Relationships in Action: Categorization in Gay and Lesbian Couples’ Talk

Brian L. Heisterkamp

Abstract

A growing body of literature examines how relational partners make their relationships available through their conversational actions. This study extends this work through a Membership Categorization Analysis of the talk of gay and lesbian couples in order to identify the conversational actions associated with membership in a same-sex couple. The data examined include transcriptions of video recordings of gay and lesbian couples interacting during informal dinner occasions. Conversational actions identified include claims of intimate knowledge of one’s partner and discussions of relationship roles. I argue that these conversational actions are category bound to relational pairs, including same-sex couples. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for identity construction and gender role behavior.

Keywords: Membership Categorization Analysis; gay and lesbian couples; discourse; interpersonal relationships

1. Introduction

Relational partners are called upon to share pieces of their history together, convey knowledge about their partner, or describe how responsibilities are allocated in their relationship. These and other actions represent taken-for-granted evidence of a relationship’s existence and are used to infer the type of relationship individuals share. Discussing relational history is one way speakers make their various types of relationships observable. Identifying types of relationships, particularly between romantic versus non-romantic partners or same-sex versus heterosexual relationships, requires examining the features of talk speakers make available. Locating cultural or language activities supports inferences regarding how relationships are identifiable.

1Dept. of Communication Studies, California State University, San Bernardino, CA, USA
This study focuses on the discourse practices of gay and lesbian couples interacting together in their social lives. Data are presented in order to understand the methods members of gay and lesbian couples use in constructing their relationships.

This study employs Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), an analytic approach for indicating how certain behaviors or characteristics are normatively linked with certain categories (Weatherall, 2002). The method developed through the analysis of how members, the actual speakers and hearers in a conversation, treat various membership categories (e.g., mother, father, etc.) as belonging in a set linked to certain behaviors (Lepper, 2000; Sacks, 1972; Stokoe, 2012). Membership Categorization Analysis is performed when membership in a given category is inferred through behaviors such as language, culture, courses of action, dress, situation, setting, or conversational utterances that make categories observable and reportable (Eglin, 2002; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984). The attributions concerning a category can be tracked back to the activities that members associate with a given category (Stokoe, 2004). Thus, when members engage in categorization work, they reveal a shared common sense knowledge of their world, generally understood as culture (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).

As an aspect of MCA, Membership Categorization Devices (MCDs) represent how individuals' everyday knowledge about people is organized (Leudar, Marsland, & Nekvapil, 2004). MCDs consist of membership categories, a type of reference form based upon classifications or social types used to describe persons, and MCDs are constituted by category-bound activities (Leudar et al., 2004; Psathas, 1999; Roca-Cuberes, 2008). Thus, membership categories, such as “mother” or “son,” are seen as part of a collection or MCD, such as “family” (Roca-Cuberes, 2008). Members can also be paired in standardized relational pairs such as “husband-wife” in which certain membership categories come together with specific rights and obligations (Lepper, 2000). Gays and lesbians can be paired in the MCD same-sex couple.

Category bound activities are commonsensically associated with membership categories and include actions expectably and properly done by persons who are the incumbents of particular categories (Psathas, 1999; Roca-Cuberes, 2008). For example, the activity “soothing a crying baby” may be a category bound activity for the category “mother.” When members act in category-bound ways, inferences that the individual performing the action is a member or incumbent of a given category can be and are made based on these actions (Psathas, 1999).
Using Membership Categorization Analysis, scholars examined actions associated with masculinity (Georgakopoulou, 2005), representations of key figures in the September 2001 terrorists attacks (Leudar et al., 2004), and the intersection of morality and public policy (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009).

