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## **Membership Categorisation Analysis: Studying Identities in Talk and Text**

### ***'In Situ, In Vivo'***

Andrea Whittle

& Frank Mueller

### **Introduction**

There is much work on identities in organizations but insufficient attention has been paid to *how* they may be studied. Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) offers one fruitful way forward that has not received the attention it deserves from identity scholars (e.g. Caza, et al, 2018; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Brown, 2015). In this chapter, we will outline and illustrate how MCA is useful for identity scholars. MCA involves the analysis of the social categories that people use in everyday talk and text to describe themselves and others. Social categories are the basis through which we make sense of our own identities and the identities of others not only as unique individuals but importantly as *members of social groups*. As Antaki and Widdicombe (1998: 2) point out, 'any individual can, of course, sensibly be described under a multitude of categories': as a woman, a manager, a mother, a professional, a salesperson and so on. When people categorise themselves as a member of a social category, that categorisation can be accepted, questioned, rejected or ignored by others. The same is true when people find themselves described by others using a particular social category. Importantly, this

categorisation activity is part and parcel of the day-to-day work that takes place in organizations and between organizations. MCA has been described by Stokoe (2012: 278) as the ‘milk float’ running behind the ‘juggernaut’ of CA, capturing the different pace at which CA and MCA have taken off in the social sciences. Our aim in this chapter is to demonstrate the analytic value that can be gained from studying the categories that are used in management and organizational settings to accomplish the ‘doing’ of organizational life.

MCA involves analysing three inter-related features of categories-in-use: (a) identifying *which* identity categories people use in talk and texts, by whom and at which moment in their interactions; (b) analysing what kinds of *reasoning* and *inference* these categories enable the speaker or writer to accomplish; and (c) what kinds of *practical actions* the categories are deployed within (and part of achieving) – for example acts of complaining, praising, inviting, rejecting, blaming, excusing, justifying, admonishing, and so on. In MCA, the analyst focuses on the knowledge and use of categories *employed by the members of the social group themselves*, not those attributed to the members by the analyst (Watson, 2015: 26).

MCA invites study of the ‘routine ordinary common-sense knowledge’ people use to make sense of (and with) categories and the forms of ‘practical theorising’ they accomplish in doing so (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015: 3). In building upon Austin’s speech act theory, Edwards (1998) points out that when people use categories they do so in the course of performing particular *discursive actions*. Categories are therefore part of *doing* something, not just *describing* something. They attend to some kind of ‘discursive business’ (Edwards, 1998: 17). Understanding this discursive business requires the analyst to investigate not only which categories get used by whom and when, but also asking ‘what is this categorisation doing?’ (Watson, 2015: 29) MCA, therefore, starts with identifying which categories are used by

particular people at particular moments during acts of speaking and writing, but crucially goes further to analyse what forms of practical reasoning these categories enable and what social actions they are used to accomplish.

Categories are understood as ‘inference rich’ because categorisation is a ‘normative practice through which inferences and implications are generated and managed’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 66). In Jayyusi’s (1984: 166) words, categories have a ‘normative and moral infrastructure’. Describing someone as a member of a social category matters because it is consequential for the way that person’s identity is made sense of. It matters not only for how they are described but also how they are *normatively evaluated* (Jayyusi, 1984). In this chapter, we will show how categories have been used to perform moral evaluations of the U.S. President Donald Trump.

We will first provide an overview of the origins of MCA as it developed in ethnomethodology and later in conversation analysis. Next, we provide an overview of the types of work undertaken within organization studies that have drawn on MCA as a theory of social categories in use. We then illustrate MCA through an analysis of a *New York Times* editorial written by a purported anonymous member of the Trump administration in which the leadership of President Trump is described and evaluated. We conclude by outlining the analytic value of MCA and how it relates to other approaches to the study of identities in organizations.

