigma, the self, and passing as glosses of contextual-conditions and formulations of structures of relations through which

a sense of personhood, and the disruption or loss thereof, are instructive in terms of the troubles of personal life. On this point, I assume that the article is left open to the same political critique levied at Goffman's analysis. It is suggested, however, that if one is, as a sociologist, concerned with inequality, power, and discrimination, then attending to the actual practices through which experiences of shame, exclusion, and so on are *actually produced* is no abdication of responsibility nor act of analytic myopia. Instead, adopting such an approach — that respects what people *actually do*, for better or worse — is to take seriously, rather than presuppose, the grounds upon which lived lives are made difficult.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank participants who asked probing questions at the European Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction 2024 conference session, and the Cardiff Ethnography Group meeting where this paper was first presented. I would especially like to thank Terry Au Yeung for discussions relating to Sacks' early work and Gestalt MCA, and Phil Hutchison for useful comments on an earlier draft. Finally, I would like to thank the reviewers for their constructively critical engagement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Sacks (1972).

NOTES

1. There is no space to spend engaging with this idea, but for a repudiation and a discussion of the “politics” in Goffman's work, see Becker (2003) on Goffman's presentational politics in *Asylums*, as well as more recent works which incorporate an understanding of Goffman's biography (Shalin 2021).
2. Garfinkel met Agnes as part of a study at the University of California, Los Angeles Psychiatric Gender Identity Clinic. She was one of several transexual women and men interviewed by Garfinkel. Garfinkel was particularly taken with Agnes and her practices of “passing” which he described as providing access to the practical production, maintenance, and assumptions of “‘natural,’ i.e., moral entities” of sexual status (Garfinkel 1967:116; and see Crawley 2022).
3. For an elaboration of the relationship between interactionism and ethnomethodology, see Dennis (2011).
4. See Schegloff (2007) on the distinction between categorization and mere person description.

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