Researchers explored how certain conversational actions relate to enacting incumbency in specific interpersonal relationship categories (Mandelbaum, 2003; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005). For instance, incumbency in some relational membership category is referenced when a speaker conveys prior shared experiences and relies on another speaker, who was presumably present during that past shared experience, to pick up a minimal reference to that past shared experience. For example, both members of a romantic couple would be expected to have knowledge of and jointly tell their how-we-met story. Showing interest in future activities or recognizing one’s voice over the telephone based upon minimal vocal utterances may also indicate membership in an interpersonal relationship category (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005).

Continuing the work of identifying category bound activities to interpersonal relationship MCDs, Rintel (2013) examined video distortions that occurred during video calls between long-distance couples. The couples managed those distortions through parody and teasing, which Rintel (2013) argued the couples treated as a resource for intimacy. Korobov (2011) found that individuals engaged in speed-dating gendered their desires and preferences for a potential romantic partner in a manner consequential to how possible romantic partners create connection and affiliation. Fitzgerald and Rintel (2013) explained how characters described in an end-of-the-day story embedded in a boyfriend-girlfriend interaction have implications for the MCD couple when the character is described in problematic or promiscuous terms. This study extends the work of these and others by examining conversational actions of gay and lesbian couples that are linked to a same-sex couple MCD.

The conversational practices identified by these researchers do not necessarily demonstrate category boundedness with a specific relationship membership category. Various relational categories including friends, spouses, and siblings are able to recognize each other’s voices over the telephone or may be expected to show interest in each other’s future plans.
Astheseexamples indicate, categorical incumbency for many interpersonal relationship types is interactionally revealed through talk rather than being publicly observable, such as with gender membership categories (Roca-Cuberes, 2008). Nonetheless, examining interpersonal relationships from a perspective grounded in real-life social interactions is best equipped to demonstrate how interpersonal relationships, including gay and lesbian relationships, are systematically occasioned in various conversational activities (Korobov, 2011).

2. Aim of the Study

This study will build upon the types of conversational actions indicative of incumbency in an interpersonal relationship category with the aim of analyzing membership categories that suggest a same-sex relationship between interactants. As stated earlier, behaviors such as expressing a shared history or recognizing another’s voice on the telephone may point to incumbency in a relationship category (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005). The goal here is to identify conversational actions associated with a romantic relationship with a specific focus on examining what gays and lesbians do to enact incumbency in the same-sex couple MCD. I assert that this study’s speakers engaged in category-bound activities linked to the MCD same-sex couple through the conversational actions of making claims of intimate knowledge about their same-sex partners and discussing relationship roles.

3. Data and Analytic Approach

The data included transcripts of video recordings of gay and lesbian couples gathered for various dinner events held in their homes. The video recordings included the participation of three gay male couples (“Three Gay Male Couples” video) and two gay male couples and one lesbian couple (“Dinner with the Neighbors” video). The transcripts were created using a version of the Jeffersonian system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). In each case, the recording device did not impact the events’ occurrence. Participants were told participation was voluntary and that the researcher was interested in examining the conversational behaviors of gays and lesbians. None requested that the recording device be turned off. The use of pseudonyms in the transcripts protects confidentiality. As described above, the analytic approach used to examine the data is Membership Categorization Analysis.
4. Analysis

The two analytic sections that follow each examine category work in particular relationship-oriented environments. The first looks at categorization in displays of intimate knowledge. The second shows how speakers display features of categorical practices in discussions of relationship roles. The extent to which speakers orient to categorical work as common, cultural knowledge becomes evident through the manner produced by participants (Stokoe, 2012).

4.1 Categorical practice in claiming intimate knowledge

The shared experiences of relational partners enable them to acquire intimate knowledge about each other. Experiences enable partners to learn one another’s preferences or habits. This knowledge can be shared during interaction and understood as a category-bound activity, or an activity linked to a category (Stokoe, 2012). For example, displaying knowledge of another’s food preferences may be category-bound to the standardized relational pair spouse-spouse, amongst others. During the following interaction, which occurs near the start of the dinner, Matt is responding to a get-to-know-you question regarding his occupation.