## **Origins**

MCA originates from Harvey Sacks’ influential book *Lectures on Conversation* and together with Conversation Analysis (CA) forms one of two main forms of ethnomethodological approaches to studying interactional practices. MCA involves the analysis of identity

categories employed when people are speaking within a conversation or a written text. While CA focuses on the sequential organization of talk in interaction, MCA focuses on the ways in which actual references to categories used in talk or text enable members of a social group to accomplish whatever it is they are doing: holding a business meeting, calling a helpline, teaching a class or putting forward an argument in a letter or speech. The question for an MCA analysis then becomes: how are social categories used to engage in forms of practical reasoning about the social world? This includes examining how membership of a category is ‘ascribed (and rejected), avowed (and disavowed), displayed (and ignored)’ (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998: 2) in particular settings and times in the course of accomplishing some practical task.

CA and MCA are ethnomethodological approaches grounded in the work of sociologist Harold Garfinkel from which the work of Harvey Sacks emerged. Some use the term EM/CA to reference this close link (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010). Ethnomethodological study involves focus on the way members of a society, regarded as ‘folk’ sociologists (Wieder, 1974) or ‘practical’ sociologists (Benson & Hughes, 1983) use their common-sense knowledge of the social world to accomplish social organization. People, from this perspective, are not viewed as ‘cultural and judgemental dopes’ (Watson, 2015: 26), being pushed and pulled into compliance by norms and values, but as active constructors of social worlds. Social facts are seen as *accomplishments*, not pre-existing ‘things’ leading Garfinkel (1967: 79) to refer to this approach as the study of ‘fact production in flight’.

While MCA scholars retain their interest in categories used in spoken interaction, it is not confined to studying talk but has also been used to study written texts. Eglin and Hester (2003) use MCA to analyse the newspaper coverage of the 1989 Montreal Massacre, where a lone gunman killed 14 female engineering students. They show how the newspaper descriptions

employed categories and associated predicates to make sense of the underlying motive behind the attack. Eglin and Hester (1999) analyse the suicide letter written by the gunman himself to make the attack rationally accountable, in his eyes at least. Stetson (1999) also used MCA to analyse a Japanese newspaper story about a woman pushing a man onto train tracks and showed how alternative categorisations of the actors – either as a ‘woman’ or an ‘exotic dancer’, as a ‘teacher’ or a ‘drunk’ – created ascribed identities for both parties, which were consequential for how blame was allocated: ‘woman versus drunk’ creates a different moral story from ‘exotic dancer versus teacher’.

The concept of *category predicates* is an important one in MCA and is especially relevant for the study of identities in organizations. What was first described by Sacks as ‘category bound activities’ to refer to the activities typically associated with a particular category of person (‘crying’ for a baby, ‘comforting’ by a mother) has since been expanded to the concept of ‘category predicates’. Category predicates refer to the whole array of social characteristics conventionally associated with a category (Hester, 1992: 165). These characteristics could include ‘motives, rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributes and competencies’ that can be imputed or ascribed as ‘going with’ a category (Psathas, 1999: 144).

For example, Watson (1978) analysed the categories used in a complaint by a caller to a suicide prevention hotline. The caller invoked a number of categories in the course of her complaint about the ‘disgusting’ (p.105) way she was being treated by her church, including categories of religion (Protestants, Catholics, Jewish people) and racial categories (black people and white people) and the obligations and expectations of categories of people within the church (vicar). The concept of *membership categorisation device* (MCD) is important here. MCDs are devices for collecting together a group of categories that are typically understood as ‘going together’

(Sacks, 1992). Protestant, Catholic and Jew are all members of the device ‘religion’, for example. Black and white are heard as ‘going together’ in the device ‘race’.

Returning to Watson (1978), when the call-taker asks the caller if she has spoken to anyone at the church and whether they know she needs help, the caller resists the inference in the question, i.e. that the church have not failed in their moral duty if they do not know she needs assistance, by categorising herself as not being the ‘type’ to ‘come screaming’ for help because that would make her a ‘beggar’ (p.106). In this example, we see how two social actions – a complaint (against her church for breaking its moral *obligation* to offer aid) and a justification (for failing to undertake her *responsibility* to ask if she needs help) are accomplished through the use of category predicates. The organization is criticised for failing in its duties through the inferences being made about rights, responsibilities and obligations. Crucially, though, these inferences drew on common-sense understandings of categories that were *not* shared: the call-taker drew on a *different* set of inferences about the responsibility of the client (in this case the church member) to let the organization know if they needed help. Later, we will analyse the construction of ‘moral profiles’ used to present ‘specific distributions of blame, guilt or responsibility’ (Watson, 1978: 107) ascribed to President Trump as a leader.

