‘Membership Matters’: Applying Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) to Qualitative Data using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) Software

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Abstract

This paper introduces and outlines a methodology that may be unfamiliar to some qualitative researchers: Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA). The first section of the paper explains the basic principles of MCA and why it is a valid method for exploring the power of categorisations in texts and talk. Additionally, it explains why MCA differs from other forms of qualitative data analysis. The second section begins with a discussion of why researchers might or might not use Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS). Subsequently, a detailed description of how MCA was applied to qualitative data using the CAQDAS software package NVivo is outlined. To provide examples, this draws on a project that used MCA to analyse the interview accounts of twenty-five young people who had taken a Gap Year between leaving school and beginning university. The paper concludes that qualitative researchers should consider using MCA and that CAQDAS is a useful tool to aid its application.

Introduction

Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) is a form of conversation analysis that explores how individuals make sense of and order their social worlds, particularly how they constitute social actions through making categorisations and attributions. Recently, this rather neglected area of conversation analytic work has experienced a resurgence of interest with MCA applied to the analysis of gender, crime, organisational structures and stigmatised identities, amongst other topics (Eglin and Hester 2003; Horton-Salway 2004; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002; Stokoe 2003a; 2003b). However, it remains a somewhat esoteric methodology that is not widely recognised amongst qualitative researchers. Indeed, anecdotal evidence from discussions the author has had with a wide range of qualitative researchers, both academic and professional, confirms this assertion. The aim of this paper is therefore twofold. Firstly, to convince qualitative researchers of the significance of this methodology; to explain why it differs from other modes of analysis and what critical insights it can provide. Secondly, using worked examples from a study of young people's experiences of taking a Gap Year between school and university, the paper demonstrates how MCA can be applied systematically and rigorously to a corpus of qualitative interview data using a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) package, NVivo. It should not, however, be inferred that NVivo does the analysis; rather, it provides useful tools to aid the researcher in undertaking a MCA.

What is Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA)?

The analysis of membership categories was developed by Harvey Sacks in his 'Lectures on Conversation' (Sacks 1995). Subsequently it has been extended into a methodological program that examines how members of society categorise

themselves, others, and locations. In so doing, it also examines how they assign activities and attributes, or predicates, to these features (Hester and Eglin 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002). According to Baker (2000) its analytic strength is its ability to demonstrate the power of categorisations used in talk and text: ‘how discourses are called on and how they are invoked in the mundane activities of talking, hearing, reading and writing’ (Baker 2000: 112). Baker says MCA enables the investigation of culture-in-action; in effect, it shows how cultural understandings are carried by discourse and reproduced and transformed in their use. Although it may seem that MCA is mundane, Baker contends that ‘the more natural, taken-for-granted and therefore invisible the categorisation work, the more powerful it is’ (Baker 2000: 111). However, before considering the power of categorisations, some basic principles of MCA will be outlined.

Basic principles of MCA

Sacks demonstrated the use of membership categories with reference to the opening lines of a story written by and for children: ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up’ (Sacks 1974; Sacks 1995). Sacks asked: why do we hear, even as young children, that it is the mother of this infant? And, additionally, why do we regard these activities as normal for this pair of membersⁱ? He answered both of these questions with reference to membership categorisation devices (MCDs); that is, collections of categories, together with their associated attributes and rules of application (Silverman 1998).

In the children’s story, both ‘baby’ and ‘mommy’ belong to the MCD ‘family’. Sacks argued that the category ‘baby’ adheres to an ‘economy rule’: it is satisfactory for the occasion of its use. It is not necessary to know other aspects of this

baby's identity for the purpose of the description: for example, its gender. In the subsequent sentence another category is used: 'mommy'. Here a 'consistency rule' is operative: if more than one person is being categorised and can be heard as related to the same MCD then that device may be invoked to classify others. In short, since 'baby' can be heard as coming from the MCD 'family', so can 'mommy'. However, categories can be ambiguous: 'baby' can also belong to the MCDs 'stage of life' or 'romance' (Silverman 1998). Hence, a 'consistency rule corollary' or 'hearer's maxim' operates: 'if a hearer has a second category which can be heard as consistent with one locus of the first, then the first is to be heard as at least consistent with the second' (Sacks 1974: 220). In short, as 'mommy' and 'baby' are both consistent with the MCD 'family' they are heard that way, although this does not explain what the manner of their association might be: that it is the mommy of this baby.