Extract 1: “Three Gay Male Couples for Dinner”

1. Matt: I say I’m a writer=
2. John: =Don’t let him <f:oo::l: y:o:u>
3. He watches soap operas
4. Which I go hooked into
5. Matt: O:h (. ) John you’re the one who got me started on those
6. I only watched CBS

Matt’s “I say” utterance (line 1) displayed a possible incongruence between his occupation and how he describes it. John’s indication that Matt is fooling the others (line 2) affirmed this difference. John continued to provide his own version of Matt’s occupation, namely that “he watches soap operas” (line 3). John then explained that Matt “hooked” (line 4) him into the same behavior. Matt refuted John’s characterization and claimed John started the soap opera watching behavior (line 5).
This series of utterances suggests the MCD same-sex romantic couple for several reasons. As in the prior examples, John’s knowledge of Matt’s soap opera watching and Matt’s claim that John initiated the soap opera watching at some earlier time indicated an historical aspect of their relationship. Also, John’s ability to offer a public claim of deceptiveness by his partner in the description of his occupation indicates some risk-taking associated with a more intimate personal relationship (Mandelbaum, 1989). The teasing nature of John’s utterance (lines 2-4) displayed a temporal or historical aspect of their relationship and intimacy that may be associated with romantic partners due to the risk-taking associated with his tease (Pawluk, 1989). The more intimate nature of their relationship enabled John to make such a claim. Lastly, the discussion of soap-opera watching seems more normatively associated with a romantic partnership than with another relationship type.

Upon hearing two men discussing occupation and soap opera watching in the manner illustrated in the above extract, Matt and John could be placed into the MCD same-sex romantic couple. MCA provides a set of rules of application (the economy and consistency rules, the hearer’s maxim) that explain how people account for the inferences made when they hear these conversational actions (Tracy, 2011). The hearer’s maxim indicates that if a conversational action tied to some category is presented, and the person performing the conversational action is a member of that category, then the speaker should be understood as belonging to that category (Schegloff, 2007). Thus, John’s statement that Matt’s description of his occupation as a writer fooled the others (i.e., a claim of intimate knowledge) could be a member of a variety of categories such as group-of-friends or romantic partners. However, John’s risk-taking claim of intimate knowledge that Matt watches soap operas rather than writes is more likely bound to the category same sex romantic partner. Since John and Matt are from the same population, the consistency rule enables one to place both men in the MCD same-sex romantic couple.

In contrast to the prior example, the following extract relates to enacting membership in a relationship category, but the conversational actions do not necessarily provide evidence of a romantic relationship. In this interaction Anton is discussing the preparation of a salad.
Extract 2: “Three Gay Male Couples For Dinner”

1. Anton: Bret had a hissy fit cuz
2. I wanted to put some damned olives in the uh salad
3. He can’t eat olives
4. Anybody want some olives ((holding bowl of olives))
5. Bret: Do you like olives? ((glancing toward John))
6. Matt: John hates olives
7. Anton: Well you know what
8. I think we should send them down there [on ((noise))] 
9. John: [ha ha ha ]

Several conversational actions point to incumbency in a relationship category such as Anton’s reference to the shared activity of preparing a salad for a dinner party with Bret. Their membership in the standardized relational pairs host-host or roommate-roommate is indicated by the sharing of household responsibilities such as preparing for a dinner party. The non-addressed recipient response Matt provided (line 6) to Bret’s question (line 5) also indicated a relationship between Matt and John to the extent that he is able to convey this information on John’s behalf without objection from John.

Both of these examples – Bret and Anton preparing for a dinner party and Matt expressing John’s dislikes – suggest possible membership in several different standard relational pairs such as sibling-sibling, friend-friend, romantic partner-romantic partner, etc. Friends may jointly prepare for a dinner party and siblings may know each other’s likes and dislikes. So, while ethnographic information does provide information regarding the romantic nature of these relationships, the conversational activities here do not point specifically to the MCD same-sex romantic couple.