## **Membership categories and organizations**

As part of organizational life, categories are routinely used to describe the people who work in them and interact with them. Organizations have people who are categorised as managers and employees, leaders and followers, as senior managers and middle managers, as people who work for various functional departments (the ‘purchasing department’, the ‘sales team’) and business units (the ‘Brazilian headquarters’, the ‘Chinese subsidiary’). People working in organizations also categorise those they interact with during the course of doing their business.

Other organizations are categorised as either competitors or allies, customers are categorised as satisfied customers or complainers, and so on. Interacting with other people inside and outside the organization would be hard to imagine without some way of categorising those people in order to make sense of *who they are* and what they might be expected to *be or do*.

The study of membership categorisation activity is central to the ethnomethodological model of organizations. Hester and Eglin (1997) term this approach to studying human societies ‘culture-in-action’, while Boden (1994) calls it ‘organization-in-action’. Psathas (1999: 142) explains how categories help us to understand the work of organizations:

‘The notion here is that, if the “identities” of the parties ... are relevant for the parties in the interaction, then these will be manifest in the various ways that the parties invoke, formulate and orient to contingently relevant membership categories. Further, by understanding how “categorization work” is ongoing, we can also understand how organizational context is invoked and made relevant by the parties since organizational identities are involved. And, since, in their talk-in-interaction they are engaged in “work”, such studies may reveal how the work of the organization is ongoingly produced in and through their interaction’.

Only a handful of studies *of* organizations or *in* organizations have used MCA. Samra-Fredericks (2003) showed how a senior manager led a strategic change initiative by deploying categories in interaction, painting a picture of the organization’s weaknesses and the danger that posed for its strategic plan of growth through acquisition. Llewellyn (2011) analyzed how categories play a role in the accountability of gift giving exchanges. Fairhurst’s (2007) analysis of leadership demonstrates that categories are ‘flexible linguistic resources’ (p.50) that not only enable leaders to describe a situation, but also to make judgements, inferences and decisions about what to do that lead others to hold consonant understandings. Larsson and Lundholm (2013) used MCA to study leadership interactions in an international bank. Using audio recordings of two managers negotiating a decision about an overdrawn customer account, the authors show how ‘the negotiation about the nature of the issue is intimately associated with the interactional identities of the participants’ (p.1120). Whittle et al. (2015) examined audio

recordings of strategy meetings to identify the role played by membership categories in the formulation and implementation of a strategic change initiative. One final example is that of Iszatt-White et al. (2018) who also address issues of leadership in an analysis using MCA of the media representations of Jeremy Corbyn during the leadership election contest for the UK Labour Party.

### **An illustrative example: The New York Times op-ed piece**

On 5<sup>th</sup> September 2018, the New York Times ran an anonymous op-ed<sup>i</sup> article entitled “*I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration*”<sup>ii</sup>. The article stated that it was written by a ‘senior official’ within the Trump administration. We have chosen to analyse the categories used in this text for three main reasons. Firstly, it illuminates an important phenomenon relevant to the study of organizations: namely, the relationship between leaders and followers. More specifically, it discusses a highly relevant topic of leadership ethics. Third and finally, it was a consequential text in the sense that it was discussed in the media around the world and subsequently shaped the way in which people discussed and evaluated Trump. Both his supporters and his critics had much to say about the op-ed piece and it was a key text that informed the ongoing discourse about his presidency. In this chapter we will focus only on the categories used in the op-ed piece itself, while noting that the analysis could also be extended to the texts and conversations that followed its publication (such as commentaries, talk shows, and stand-up comedy routines).