The degree of association between these categories is achieved because of their 'duplicative organisation' and 'positioning' (Sacks 1995). Indeed, certain MCDs are comprised of various subject positions: for example, the MCD 'family' may have subject positions of 'mother', 'father', 'son', 'daughter', 'baby', 'uncle' etc. depending on the context. When two or more categories from a potentially consistent MCD are used in sequence, a 'hearer's maxim' operates to ensure that they can be heard that way; it conveys that they are 'related'. Moreover, these types of categories tend to have positions: they can be heard as hierarchical or ordered in some way, as in the case of kinship relations.

For Sacks, some categories also operate as a 'standard relational pair' (SRP) whereby certain rights and obligations are associated with them. Common examples

of categories with SRP entitlements are: 'parent-child', 'teacher-student', 'friend-friend'. Non-incumbency of one of these subject positions, or the inclusion of a category from another device in a description drawing on such an SRP would be noteworthy: for example, 'The baby cried. The dog picked it up'. Sacks noted that this draws upon something he called 'Collection K': some categories are associated with certain forms of knowledge. In the 'baby/mommy' story the knowledge drawn upon is that mother's should pick up crying babies; it has, within certain cultures, and within certain eras, normative connotations.

Sacks also noted that certain categories are bound to specific activities within a given context and/or culture. The use of category bound activities and attributes, or predicates, explains why the sequence of actions and associations in the mother/baby example are normative. However, predicates can be artfully deployed in specific contexts to substantiate or transform the meaning of certain categories or actions: for example, to establish moral and behavioural precedents. Indeed, if the opening line of the story had been 'The baby cried. The mommy slapped it' we might expect an account of abuse rather than a story of parental care. Therefore, underlying this 'machinery' of classification are tacit assumptions based on cultural knowledge, they are the objects-subjects of discourse: membership categories do identity work within discursive fields.

The power of categorisations

MCA is a methodology that exists in tension to more formal types of conversation analysis that were developed by Sacks' students, notably Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, into a program for the analysis of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction (Sacks 1995; Silverman 1998). Moreover, the development of

conversation analysis during the past four decades has largely focused on the sequential organisation of talk, to the detriment of its categorical aspects (Hester and Eglin 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002).

Prior to the 1990s there were a few notable studies that extended the remit of the examination of membership categories: the investigation of location categories (Drew 1978; Schegloff 1972), the moral ordering of categories (Jayyusi 1984), the allocation of blame (Watson 1978) and the use of the 'stage of life' collection by adolescents (Baker 1984). However, since the 1990s there has been a growing corpus of studies that have further extended MCA, often in cross and inter-disciplinary work. Studies in this corpus include those that have analysed a number of the key categories employed in social research, including: gender (Speer 2005; Stokoe 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Stokoe and Smithson 2001) and age (Edwards 1998; Nikander 2000); as well as specific settings (Vallis 2002), occupations (Baker 1997b; Roulston 2001) and national identity (Housley and Fitzgerald 2001). In each of these cases, categorisations are not treated as *a priori* things; instead, their meaning comes from the situation in which they are uttered and therefore shapes that situation. For example, in a MCA of a student workgroup, Stokoe (2004) demonstrates how gender categories become interactionally relevant, rather than simply determining the interaction in advance. She shows how the categories used by the students in their talk result in the positioning of the only female member of the workgroup as the scribe. In effect, through the talk-in-interaction the group reproduced normative gender roles, although not without a degree of argument and re-categorisation. Stokoe argues that this reveals the critical nature of MCA; it shows the micro-political dynamics of categorisations in talk.