A specific type of shared experience discussed by romantic couples involves their sexual history. This specific type of shared experience enables partners to share information about each other’s idiosyncrasies that are likely category bound to standardized relational pairs involved in a sexual and/or romantic relationship. The following extract began following a query from Anton regarding the sexual experimentation that occurs in Lisa and Sandra’s relationship.
Extract 3: “Dinner with the neighbors”

1. Lisa: Like sexually you mean
2. Anton: Yeah (.) sexually experiment
3. Try different things °and°
4. Sandra: I'm (.4) more (.4) experimental than you are
5. Lisa: [Yeah
6. Anton: Are you really?
7. Lisa: She's kind of like (.4) the saying
8. Femme on the streets (.4) Butch in the sheets
9. That kind
10. Anton: HA HA [HA
11. Bret: [Ha haha
12. Mark: Oh yes
13. Anton: Ha ha
14. Mark: So when she does finally [get ready
15. Sandra: [He he
16. Mark: It's like get out of the way
17. Lisa: Yeah I'm like I'm way too tired tonight honey

After Sandra explained that she is more experimental than Lisa (line 4), Anton sought confirmation (line 6). Lisa then produced the saying “Femme on the streets, butch in the sheets” (line 8) to both respond to Anton’s question and to clarify Lisa’s statement confirming she is the more experimental partner (line 4). Several conversational actions are indicative of membership in a same-sex romantic couple MCD. Both Sandra and Lisa referenced their shared experience of being sexual partners, suggesting at least a sexual relationship between the two. Their comments also referenced a historical aspect of their relationship because they are able to label one partner as more sexually experimental than the other. Such labeling indicates a history of sexual interaction between Sandra and Lisa from which the evaluation “more experimental” is reached (line 4). Individuals without such a history are less capable of constructing such an identity without possible dispute from the individual for whom the identity is constructed.

Lisa and Sandra share knowledge of their sexual relationship. Either can choose to reveal that shared information regarding their referenced sexual relationship.
The ability to reveal shared knowledge is true for any couple with joint experiences (Mandelbaum, 1987). The inference that one must first have sexual experience with another in order to consequently make it public indicated that Lisa and Sandra are members of some MCD involving a sexual or romantic aspect.

Later in the extract after some laughter from the participants, Mark quipped that Lisa may need to “get out of the way” (line 16) when Lisa presumably begins her sexual experimentation. Lisa responded that she may quash Lisa’s sexual advances through the typical “I’m too tired” response (line 17). This utterance also suggests a long-term element to the relationship between Lisa and Sandra in that Lisa may be tired “tonight” but not some other night. Hearers of this utterance may infer that a relationship occurring over some period of time exists between Lisa and Sandra.

The hearer’s maxim indicates that ambiguous categories that could be part of at least two different MCDs should be heard as belonging to its category bound device (Psathas, 1999). This suggests that Lisa’s utterance “femme on the streets, butch on the sheets” is a member of the category lesbian and may be part of at least two different MCDs such as same-sex romantic couple or sexual adventurers. Considering both Lisa’s “femme on the streets” utterance and Lisa’s “I’m more experimental” utterance (line 4), the category lesbian in this instance is likely bound to the MCD same-sex romantic partner because this self-description and description of one’s partner suggests a longer-term sexual relationship. The consistency rule, which indicates that category names from the same device should be applied to members of the same population (Sacks, 1974), suggests that the category romantic partner may be more appropriately applied to both Lisa and Sandra given the historical nature of their shared experiences. Additionally, because two women spoke about an enduring sexual relationship, the MCD same-sex romantic couple is inferred.