Our analysis will address the following question: how is description and evaluation of a leader identity accomplished through the use of categories? The social actions being performed by this op-ed article include the acts of complaining, criticising, admonishing, resisting, warning, encouraging and inviting. Our analysis will focus on how the categories deployed in the text



accomplished these social actions. First, we break down the op-ed article to show the categories used as it progresses, and second, we highlight particular category-based reasoning procedures that the author uses to present his or her account and accomplish the social actions listed above (see Table 1). We will be breaking our analysis into two sections, namely under second-tier titles ‘Author identity’ and ‘President Trump’s identity’.

--- Insert Table 1 here ---

### **Author Identity**

The first set of categories we focus on concerns the way in which the author positions himself or herself as part of an ‘epistemic community’. The author describes him/her-self as a member of a group of insiders who have access to privileged forms of knowledge due to their senior positions: described by the author as ‘senior officials’ and ‘top officials’. This categorisation performs an important discursive function, namely positioning the author as part of a *collective group* who shares the views being expressed. This ‘category entitlement’ – the idea that particular categories of people are treated as or claim to be knowledgeable as a result of their membership of a social category (Potter, 1996: 133) – also performs the epistemic function of *bolstering* and *corroborating* the validity of the opinions being expressed (Benoit, 2014). It implies, ‘it’s not only me who thinks this, *all members* of the category senior official think this’. The author reinforces his identity as part of the group of senior officials. The President’s identity is then invoked through a description of his amoral behaviour as a ‘daily’ occurrence, invoking a sense of a *permanent personality trait* rather than idiosyncratic instances. A ‘type’ or ‘typification’ is thereby constructed.

While associating with this in-group of senior officials, the author also differentiates him/herself from this wider collective by positioning the others as sharing these views only ‘privately’, whereas the author is willing to go public, albeit under the veil of anonymity. In terms of footing (Goffman, 1981; see also Potter, 1996: Figure 5.1), the author positions him/herself as not only the *author* and *principal* of these opinions but also the *animator* of a viewpoint shared by a collective (Goffman, 1981). At this point, the reference to a collective social group is also widened beyond just ‘senior officials’ to include ‘anyone who works with him’ and ‘astute observers’. This categorisation practice creates a sense of a wider collective who corroborate these views. Overall, then, these membership categories perform an epistemic function, namely transforming the opinion from a *subjective* viewpoint (which would carry with it inferences about personal bias) into an *objective* statement of fact: something that ‘anyone in our shoes would see’ (Potter, 1996: Figure 5.1).

Categories are also used to handle the actual or potential attributions of motive. An Op Ed piece as critical as this could easily be discredited on a number of grounds related to material or ideal interests (Lizardo & Stoltz, 2018) including, but not limited to, personal political ambition in seeking to displace the President to secure power for themselves or their allies, a vendetta motivated by personal conflict, or an ideological battle motivated by competing political agendas. The author focuses on the latter in particular and uses stake inoculation (Potter, 1996: 125) to discount the notion that a partisan ideological agenda is the motivation for the article by discounting the notion that the article is motivated by ‘the left’. By dis-identifying with a social group (‘the left’), the objectivity of the opinion is bolstered. Further, the author explicitly identifies as a Republican and discounts the notion that the motive for the piece arises from a pre-existing political stake, say, as someone from the rival political party most expected to be ‘resistant’ to Trump’s policies. Thus, the reader can no longer dismiss the text as ideologically

motivated from an alternative political standpoint. What is contested here, therefore, is not the ‘real’ motive, which no one can ever truly access or know, and instead the *ascribed* motive, i.e. the ‘vocabulary of motive’ (Mills, 1940).