Despite its growing application, as noted above, MCA exists in tension to mainstream conversation analysis. On several occasions, Emmanuel Schegloff (Sacks 1995; Schegloff 1991; 2007) has described the analysis of membership categories as overly interpretative; as ‘promiscuous’ and ripe with the potential for the analyst to impose meaning upon the data. Putting it uncompromisingly, Schegloff asserts

‘so-called membership categorization analysis...can thereby become a vehicle for promiscuously introducing into the analysis what the writing needs for the argument-in-progress. To avoid this, there must be analysis to show the claim is grounded in the conduct of the parties, not in the beliefs of the writer’.
(Schegloff 2007: 476)

Others have countered this argument, suggesting that their interpretations are grounded in the data (for a discussion see Silverman 1998). However, Watson (1978) has contended that the analysis of membership categories, membership categorisation devices and their associated predicates (hereafter CDPs) must take account of the sequential patterning of talk; that is, how CDPs are deployed and transformed in the ongoing production of talk. Stokoe (2004: 113-114) agrees noting that ‘order [is] produced through the formulation of category-device-predicate-activity combinations in their local use’; hence, ‘the analyst must consider the sequential and indexical organization of these categorizations’.

What are the implications of MCA for qualitative researchers?

According to Mason (2002: 3) qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with exploring ‘how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted’. In so doing, their methods of analysis, although varied, ‘produce rounded

and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data' (ibid.). Various methods of qualitative data analysis, even those with dissimilar epistemological underpinnings, are used to interpret social reality. For instance, Grounded Theory, Narrative Analysis and Thematic Analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Charmaz 2002; Coffey and Atkinson 1996a; Czarniawska 2004; Glaser and Strauss 1968; Strauss and Corbin 1998) are utilised in order to 'make sense' of research participants' accounts, rather than analysing how both participants and researchers, or members, make sense through their accounting practices. Indeed, Narrative Analysis, although analysing accounts as representations (Earthy and Cronin 2008), nonetheless prioritises the analysts interpretive 'reading' of the narrative, whilst Grounded Theory ignores the contexts of meaning production in its efforts to be systematic (Hodkinson 2008).

One example of the difference of using MCA is evident in the analysis of stories. Narrative Analysis, Lifecourse Analysis and Thematic Analysis have all been used to this effect (Coffey and Atkinson 1996a; Cortazzi 1993; Earthy and Cronin 2008; Franzoni 1998; Mishler 1986; Riessman 1993; Riley 1998). However, the significant point here is that these forms of analysis project meanings onto the stories, based on the researcher's understandings, rather than showing how participants' understandings are achieved, maintained and transformed in the process of story construction. This is not to say that a researcher's understandings are somehow not valid, but that a different approach is adopted in MCA. Here the focus is on how CDPs are interactionally relevant within a specific story, introducing and transforming certain genres of story and their meanings. For instance, in their MCA of media reports of the 'Montreal Massacre', in which a lone male gunman killed

fourteen female college students, Eglin and Hester (2003) examined how the incident was constructed from the viewpoint of a killer's story, a victim's story, a horror story, a story of gun control and a story of violence against women. In each case, they indicated that relevant CDPs were artfully deployed to produce a specific reading of the event, even though the same CDPs were used to frame an alternative position. In effect, it was how the CDPs were assembled on each occasion that led to the production of a particular story-genre.

Categories give coherence to stories; as members of a particular culture, we have expectations about the appearance of certain information at certain points in a story and its non-appearance is a notable point of contention (Housley 2000). This represents a diachronic aspect to the use of tacit knowledge and expectations associated with SRP and Collection K; when we hear certain categories being invoked we expect certain information to follow. Likewise, it has been shown that CDPs are used dynamically to represent and manipulate the 'cast of characters' in a story; the characters are therefore conjoint productions between co-participants in text or talk, rather than solely fixed identities brought to bear upon it (Roulston 2001).