4.2 Categorical Practice in Displaying Relational Roles

In this section, the relationship oriented phenomenon of relational roles is the focus of analysis. I focus on the ways speakers invoke categories and the corresponding category-bound activities in the course of discussing their relationships. By explaining how these couples discuss roles within their relationships, I demonstrate how this activity is category bound to the MCD same-sex couple.
Similar to prior examples, the following extract suggests the standardized relational pair involved in a romantic relationship rather than another type of relationship because the participants are discussing relationship roles specific to a romantic relationship. In particular, division of household shopping responsibilities are addressed.

**Extract 4: “Dinner with the Neighbors”**

1. Bret: What about shopping?
2. Dave: I shop
3.  Yep I do the shopping
4.  I do all =
5. Mark: =Well, but what kind of shopping
6.  You should specify.
7. Bret: >Food<
8. Mark: Food shopping (.) right

Several elements of this interaction suggest that Dave and Mark are members of the MCD same-sex romantic couple. Dave’s response to Bret’s question indicates that Dave and Mark are in a relationship in which shopping is a household task allocated between the two men. Mark indicated that different types of shopping could be allocated between the two (lines 5-6). The distribution of household tasks, which relational pairs must negotiate in order to maintain the shared household (Kurdek, 2007), implies some standardized relational pair such as roommates or same-sex partners. A longer-term and potentially more intimate relationship is implied by Mark’s indication that different types of shopping are distributed in their relationship. The fact that two men in a relationship allocate shopping responsibilities, and potentially different types of shopping responsibilities, points to a romantic relationship. Roommates may allocate grocery-shopping responsibilities, but they are not likely to distribute other types of shopping responsibilities such as for clothing.

Dave’s assertion that he does the shopping (lines 2-4) suggests the category “person-who-shares-a-living-space” could be bound to the MCD roommates or same-sex romantic couple. However, while roommates or friends may allocate grocery shopping responsibilities, they are less likely to allocate other types of shopping responsibilities as suggested by Mark (lines 5-6).
This utterance allows one to infer through the hearer's maxim that Mark and Dave are members of the same-sex romantic partner population, and the consistency rule indicates that category names from that population should be applied to both men. More specifically, their shared history and allocation of household tasks suggest the MCD same-sex romantic couple.

The couples below discussed a specific relationship role, namely the allocation of household tasks such as grocery shopping. This interaction began with Bret providing a possible reason for Lisa's primary responsibility for grocery shopping in the household she shares with Sandra.

**Extract 5: “Dinner with the neighbors”**

1. Bret: Now is that because of you going to school?
2. And she's the one that's working:
3. Is that part of it too?
4. Lisa: No (. ) I think the food thing is because I'm the one that cooks
5. And Sandra is (. ) but
6. She could go without food for sixteen weeks
7. And she couldn't give a shit
8. Mark: Ha ha (. ) ho::
9. Sandra: But so she knows wh- what we have and what we need
10. Lisa: But you could know (. ) if you wanted to
11. Armando: Ha hahahaha
12. Lisa: But you choose not to know

Prior to this extract, Lisa indicated her primary responsibility for grocery shopping and Bret offered a query with a candidate response, namely that Lisa did more shopping because she attended school and Sandra worked (lines 1-3). Lisa rejected the candidate response and indicated that she grocery shops because she also does the cooking in part because Sandra is not interested in food (lines 4-7). Sandra provided another reason for Lisa's role as grocery shopper, namely that she knows what the couple has and needs (line 9). Lisa rebutted Sandra's justification by indicating that Sandra could also know what is needed in terms of groceries (lines 10 and 12).
One feature of this interaction that suggests a romantic relationship is the allocation of household tasks by Lisa and Sandra. This interaction indicates they decided to allocate grocery shopping and cooking duties in their household. Their utterances also suggest a historical nature of the relationship in that Lisa knows about Sandra’s lack of interest in food. Sandra’s use of “we” (line 9) also suggests a relationship between the two (Íñigo-Mora, 2004). Lastly, Bret’s initial question suggesting that one partner works and the other attends school points to another role allocation between Lisa and Sandra normatively associated with a romantic relationship. The query suggests some financial caretaking on Sandra’s part because she is the “working” partner while Lisa is attending school.