The author also invokes categories in his or her description of motives. These motives ascribed to the collective include having a ‘duty to this country’ and wanting to ‘preserve democratic institutions’. These motives are used to construct the *principal* (Goffman, 1981) behind the text by invoking the persons or ideals *on whose behalf* the text is being written. This transforms the text from one motivated by *self*-interest to one claiming to be motivated by duty to the country. Importantly, the plural pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ are used to attribute these motives to the *whole collective* of ‘senior officials’ the author claims to be a member of. Other potential ascriptions of motives are also discounted when the author anticipates the potential nefarious motives that could be ascribed to those who are anti-Trump. The notion that this collective group of ‘resistors’ are acting anti-democratically is eschewed by rejecting the notion that a ‘deep state’ is in operation. Thus, the writer contests an accusation made by Trump in his tweets and by Trump supporters in books and articles (Corsi, 2018).

The author also orients towards matters of *moral accountability* tied to categories. The fact that the moral accountability of disobeying orders by a superior is attended to shows that ‘following orders’ is a *category-bound predicate* of ‘senior official’ (Watson, 2015: 35). The category-bound expectation that a subordinate would follow the orders of a superior is oriented to as *requiring an account*: a breach in the moral order has occurred and needs to be justified in some way. This justification is accomplished through an appeal to their commitment to a higher set of ideals connected to the protection of ‘national interest’ and their ‘duty’ to the country. Breaking *one* set of role-bound expectations is justified through an appeal to *another* set of

obligations that supersede these. Further justification work is also conducted to account for why the normal routes for challenging Trump's decisions or unseating him were not followed. Writing an anonymous Op Ed article criticising the President is not a normal category-bound activity for a senior official and therefore the act of writing the article itself is an accountable action. Options such as the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment<sup>iii</sup>, for example, are dismissed as risking a constitutional crisis and here again motives relating to duty to the nation are invoked to justify their rejection.

*A membership categorisation device* is used to bring together a group of people who share certain attributes: wanting the administration to succeed (thereby ruling Democrats out of the category), agreeing with the policies of the administration (thereby ruling out those who disagree on policy), having a first duty to the country (thereby ruling out non-patriots) and holding an overriding allegiance to preserving democratic institutions (thereby ruling out those with other motives). The author, then, is positioned as merely the *animator* of this social group. Interestingly, notions of higher duty are conflated with the category Republican: only 'true' Republicans can act in the national interest.

### **President Trump's identity**

Within the category 'Republican', two social groups are in fact constructed: those who adhere to the 'true' or 'proper' ideals of conservatism ('free minds, free markets and free people') and those who do not. In other words, there are 'true Republicans' and 'fake Republicans'. Trump is positioned in the second category, as someone who *appears* to represent these conservative ideals, but *in fact does not belong to the category*. A distinction is made between 'appearance' and 'reality' (Buttny, 2004: 156) and two discrediting methods are used to achieve this distinction: the terms 'scripted' and 'mass-marketing' are both used to discredit a

text as not reflecting the ‘real’ view or opinion of someone. The author leads the reader to infer that they have been ‘duped’: what they *think* (appearance) Trump stands for is in fact the *opposite* (reality). What Trump espouses (appearance) is not what he really thinks or does (reality). For example, Trump is described as espousing the benefits of free trade and democracy (appearance), but his ‘impulses’ are described as ‘anti-trade and anti-democratic’ (reality). This categorisation discourse plays on Goffmanian notions of self-presentation, front-stage and impression management (Goffman, 1959/2002), by implying that ‘what you see is not what you get’.

The author proceeds to present him/her-self as fair and balanced by acknowledging the ‘bright spots’ of Trump’s administration, but these are also ‘ironicised’ (Pollner, 2010) – that is, they should not be treated as reflecting the ‘true’ reality – in two ways. Firstly, newspaper coverage (appearance) is ironicised as not reflecting the ‘true’ progress (reality) that has been made by the administration (what ‘the near ceaseless negative coverage ... fails to capture’). Secondly, the ‘bright spots’ are also ironicised by claiming that the positive progress of the administration (‘effective deregulation, historic tax reform, a more robust military’) is also not what it appears to be. What would normally be attributed to the President as the *leader* of the administration is portrayed as achievements made *despite* his actions. The good things achieved by the administration (appearance) are distinguished from the behind-the-scenes activity needed to make these good things happen (reality). This appearance/reality discursive device (Buttny, 2004: 156), therefore, performs an important *identity function* by positioning Trump as not a ‘true Republican’ because he fails to enact the ideals (predicate) that the author associates with the category Republican. A form of category policing is being performed by the author: deciding who qualifies and should be admitted into the social category Republican. An identity category that Trump *claims* is here being *rejected* for him.

