ABSTRACT. In this article, we critically evaluate a conversation analytic approach to the study of the links between gender and language from a feminist perspective. In so doing, we engage in the recent series of exchanges about conversation analysis (CA) and other strands of discourse analysis that have been published in Discourse & Society. We consider talk from two sets of discourse data, focusing on participants’ orientation to gender categories as they crop up in the interactions. We suggest that a CA approach produces a rich understanding of the links between discourse and gender. However, we are critical of several, often unexamined aspects and conundrums of conversation analytic methodology. First, we consider the extent to which the ‘analytic stances’ of feminism and conversation analysis are compatible. Second, we question whether, as Schegloff (1997) suggests, it is fruitful to rely on descriptions of and orientations to gender solely in participants’ terms, as well as problematizing the notion of ‘orienting to gender’ itself. Finally, while we propose CA is a useful tool for making claims about the relevance of gender in conversational interaction, and that such claims are grounded in speakers’ orientations, we suggest that culture and common-sense knowledge, of both members and analysts, are largely unacknowledged and unexplicated resources in CA.

KEY WORDS: conversation analysis, culture, feminism, gender, gender orientations, participants’ categories

Gender and discourse: a critical review

The study of language and gender continues to stimulate research and debate across the social sciences and beyond. During the last decade, there has been a dramatic shift in the sorts of questions asked, and the subsequent methods used, in the interrogation of the links between gender and discourse. Some commentators have challenged the basis of gender difference research itself, questioning
particularly the extent to which researchers are justified in invoking gender as an analytic category (for example, Ochs, 1993; Weatherall, 2000). When feminist language and gender research began in the 1970s, the emphasis was upon defining speech styles and attributing them to men or women. Answers to the question ‘do, and why do, women and men talk differently?’ were sought within three theoretical frameworks: deficit (for example, Lakoff, 1973); dominance (for example, Fishman, 1978; Spender, 1980) and difference (for example, Tannen, 1990). Within these perspectives it was argued, respectively, that women’s speech style is inferior to men’s, that patriarchy is realized at the micro-level of interaction, or that women and men occupy different subcultures and so develop different, but equally valued, communication styles. Although criticisms of each framework are well documented, the ‘sex difference’ agenda has been perpetuated with the publication of titles which continue to search for, or discuss the evidence that supports, gendered conversational styles (for example, Conrick, 1999; Goddard and Patterson, 2000; Mapstone, 1998).

Much of this research is underpinned by an essentialist treatment of sex and gender. According to this position, gender is a fixed ‘trait’ or property that resides in individuals. Women and men are split into homogeneous groups such that generalized theories about their communication style can be developed. The essentialist framework and resulting emphasis on dichotomous gender categories has been found to bias the findings of studies of language and gender, leading to a culture of exaggeration in sex difference research (for example, Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1994; Stokoe, 1997) and reification of the gender dualism (Hollway, 1994). However, echoing the challenges to essentialism in social psychology and other disciplines, some researchers reject the assumption that gender (and a gender-linked communication style) exists in individuals, guiding their behaviour and instead locate it in interactions (Bohan, 1993; Crawford, 1995). From this perspective there is no ontological difference between sex and gender as both are theorized as dynamic, socially constituted phenomena (for example, Butler, 1990; Wodak, 1997). Critical rethinking in the field has led to an emphasis upon the social construction of gender and gendered identities (for example, Bucholtz et al., 1999; Hall and Bucholtz, 1995). Here, the focus is upon the performative nature of gender; its status as an ‘emergent property’ of social interaction, and how people ‘do’ gender as a routine accomplishment in talk (Butler, 1990; Kessler and McKenna, 1978; West and Fenstermaker, 1993, 1995; West and Zimmerman, 1987, 1991).