This series of utterances could be heard as two female roommates describing how they handle cooking and cleaning responsibilities within their household. Such a hearing would place Lisa and Sandra in the membership category roommate. However, because neither Lisa nor Sandra objected to Bret’s indication that one partner works while the other attends school, Lisa and Sandra are more likely members of a more intimate relationship category grouping, namely a same-sex romantic couple. The financial dependency implied by Bret’s statement is more normatively associated with a romantic relationship, not a roommate relationship.

5. Conclusion

The methods observable in these members’ uses of the same-sex romantic partner membership category not only involve members talking about intimate knowledge of their partner and the allocation of relationship roles, but also include using this categorizing to accomplish a sense of social role and identity through these conversations. This analysis illustrated the categorization work done by members as they use the features of language, culture, conversational action, and settings to make persons’ identities, actions, and other attributes observable. These actions make reportable the occasion of membership in a particular relationship category, and this categorization work rests in part upon making available the prior shared experiences of those in the relationship.

This analysis also supports the perspective that identities are not fixed and predetermined, but are situated occurrences that interactants’ make available through their talk (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).
The resources for identity construction emerged as actions such as discussing household responsibilities, reminiscing about past experiences, or revealing a partner's preferences. Those constructed identities related to occupation (extract 1) or sexual behavior (extract 3), in some instances, and were revealed through descriptions of social roles within relationships. Being the “grocery shopper” or the “sexually experimental partner” were examples of the roles made available by these participants.

The MCD same-sex romantic couple examined here is a result of both conversational resource and topic. The device same-sex romantic couple is evidenced through actions such as the co-telling of prior shared experiences or jointly responding to inquiries. The hearer’s maxim supports the placement of members into a general relationship device based upon these actions, but in isolation these actions alone do not point to incumbency in a same-sex romantic couple MCD. Considering the topics of conversation employed with these actions enables one to infer that these speakers are members of the same-sex romantic couple device. A topic such as the sexual interaction that occurs between the partners or the financial dependency one partner has on another supports this inference. The greater emphasis MCA places upon interactants’ interpretive procedures compared to turn-by-turn sequencing enables analysts to reach these sort of conclusions (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).

A feature of this categorization work is that characterizations of gay and lesbian partnership are oriented to as playful and ludic. The elements of humor present in many of these interactions is present in a variety of instances including Lisa’s characterization of her partner as “femme on the streets; butch in the sheets” and John’s assertion that Matt does nothing more than watch soap operas. The laughter that follows these instances shows these representations are oriented to humorous rather than conflict invoking. This may be a feature of the talk that distinguishes same-sex romantic relationships from heterosexual relationships as this sort of playful, camp-like talk has been linked with gay conversation (Harvey, 1998, 2000).

The gender role implications of many of these interactions may also differentiate same-sex from heterosexual couples. To the extent that men discussing types of shopping and watching soap operas or women discussing sexual experimentation deviates from normative gender behavior, these participants do not conform to traditional gender roles.
Perhaps these members feel more comfortable discussing non-normative behavior for their gender, albeit in a situation that includes the company of other same-sex couples. Certainly how categories develop is contingent on the situation, but it also draws on given cultural resources provided by language (Leudar et al., 2004). Clearly further analysis of data, particularly from heterosexual couples, is needed in order to support findings related to the manner in which sexual orientation and gender are oriented to in membership categorization work.

This study indicates that a confluence of factors allows other membership categories to fall away while same-sex romantic partner remains a logical inference. When joint ownership of past experiences, the sharing of those experiences, discussion of relationship roles, and non-normative gender behavior come together other types of relationship categories recede from consideration. The examination of similar data and the connecting of activities to categories will aid in the development of these and other factors that suggest incumbency in the same-sex romantic couple Membership Category Device.

References