The final categorisation used by the writer is the category of leader. Trump is evaluated through a variety of descriptions of his personality and behaviour as a leader: impetuous, petty, adversarial. While there is certainly no universal shared common-sense about what makes a good leader, these descriptions of behaviour and personality do invoke a sense of the predicates least likely to be attributed to a competent and effective leader. Moreover, a moral landscape is laid out in which there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters. Trump is presented as amoral and, therefore, a bad character. Trump is also categorised as associating with the ‘wrong’ people, such as autocrats and dictators. The term ‘adult’ is particularly relevant here because it plays on a ‘stage of life device’ (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998: 138) in which persons in category X who display behaviour Y warrant praise or complaint. By categorising the senior officials the writer identifies with as ‘adults in the room’, Trump is implicitly categorised as ‘child-like’. The good characters include the author and his collection of senior officials, who are described as the ‘unsung heroes’ who temper his worst behaviours and unravel his bad decisions.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis of the Op Ed article has revealed how moral reasoning was undertaken in relation to three identities: the identity of Trump as an incumbent of the role of President, the identity of the writer and, thirdly, the identity of the collective group of Senior Officials. The moral accountability of Trump was articulated through a set of category predicates normatively associated with Presidents (such as putting the national interest first) and category predicates normatively associated with Republicans (such as a commitment to free markets, free trade and free people). The social action being performed – in this case criticism – was performed not through reasoning about Trump *as an individual*, but through the reasoning about the duties, responsibilities and obligations normatively associated with *Trump-as-a-President* and *Trump-*

*as-a-Republican*. The writer invoked a set of moral expectations the reader was assumed to share about what a ‘good’ President should do and what a ‘proper’ Republican should do.

The author also oriented to a different set of moral accountabilities associated with the act of criticising. Criticism of a person who is not only above you in the hierarchical chain of command, but also a democratically elected leader of the nation, is morally accountable in many ways, because it breaches normative expectations, such as the expectation that a subordinate should show loyalty and follow orders. We know this normative expectation is oriented to precisely, because the writer spends so much time *accounting* for why he/she is writing the Op Ed article (for example through appeals to duty and higher ideals) and why ready-to-hand inferences about his/her motive should *not* be made – such as partisan bias. This discursive work positions the writer as motivated by moral duty to the country and its citizens, and *not* as an illegitimate, party political, disloyal attack. The categorisation work concerning ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am not’ was also tied up with the epistemic work of presenting the critique of Trump as neutral, fair, objective and unbiased.

Towards the end of the article, the writer sought to construct a set of identities for the reader, categorised as ‘everyday citizens’. A set of moral obligations were constructed for the reader. These included references to political party allegiances referenced through terms such as ‘labels’ and ‘reaching across the aisle’ and the moral duty of the reader to supersede any in-group identifications and out-group dis-identifications generated by their party political grouping (Republicans versus Democrats).<sup>iv</sup>

Building on previous work undertaken using MCA to analyse the discourse of political leaders (Iszatt-White et al., 2018), we also contribute to the body of knowledge in leadership studies

by showing how the category of 'leader' is made sense of and reasoned about. What differentiates our findings from the wider body of work in MCA is the focus on *more or less* shared common stocks of knowledge and reasoning. This is a crucial point that is worth unpacking in more detail. The focus in MCA analysis is typically on the shared knowledge and reasoning used to make sense of identities within interaction. The category 'leader' is, however, a different story altogether. Normative expectations about the category 'leader' are both historically contingent (as evidenced by the different ideas of what a good leader should be throughout history) and situationally contingent (one culture might be different from another, leaders of political parties might be different to corporate leaders and different to a charity) (Grint, 2005).