Consequently there has been a considerable shift in the gender and discourse arena, away from a study of gender differences in interaction to a focus on gender’s discursive articulation. Although this is a welcome new direction for the study of gender and language, the constructionist strand has prompted its own critical commentary. For example, Cameron (1998) argues that some of this newer work confounds a so-called ‘critical’ position with analytic explanation that perpetuates gender dualism. Similarly, Stokoe (in press) suggests that some of this work blends a constructionist stance with cultural (essentialist) feminism.
For example, in her analyses of the talk of female friendship groups, Coates (1996, 1999) bases her descriptions of how participants ‘do femininity’ by pointing to instances in which speakers talk about what could be glossed as ‘female’ things (their appearance, being at the mercy of their hormones). Conversely, men perform masculinity by adopting a particular conversational style and by talking about impersonal, factually based topics (Coates, 1997; see also Tannen, 1999). These notions of what defines femininity and masculinity stem from cultural norms and stereotypes about the sorts of things heterosexual men and women talk about. There is nothing inherent in the talk that indexes gender (Ochs, 1992); the data is analysable as ‘doing gender’ because researchers are culturally competent members and know what this talk may look like. Descriptions of gendered behaviour and discursive positions are grounded in the analysts’ background knowledge. In addition, these descriptions are based in a process based categorically on two genders. As Kessler and McKenna (1978: 164) point out, ‘where there are dichotomies, it is difficult to avoid evaluating one in relation to another’. Contrasting how speakers ‘do’ one of masculinity or femininity involves the production of theories based on gender dualism. Ultimately, the execution of a constructionist approach may reinforce a ‘two genders agenda’ because any commentary that treats women and men as different groups reinforces the dichotomy.

A conversation analytic approach to gender and discourse

The critique set out above creates difficulties for the future direction of language and gender research. There are, however, different ways of approaching the problem. One solution is to interrogate the category of gender as it appears in people’s talk, using ethnomethodological principles and the related methodology of conversation analysis (CA). CA constitutes an ‘analytic mentality’ that requires researchers to consider their data without pre-selecting concepts and theories to test or explore (Hester and Eglin, 1997). This means that rather than seeking to impose categories on to the analysis of discursive data (such as ‘gender’, ‘power’), the focus is upon what participants, or members, orient to in their discussions. If one wants to make claims about sociological variables such as gender or class, such variables must be shown to be relevant to the participants. Conversation analysts argue this approach sets up a less interpretational basis for the analytic claims made because the basis is in ‘people’s own orientation to what’s going on: what they take to be relevant and to be pertinent to the interaction as it proceeds’ (Antaki, 1995: 23). Summarizing the fundamental assumption of this position, Scheglof (1992: 192; emphasis in original) writes:

. . . showing that some orientation to context is demonstrably relevant to the participants is important . . . in order to ensure that what informs the analysis is what is relevant to the participants in its target event, and not what is relevant in the first instance to its academic analysts by virtue of the set of analytic and theoretical commitments which they bring to their work.

In his 1997 article, Scheglof challenges a critical discourse analytic (CDA)
theorization of gender and interaction and sets out the CA alternative. Consistent with the ideas set out above, Schegloff argues that in order to warrant a claim that gender is relevant in interaction, analysts must be able to demonstrate its relevance for speakers. There is a small body of work outside the rather inward-looking field of language and gender that adopts such a framework for explicating members’ practices of gender categorization, providing a radically different approach to the study of gender and discourse (Edwards, 1998; Hopper and LeBaron, 1998; Philipsen, 1990/1; Stokoe, 1998; Stringer and Hopper, 1998). From this perspective, no commentary is produced about wider discourses or repertoires that may be drawn upon by the speakers, or the gender of the speakers themselves. The analysis sticks closely to the local context in which the speaker makes gender pertinent.