MCA demonstrates that the construction of meanings in context, in the ongoing flow of talk-in-interaction or the unfolding of a text, is highly significant. There is a tendency for other forms of qualitative data analysis to under-analyse the context-specificity of language, its indexicality, whilst simultaneously extrapolating preferred or interpretive readings. Whilst this may well illustrate significant and socially useful points, MCA follows the ethnomethodological critique of mainstream social science: that it treats what member's do as a resource for social scientists to

analyse and interpret, rather than as a topic in its own right, to be analysed in its own terms (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970/1990). By attempting to overcome the problems of context by designing more 'rigorous' measures, social science, it has been argued, has obscured rather than confounded the issue (Cicourel 1964).

It is, however, not the intention of this paper to become embroiled in these epistemological debates, but to point them out as matters of concern. The suggestion is, nonetheless, that MCA presents both a challenge and an opportunity to qualitative researchers to take seriously the power of categorisations and the way that these categorisations are deployed and transformed in the ongoing flow of texts or talk. Those who are convinced of the plausibility of MCA will, however, find few texts outlining how to apply it (exceptions are Baker 1997a; 2002; Lepper 2000; Stokoe 2004). The remainder of this paper is therefore designed to exemplify one method of applying MCA to a corpus of data, whilst illustrating, empirically, some of the points raised in the previous discussion. Before that a brief review of the value of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software will be presented.

Using CAQDAS

While qualitative researchers may be unfamiliar with MCA, they may be more familiar with CAQDAS packages, such as NVivo, Atlas-ti and MaxQDA to name but a few. Seale (2002) suggests that CAQDAS can increase analytic rigour in qualitative research, together with the ability to label (or code) multiple sections of data, retrieve or search those sections and where necessary re-label and reanalyse them. However, as has been discussed previously in this journal, CAQDAS packages have been viewed by qualitative researchers with either enthusiasm or abhorrence (Crowley, et al. 2002). Several explanations may account for this suggestion.

The use of CAQDAS may reflect personal preferences about computer software, although more fundamentally it implies a concern on the part of researchers that the use of computers will result in a loss of meaning and inference; in effect, it will take researchers away from the data. Ironically, it has been suggested that software is more likely to increase the chance of researchers falling into a 'coding trap' (Gilbert 2002: 218), becoming ever more immersed in the minutiae of the data, since it encourages attention to granularity but not always generalisation.

Researchers' use of CAQDAS may also be affected by a lack of relevant information. Johnston (2006) argues, for instance, that the practice of conducting qualitative research using CAQDAS packages has primarily been illustrated by software developers or consultants, while Richards (2002) notes that relatively little debate has been concerned with what impact technology has had on doing qualitative research more generally. Despite a growing range of publications written by those with training in both qualitative methodologies and CAQDAS packages (Bazeley and Richards 2000; Fielding and Lee 1998a; Gibbs 2002; Kuckartz 2001; Lewins and Silver 2007; Richards 1999; 2005), together with the use of CAQDAS in association with a the range of qualitative methodologies (Fielding and Lee 1998a), the use of CAQDAS by qualitative researchers remains contentious. Certainly, within conversation analysis its use has been negligible, although some have used software packages to varying degrees of success (for a review see Fielding and Lee 1998b; Have 1999; MacMillan 2005). Gibbs et al (2002) suggest that conversation analysts have been deterred because they believe that CAQDAS packages cannot handle conversation analytic transcription conventions, which attend to pauses, overlaps, intonation, breathiness and laughter (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998). Furthermore,

CAQDAS packages are sometimes associated with the need to analyse large quantities of data, especially large samples. From a MCA standpoint it is not necessary to use large samples in research, although having large amounts of data should not preclude researchers from using MCA.