While the category 'leader' can at times have a shared set of understandings and expectations about the type of person that makes a good leader, the category can also at times be highly contested. For instance, a leader can be *praised* for their leadership credentials by some at the same time as being *criticised* for their leadership failings by others, as the analysis of the media discourse on UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has shown (Iszatt-White et al., 2018). In these situations, it is clear that there are different forms of knowledge and reasoning about what characteristics are needed to be a 'good leader'. Here, knowledge about the category leader is *not* shared-in-common. Indeed, ascribing an identity category is always subject to potential contestation.

## **Conclusion**

Identity is one of the central pillars of any theory of culture. As Housley and Fitzgerald (2015) argue, identity is an analytic construct used to capture the all-important relationship between an individual and the social groups and society they interact with. To have an identity is to be



cast into a ‘typification’ or social type with an associated set of expectations about one’s role, relationships and responsibilities within a culture or social structure (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015). The study of how people are placed into ‘types’, and the kinds of practical reasoning accomplished through this social ‘typing’ of persons, operationalises an important element of Schutz’s (1973) phenomenological approach to understanding how society is constituted through typifications. Indeed, Watson (2015) describes MCA as providing a ‘linguistic turn’ to Schutz’s work on typifications.

The ethnomethodological approach underpinning MCA asks ‘how is identity done, managed, achieved and negotiated *in situ*?’ Indeed, MCA asks how people *draw on and use* social identities, in talk or text, in getting their everyday business done. It addresses this question by studying social identity as ‘something people in society do, achieve, negotiate, attribute things to and act upon as part of their daily lives’ (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015: 3). This way of approaching the study of identity is different to other approaches that start with theories of self, or discourse, or power. Rather than seeking to explain how people come to hold a sense of self and how power operates through the discourses that construct subject positions, MCA seeks to investigate ‘how people display identity, in terms of ascribed membership of social categories, and the consequences of ascription or display for the interactional work being accomplished’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 69).

MCA represents a distinct approach to studying identities that sits alongside the dominant approaches in organization theory. MCA shares common intellectual roots with many of these, and their anti-essentialist perspective on identity as something that people construct through their social interactions as opposed to something that is a stable and fixed inner ‘core’ or ‘essence’. However, it also provides a distinct way of approaching the question of how we

construct our sense of self. Consider, for example, how other approaches would approach the text we have analysed in this chapter. Social Identity Theory, for instance, would seek to identify the cognitive processes that lay behind the creation of identification with the in-group (those critical of the President) and disidentification with the out-group (those supporting the President). It would also be interested in mapping the psychological process through which well-established in-group identifications and out-group disidentifications are being challenged (for instance, references to ‘shed the labels’ and ‘reaching across the aisle’). MCA, on the other hand, approaches this question of identity as a *discursive practice* (for instance the creation of a discursive category of an in-group and out-group) used as part of the accomplishment of particular *social actions* (for instance, the social action of criticising). Identities, from an MCA perspective, are not only something we have but also something we discursively invoke and negotiate as part of our interactions with others.

To conclude, MCA enables us to analyse how, when a social category is used, the person being described is also being judged according to the set of *normative expectations* associated with that category. For every category, there is a list of ‘actions, beliefs, feelings and obligations *normatively* associated with it’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 69, emphasis added). However, we propose that these ‘norms’ can be *more or less shared* and *more or less contested*. They can also change over time as societies and social groups develop their cultural beliefs and expectations about these social categories. As such, membership categories are part of the stock of knowledge and reasoning procedures that constitute the *culture* of a society or social group. Studying the categories people use in talk and text enables us to see the norms and values that people draw on as interpretative resources for making sense of themselves and others. These are not just interpretations that take place in people’s heads as part of cognitive processes of categorizing streams of experience: they take place in publicly visible and accountable

*interactions* with others. We invite others working in the field of identities in organizations to see where this study of membership categories in and about organizations can take us in the study of categories 'in situ, in vivo' (Watson, 2015: 35).