We suggest that CA provides a new way of studying the links between language and gender. As Garcia (1998) notes, language and gender research will carry on in spite of the numerous critiques and challenges. Garcia uses CA to show how non-gendered explanations for conversational phenomenon are more convincing than the (perhaps more obvious) gendered readings. We agree that if gender and discourse research is to continue, then the links must be examined in a different way. Further, we argue that CA is a useful tool for making claims about the relevance of gender in talk-in-interaction because such claims are grounded in speakers’ orientations (as we will demonstrate in the final section of the article). This is in sharp contrast to other work in the field, which imposes analysts’ assumptions and categories on to the analysis. However, the application of CA to the study of gender and other social categories has recently generated heated debate, as evidenced in the pages of Discourse & Society (Bergvall and Remlinger, 1996; Billig, 1999; Hutchby, 1996; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Speer and Potter, 2000; Stokoe, 1998; Van Dijk, 1999; Weatherall, 2000; Wetherell, 1998). We extend this debate by problematizing some of CA’s claims and reflect on a number of related points. First, we consider the extent to which the ‘analytic stances’ of feminism and conversation analysis are compatible. Second, we question whether, as Schegloff (1997) suggests, it is fruitful to rely on descriptions of and orientations to gender solely in participants’ terms. Linked to this, we ask what, precisely, counts as an orientation to gender? We suggest that the actual discursive practices of ‘attending to’, ‘making relevant’ or ‘orienting to’ gender remain unspecified in CA. This leads to our final point. While we propose CA is a useful tool for making claims about gender, and that such claims are grounded in speakers’ orientations, we suggest that culture and common-sense knowledge, of both members and analysts, are largely unacknowledged and unexplicated resources in CA. We shall address these points in turn throughout the rest of the article.

**Feminist conversation analysis: an oxymoron?**

Davis (1988) starts her feminist conversation analysis of doctor–patient interaction from the position that any interaction between women and men will involve
power asymmetry and that this is a ‘social fact’. In contrast, a central argument of CA is that analysts should adopt a stance of ‘unmotivated looking’ when analysing data and thus bring no assumptions, theories or categories to it (Psathas, 1995; Sacks, 1984). Categories should only be understood within the context that is built up by interactants as they display their understandings of emergent social actions. This position has stimulated responses from other analysts of discourse and conversational interaction. For example, Wetherell (1998) has argued that a complete scholarly analysis of data, as opposed to a solely technical analysis, must include a focus both on the argumentative trajectory of talk as displayed in participants’ orientations and the broader interpretative resources that members draw upon.

For us, what is problematic about CA’s stance is its potential incompatibility with a feminist approach to data analysis. We take the position that a key feature of feminist research is the investigation of sexism in society and the political location of the researcher as feminist within the research; as such, no method is prima facie incompatible with feminism (Brannen, 1992; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1983). However, many feminists have generally eschewed CA as a possible method because of its perceived inability to advance political arguments (discussed by Wetherell, 1998) or for its perceived ‘positivism’ (Hollway, 1989). As Speer (1999) has shown, recent CA textbooks (for example, Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Ten Have, 1999) typically ignore feminist concerns and critiques, although she concludes that there is nothing intrinsic in the type of CA advanced in these texts that would prevent feminists with a critical agenda from using it to ask politically motivated questions. Indeed, feminists such as Davis (1988; see also Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992; West, 1995) feel entitled to take a broadly critical perspective and combine this with authentic CA-based analyses, something that ‘fundamentalist’ commentators such as Schegloff might dispute.

A major problem for feminists with using CA is that making claims about approaching data with a ‘clean gaze’ is a stance within itself, rather than a ‘neutral’ stance, and imports its own theoretical assumptions (Billig, 1999; Buttny, 1993; Cameron, 1994). Feminist philosophy informs us that it is impossible to maintain an impartial position in any research because analysts inevitably bring their own experiences, cultural background and values to bear on the data (Hollway, 1989; Weatherall, 2000). Feminists also stress the importance of reflexivity and subjectivity in the research process and a political commitment to social change and transformation (Wilkinson, 1997). So whereas CA would argue that if gender is embedded in society then it should be observable in talk, feminists would maintain that it is not only impossible to come to the data ‘without bringing any problems to it’ (Sacks, 1992) but not even desirable or valid to try. Much feminist work necessarily starts from a certain political perspective and with certain things as axiomatic. Most importantly, we suggest that despite claims to the contrary researchers do not come ‘neutrally’ to analysis, but bring their cultural (gendered) ‘baggage’. At this point in our argument, it seems that CA and feminism are incompatible due to these opposing analytic positions.
Gender as a participants’ category