It would appear that here is something of an impasse. Qualitative researchers prepared to use CAQDAS do not use MCA, whilst MCA researchers are less inclined to use CAQDAS. As this paper is written with the former in mind, the following section demonstrates how a MCA was conducted using a specific CAQDAS package: NVivoⁱⁱ.

Conducting an MCA with NVivo

The methodology and data presented in this section draws upon a research project that examined the experiences of young people, mostly university students, who had taken a Gap Year, a break in their educational careers between leaving school and beginning university. Previous research about the Gap Year has examined the effects of Gap Year travel on young people's understandings of other cultures (Simpson 2004; 2005) and argued that taking a Gap Year acts as a means of developing cultural capital in order to enable distinctions to be constructed between young people in similar life situations: university students (Heath 2007). The Gap Year project outlined here, however, used MCA in order to examine how meanings about the Gap Year were constructed in the context of an interview about young people's experiences, whilst identifying the wider discourses and cultural knowledge that informed their experiences and understandings. Overall, it examined the identity work that these young people undertook in the interview context.

The Gap Year research project utilised a three stage MCA outlined by Stokoe (2004), following Baker (1997). The first stage was to locate key CDPs from the twenty-five interview accounts. The second was to map the sequence of these across each account and across the dataset. The third stage was to locate how certain CDPs were treated as anomalies or disruptions by the co-participants in the talk that required some form of explanation or ‘repair’ work.

NVivo was used for all three stages, but first certain decisions about transcription and data preparation were necessary. MCA transcription does not require a detailed notion system reminiscent of much conversation analysis (Have 1999). Nonetheless it should provide the analyst (and reader) with enough detail to present ‘phenomena of interest’ (ibid: 77). As noted above, one criticism of MCA is its failure to attend to the sequential ordering of categories. For this reason, in the Gap Year project, transcription included a limited range of conversation analytic conventions, for example: laughter and pauses; as well conversational fillers such as ‘yeah’s’, ‘hmmn’s’ and ‘uh-ha’s’, since it has been demonstrated that these act as sequential features in the unfolding co-production of accounts (Jefferson 1979; Sacks 1995). Additionally, it is useful to have line numbers on transcripts, which NVivo does not automatically produce. To resolve this problem data was initially imported into NVivo and then exported, specifying the inclusion of ‘paragraph’ numbers. The original documents were then deleted from NVivo and those with the line/paragraph numbers were re-imported.

Locating key categories, devices and predicates (CDPs)

The first stage of the Gap Year MCA was the location of key CDPs amongst the dataset; a first step in discerning participants’ categorisations and understandings.

Two of NVivo's query tools were used. The 'text search query' enabled the researcher to identify instances where the primary device occurred: the term 'Gap Year' itself. However, it is worth noting that participants often referred to their 'Gap' or 'Year Out' and these were also included in the text search criteria. In locating this key device, CDPs associated with it were also identified. For example, the interviews began with the researcher asking: 'so perhaps you could begin by telling me about your Gap Year'. It was notable that the majority of the participants then introduced categories, often those relating to family, friends, and education that 'set the scene' for the remainder of their account. It was concluded that when participants gave an account of their Gap Year they produced one with its own story genre. Moreover, it was notable that the meanings ascribed to these initial CDPs changed as the accounts unfolded: for example, most of the sample described changes in their relationships with their parents as a result of taking their Gap Year and in so doing gradually changed the predicates they associated with this category.

It was therefore considered important to have an overview of all CDPs across the dataset. This was achieved using NVivo's 'word frequency query'. This query produces a report listing all of the words in a dataset, together with their frequency. Those that are considered to be significant can then be examined in their original context, since NVivo hyperlinks the results of this query to the original data file, or 'document'. Coding of this context can then be undertaken. Using this method in the Gap Year project it was apparent that 'friends' was a significant device, composed of a number of different categories e.g. best friend, work mates etc. The 'word frequency query' was used to locate and code these. An alternative was also used in some cases. For example, each category of the collection 'family' was identified and coded

separately before subsequently being merged into the larger device. This simply involved using NVivo's code merging functions. Hence it enabled discreet categories to be maintained, but also ensured they were grouped into devices that could be heard as being consistent with one another, an example of Sacks' 'hearer's maxim' (Sacks 1995).