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**Table 1 Membership categorisation in the New York Times op-ed**

New York Times article	Membership Categorisations
President Trump is facing a test to his presidency unlike any faced by a modern American leader....	Author categorises himself or herself as a member of a group of senior officials who share his or her concerns about the President.
To be clear, ours is not the popular “resistance” of the left. We want the administration to succeed and think that many of its policies have already made America safer and more prosperous. ...	The author disavows two categories (‘the left’ and those who ‘want the administration to fail’) and lays claim to membership of another category (people who have a duty to the country and who want to preserve the nation’s democratic institutions) which contains other members of the category ‘Trump appointees’.
The root of the problem is the president’s amorality. ...	The author claims to be a member of a category of people who know the same thing (‘anyone who works with his’) which lead them to reach the same conclusions.
Although he was elected as a Republican, the president shows little affinity for ideals long espoused by conservatives: free minds, free markets and free people. ...	The author claims that the category Republican exhibits a set of conservative ideals that the president does not fit and does not belong to (Trump as a <i>non-category member</i> ).
Don’t get me wrong. There are bright spots that the near- ceaseless negative coverage of the administration fails to capture: effective deregulation, historic tax reform, a more robust military and more. ...	The author distances himself or herself from negative media coverage and praises some achievements which are attributed to the category ‘the administration’. Successes are attributed to a category of people (the administration) and not the leader.
From the White House to executive branch departments and agencies, senior officials will privately admit their daily disbelief at the commander in chief’s comments and actions. Most are working to insulate their operations from his whims. ...	The author is a member of a category of senior officials who share the same opinions because they have similar experiences of interacting with the President. Members of this category are described as having no faith in the President and seeking to avoid his decisions affecting the functioning of their departments.
The erratic behavior would be more concerning if it weren’t for unsung heroes in and around the White House. ...	The category of ‘hero’ is used to describe those who disobey or ignore his orders. The category ‘villain’ used in the media to describe some of Trump’s aides is dismissed as false.
It may be cold comfort in this chaotic era, but Americans should know that there are adults in the room. ...	The author invokes membership of two categories: people who are adults and people who know what is right.
Take foreign policy: In public and in private, President Trump shows a preference for autocrats and dictators, such as President Vladimir Putin of Russia and North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-un,	The author invokes categories of nations which the US should not engage with (“autocrats and dictators”) and those who should be regarded as allies (“like-

and displays little genuine appreciation for the ties that bind us to allied, like-minded nations. ...	minded nations"). Trump is presented as aligning himself with the wrong categories.
This isn't the work of the so-called deep state. It's the work of the steady state. ...	A contrast of categories of state administration is created by the author: "deep state" (which is critiqued as a category) and "steady state". The author lays claim to knowledge of category 'the cabinet', including their decisions and justifications for those decisions.
The bigger concern is not what Mr. Trump has done to the presidency but rather what we as a nation have allowed him to do to us. ...	The categorisation shifts away from Trump as an individual towards the characteristics of those who put Trump into power and those who follow his lead. The category 'we as a nation' is ascribed responsibility for the situation.
Senator John McCain put it best in his farewell letter. All Americans should heed his words and break free of the tribalism trap, with the high aim of uniting through our shared values and love of this great nation. ...	The category 'Americans' is invoked with a prescription of what they should hold as their values, aims and beliefs. An implicit contrast is made between Trump and the category 'honorable men', which Senator McCain is positioned as a member of.
There is a quiet resistance within the administration of people choosing to put country first. ...	The category 'administration' is further differentiated into two categories: those within in who seek to 'put the country first' (including the author) and those, by implicit contrast, who do not. The second category is 'everyday citizen' who are attributed the characteristics of being able to make a difference if they recognise their shared identity as 'Americans'.

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<sup>i</sup> An 'op-ed' is an opinion editorial which expresses the opinion of the author rather than the usual factual reporting present in newspapers.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>

<sup>iii</sup> The 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment clarifies the succession of the Vice-President to the office of the President. One of the reasons for the succession would be a President's "disability" or "incapacity".

<sup>iv</sup> Due to constraints of word limits we have not developed this point in any detail.