We have established that, for conversation analysts, claims that gender is relevant to an interaction can only be made if speakers themselves attend to it. A second issue in the debate, therefore, and one which is largely ignored in the literature, is what precisely counts as an orientation to gender? Whereas many authors have written about ‘participants’ orientations’, ‘member’s categories’ and so on, the actual discursive practices involved in ‘attending to’, ‘making relevant’, ‘indexing’ or ‘orienting to’ gender remain unspecified. Conversation analysts describe both explicit and implicit ways that speakers might demonstrate their orientation to gender. But what mechanisms are involved in this process, for both speakers and analysts?

Schegloff sets out his position on this matter in the recent series of exchanges in Discourse & Society. For instance, in his analysis of ‘Marsha and Tony’ (1997: 173), he suggests how CDAs might describe the interaction ‘along gender lines, in which the asymmetries of status and power along gender lines in this society are played out in the interactional arena of interruption and overlapping talk’. In other words, Schegloff objects to the assumption that gender can be read off interactional patterns, a criticism made of much language and gender research (for example, Cameron, 1992). Consequently, he argues that CDA does not allow for ‘the overtly displayed concerns of the participants themselves . . . Such analyses insist instead on characterisations of the parties, the relevancies, and the context, to which the analyst is oriented’ (1997: 174). This position is echoed in the comments of other conversation analysts. For example, LeBaron (participating in transcribed discussion in Tracy, 1998: 15) argues:

... we should not ... say ‘oh, look, here’s a man and a woman talking; let’s look at how they talk; oh, we can make these conclusions about gendered communication’.

But rather we should say, ‘gender only becomes an issue when the participants themselves make it one and we can point to different things about that’.

Buttny (participating in the same discussion, Tracy, 1998) also argues against the omnipresence of gender, claiming that a ‘gender always matters’ position is illogical. Finally, Hopper and LeBaron (1998: 61) claim that ‘researchers may specify the relevance of a feature of context (for example, gender) mainly in moments of social interaction in which actors observably orient to that feature’.

The argument, then, is that speakers must show that gender is relevant to them. But what counts as an orientation to gender? For Schegloff, ‘what counts’ is demonstrated in his analysis of ‘Chicken Dinner’ in which explicit mention of the term ‘ladies’ during the course of interaction shows how ‘gender is relevant here after all’ (1997: 182). Other analysts have also described the content of and processes involved in attending to gender in interaction. For example, Stringer and Hopper (1998: 213) explore instances in which speakers use the pseudo-generic he when referring to ‘sex-unspecified incumbents of traditionally male social categories’. When another speaker problematizes the generic he, gender becomes the axis around which the conversation proceeds. Similarly, Hopper and LeBaron
(1998) note that in their data, self- or other-repairs of gender references are oriented to the need for gender-inclusive language, promoting the salience of gender as part of the context. In an analysis of couples therapy, Edwards (1998) discusses how participants use different gender references, ‘woman’ and ‘girl’, at strategic points in their discussion of the husband’s affair. Finally, Philipsen (1990/1) analyses the gender references in a film script in which a teacher is referred to as such, then as ‘Mrs Ganin’, ‘she’ and ‘a lady’. The latter three references all index (female) gender as the relevant thing about the teacher.

In all of these studies, attending to gender can be defined as the explicit mention of a gender reference, such as ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘ladies’, ‘girl’, or ‘woman’. However, this definition seems rather restrictive for, as Ochs (1992) points out, very few words in the English language exclusively index gender. Kitzinger (2000: 171) complains that it would be ‘unbearably limiting’ if conversation analysts had to rely on such explicit orientations. Schegloff himself acknowledges the potential limitations of such a narrow definition. He writes: ‘explicit mention of a category term . . . is by no means necessary to establish the relevant orientation by the participants . . . orientation to gender can be manifested without being explicitly named or mentioned’ (1997: 182). This concession is problematic for, if something is implicit in conversation it is up to the analyst to reveal something that, logically, is not available directly. Not only does this contradict Schegloff’s overall argument, the examples he provides of such work do not support the position he constructs. For example, he cites West and Zimmerman’s (1987) classic ethnomethodological paper on ‘doing gender’. Unfortunately, it is hard to tease out what ‘doing gender’ might involve at an interactional level from this largely theoretical paper. The only talk-based resource offered is drawn from the work of Fishman (1978), who found that women did more interactional work in talk with their male partners.