Text searching, as exemplified above, is viewed by some researchers as an unsophisticated and mechanised way to produce codes (Thompson 2002). However in MCA it is more significant since it enables the identification of key CDPs in their original context. One potential problem with this form of coding though, is that it does not, in itself, provide a means of examining the sequential development or construction of the CDPs across each account or throughout the dataset as a whole. This is important because it demonstrates how participant's understandings change over the course of their accounts and how different participants use the same CDPs to create different meanings and stories.

Mapping key CDPs across the dataset

During the second stage of the Gap Year MCA, the researcher explored how the meanings of CDPs were transformed in the on-going flow of an account and between the accounts. For instance, participants often used the same CDPs in different ways at different points in their accounts, illustrating changes in meaning and how meanings changed during their Gap Year. To examine this, NVivo's 'coding stripes' were activated, enabling the researcher to visually locate where a particular CDP occurred and explore each example (this is illustrated below).

FIGURE 1: NVIVO 8 INTERFACE WITH A SINGLE CODING STRIPE DISPLAYED

Two other methods were also used. The first was code retrieval. By choosing a code from NVivo's node functionⁱⁱⁱ, all the data coded to a specific CDP could be retrieved and compared. Hence, the researcher was able to see how the participants made each CDP relevant in their accounts, comparing these across the dataset. The second method utilised NVivo's 'compound search query', which enabled the researcher to find relationships between CDPs. One example was the predicate 'maturity'. Using the methods outlined above it was discovered that some participants claimed that they had developed 'maturity' as an effect of their Gap Year, whilst claiming that their university peers lacked this attribute; it was a form of distinction.

However, other participants, although claiming to have become more mature, played down any differences with their peers. This is evident in the following two data extracts.

Extract 1

- 1438: Josh: and er (.) I don't know (.) I seem to notice that people who have had a Gap Year seem much more mature
 1439: I mean I know they're a year older and everything
 1440: Int: yeah
 1441: Josh: but even so I think because they've either been to work or have been travelling
 1442: or (.) they've just had that extra experience
 1443: whatever they've done in their Gap Years (.) it's kind of (0.1) matured them
 1444: and (.) and (0.2) y'know I see the school-leavers
 1445: and they're (.) just throwing eggs about and shouting
 1446: and (0.1) I don't think people that have had a Gap Year and had that extra experience (.) are really like that
 1447: I think (0.1) y'know (.) I certainly can't stand that anymore
 1448: Int: yeah
 1449: Josh: I may have used to have been like that
 1450: maybe not that bad

Extract 2

- 892: Nikki: erm (.) I found it quite strange (.) because some people know how old I am and some people don't
 893: and when I have actually told them because my birthday's quite soon
 894: I've sort of said 'oh y'know I'm twenty-one in a week'
 895: and they're like (.) 'you're twenty-one!'
 896: Int: (laughs)
 897: Nikki: and they've just assumed I'm like eighteen
 898: they don't assume me to being older which I think is nice (.) because it means that I'm not coming across as too mature
 899: Int: yeah
 900: Nikki: and they're not thinking 'oh she's too old to be my friend because I'm eighteen and she's twenty-one'
 901: which is good (.) because the majority of people are eighteen
 902: and the majority of people who I'm going to be friends with are going to be younger than me

In both of these extracts the predicate ‘maturity’ is embedded in talk about fellow students. What is clear here is that whilst Josh (Extract 1) identifies certain behavioural characteristics as making him more mature than his peers, Nikki (Extract 2) indicates that her peers could not distinguish her as being different. Behaviourally, she was ‘not coming across as too mature’ (line 898). Hence, we can see the same predicate-category sequence ‘maturity-peers’ being used to produce different representations of self and others. So Josh indicates that the category student is ‘positioned’ (Sacks 1995), whilst for Nikki this is not the case in this instance (although in another context it could be). To put this in Sacks’ terms outlined earlier in this paper, each participant was making clear his/her own ‘Collection K’ about the behaviour and attributes of students. Simply coding these instances as ‘talk about students’ would miss this important analytic point, occluding how distinctions can be achieved in Gap Year talk and more significantly how the category students and the predicates associated with it were transformed during the talk-in-interaction of different participants.

In the Gap Year MCA a fourth method of mapping CDPs across the dataset was also utilised. This enabled the researcher to specifically compare a number of CDPs by certain criteria: for example, to narrow or ‘scope’ a search according to pre-specified attributes. This required some work in advance using NVivo’s classifications and casebook tools (for a clear explanation see Lewins and Silver 2007), but once completed the researcher was able to run a series of ‘matrix’ searches. The results of one are evident in figure 2 below.

FIGURE 2: NVIVO INTERFACE WITH A MATRIX QUERY RESULT TABLE DISPLAYED

Figure 2 shows the NVivo interface when a ‘matrix’ search had been conducted to compare the predicates ‘independence’ and ‘maturity’ by the classification ‘type of Gap Year’: whether a participant worked in the UK and then travelled; worked solely in the UK; or spent his or her entire Gap Year travelling overseas. This simple ‘matrix’ search clearly identified that those who had stayed in the UK and worked referred more frequently to these two predicates in their accounts than those who had other types of Gap Year. Aside from the tabular presentation, each

table cell is live, enabling the researcher to retrieve the relevant data: for example, by using this, the researcher found that both predicates were most frequently associated with the device ‘employment’. Although this appeared to contradict previous research (Heath 2007), which indicated that Gap Year experiences are ordered hierarchically and that UK based work is towards the lower end of the spectrum, it was being used rhetorically by participants to create distinctions between themselves and others. In effect, those members of the sample who did not travel used these predicates to distinguish their experiences from those who had; they claimed that their experiences were a more valid use of time during the Gap Year, defending themselves against the hierarchical discourse that implies one should travel during a Gap Year.

Identifying anomalies and repairs

The final stage of the Gap Year MCA involved the identification of anomalies and/or repairs to view participants’ tacit understandings, which become evident when they are breached or undergo some form of reconstruction. These were identified by a detailed, and perhaps more traditional, reading of each account that is similar to ways of generating codes suggested by Coffey and Atkinson (1996b). The researcher determined what was an anomaly or repair and why each was interactionally relevant. For example, it was noted earlier that the Gap Year has been associated with social class distinctions. In the Gap Year study very few explicit references were made to social class. One exception occurred in David’s account, where his categorisation of his Gap Year work colleagues and friends with a morally dubious term caused him to undertake some repair work (see Extract 3 below).

Extract 3

- 197: David: it was weird 'cos (.) the cleverest (.) the sort of cleverest load of friends
I'd got (.) went out went completely away
- 198: Int: hmmn
- 199: David: when they were at uni they were completely separate
- 200: erm (.) and then I was sort of (.) my mum puts it 'I was left with the
dregs'
- 201: Int: (laughs)
- 202: David: to go down the pubs with all the mechanics
- 203: there's nothing wrong with all that
- 204: Int: yeah
- 205: David: but it's almost as if (.) my profile of friends changed quite a lot
- 206: Int: right
- 207: David: which is (.) odd
- 208: and that was (.) I guess it was unusual

This anomaly/repair occurred when David had been asked by the interviewer to explain how he felt at the beginning of his Gap Year, when his school friends went to university and he stayed behind in his community and worked in a bicycle repair shop. Here David invokes friends as a 'positioned category' (Sacks 1995) and makes social class a relevant feature associated with it by using an employment category to categorise his other friends: mechanics. He is clearly aware that characterising these people as 'the dregs' (line 200), the least desirable remnants of something, has moral implications since he initially attributes this classification to his mother before emphasising that 'there's nothing wrong with all that' (line 203). Nevertheless, at the end of this particular section of his account he specifies that the 'profile' of his friends had changed something he characterises, despite his repair, as 'unusual'.

In effect, this section of his account demonstrates that David's understandings of the 'standard relational pair' (SRP) 'Friend-Friend' were disrupted during his Gap

Year, effectively crossing social class boundaries. Later in his account David referred to a case of ‘juggling’ his friends precisely because he thought they were composed of exclusive categories. To this end, David once again alters the representation of himself as someone who, although he was capable of crossing social boundaries, nevertheless recognised and accepted their existence.

Arguably, the potential for this form of coding and its interpretation to be ‘promiscuous’ (in Schegloff’s terminology) must be considered. Certainly, the strategy appears to be more akin to interpretive methods of coding prevalent in Grounded Theory and Thematic Analysis. However, the interpretations were directly grounded in a particular CDP, in this case the category ‘mechanics’ belongs to the device ‘types of employment’ and hence social class. To simply code this section as ‘employment’ and/or ‘friends’ would miss its relevance as an example of social class-in-interaction and occlude its sequential positioning in David’s account. Certainly, this relates to Stokoe’s (2004) contention that MCA enables connections to be made between sociologists ‘macro’ concerns and their occurrence in micro contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a methodology that may be unfamiliar to qualitative researchers and has attempted to demonstrate how it can be applied to data using a CAQDAS software package, NVivo. The paper has explained why qualitative researchers should consider using Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA). It has not argued that other methodologies are either unacceptable or invalid, although it has argued that there are epistemological reasons why MCA should be considered. In short, this methodology explores how people make sense of their worlds through

using categorisations and it demonstrates how these categorisations draw upon forms of power and knowledge that are omnipresent but taken-for-granted. This macro-micro and structural and agentic focus mirrors the way in which we all use membership categories. We use them artfully and commonsensically to create descriptions of people, events and places that have varying effects at a more structural level. What, one might consider, is the difference between describing the same man as ‘a loving husband and father of two children’ or ‘a Muslim fundamentalist with a family’ (something that occurs regularly in the media)? Both may be factually correct but their micro-political implications may differ enormously. As others have argued, the power of MCA, its criticality, is that it is attuned to exploring how people are classified as a first stage in creating, maintaining and moreover critically engaging with social distinctions and inequalities (Baker 2000; Stokoe 2004).

The paper has, to an extent, assumed that qualitative researchers are somewhat more familiar with CAQDAS packages such as NVivo, although the case for using these packages has also been outlined. From an MCA perspective these packages are not necessary. However, the writer believes that the ability to search and retrieve data, to store it in a single place and hyperlink it to text and audio files and to constantly update or return to data and audit its analysis (all of which NVivo and many other CAQDAS packages are capable of), means that they should be considered. It should, however, be noted that CAQDAS packages do not do the analysis; they do not ‘mechanise’ it. Instead, CAQDAS packages aid the process. Overall, from the writer’s own experiences of using NVivo to conduct a MCA it has proved to be a useful tool that generated valid results. This paper flows from that experience, although the writer recognises that others could have alternative ways of using CAQDAS to undertake a

MCA. There are, as usual, no simple hard and fast rules of analysis, although certain steps have been outlined here. In effect, one must monitor the process as one proceeds. NVivo, as I have stated, can help with this reflexive process.

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ⁱ Sacks follows the ethnomethodological principal of referring to the co-participants in social interaction as members.

ⁱⁱ This should not be taken to suggest that NVivo is the only package capable of undertaking membership categorisation analysis, merely that the author has used it to this effect.

ⁱⁱⁱ In NVivo terminology, codes are termed nodes.