Fishman, like West and Zimmerman, is best known as a gender and discourse researcher working within the dominance framework. These researchers use CA to explain how gender gets worked up at the micro-level of interaction (Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992; Conefrey, 1997; Davis, 1988; De Francisco, 1991; West, 1995; West and Garcia, 1988; Zimmerman and West, 1975). Such studies link gender to interruption, talk time, topic initiation and topic maintenance. Interruption and talking at length signal men’s conversational power while women’s attention to topic initiation and maintenance is a sign of their relative lack of power. So conversation is analysed for the above patterns and ‘gender’ is treated as something identifiable even though participants themselves do not orient to it. This application of CA to what Ten Have (1999) calls ‘non-CA purposes’ is problematic because such studies correlate gender (as a ‘fixed’ property) with a pre-defined category (such as interruption). Gender is implicitly essentialized, which runs contrary to the underlying ethnomethodological position that gender is something one ‘does’ and not something one ‘has’. Moreover, if one looks closely at some of the conversation analytic studies listed above, their analyses are surprisingly similar to Schegloff’s own ‘critical gloss’ of the ‘Marsha and
Tony’ data. And these CA studies are difficult to distinguish from a CDA study of classroom discourse (Bergvall and Remlinger, 1996). While we agree with Speer (1999) that there is nothing intrinsic in CA that prevents feminists from using it to ask politically motivated questions, some of this feminist CA work is problematic for other reasons.

Schegloff also cites the work of Ochs (1992) as an example of an account in which orientation to gender can be manifested implicitly. In thinking about the relationship of language to gender, and the prevalence of gender as a social category, Ochs argues that it is surprising that very few features of the English language directly and exclusively index gender. Most features of English are non-exclusive and can be used by, with or for both sexes – they do not presuppose one sex or the other. This implies that other aspects of language must indirectly index gender. Ochs’ examples include the use of tag questions, a delicate intensity to speech, and correct pronunciation, all of which index female gender (with the opposite of these indexing male gender). This account is similar to traditional language and gender research in which gender can be read off the use of particular linguistic devices and strategies (for example, Coates, 1993; Holmes, 1995; Labov, 1972; Lakoff, 1973). The criticisms of this type of analysis are well documented, and include mapping function on to form, ignoring conversational context, perpetuating stereotypes about gendered speech styles, employing analysts’ categories of and essentializing gender (see Crawford, 1995 for an overview of these criticisms). Most importantly, such work adopts a fundamentally different theoretical and methodological stance to that proposed in Schegloff (1997).

Schegloff is not alone in suggesting that gender may be indexed implicitly although, so far, we are no closer to defining what this might mean practically. Weatherall (2000: 287–8) suggests that ‘linguistic indexes of gender may occur at every level of language. So, even if gender is not explicitly privileged by participants as relevant to the conversation, it is an omnipresent feature of all interactions’. According to Hopper and LeBaron (1998), these features might include gender-marked names and terms of address and reference. They also argue that ‘gender can be indexed as a relevant part of the context by ambiguous words with possible references to sexuality; reference to female appearance or male appearance; or references to female demeanor or male demeanor’ (1998: 171). Hopper and LeBaron further suggest that gender-indexing resources might include references to gendered activities (they give the example of ‘car mechanics’) and conclude that, ‘in fact, speakers would experience some difficulty not indexing gender in many utterances’ (1998: 171). Finally, a number of authors claim that gender is indexed in English through high or low pitch of voice, intonational qualities, or by using particular vocabulary (Hopper and LeBaron, 1998; Kessler and McKenna, 1978).

What counts as orienting to or indexing gender has therefore shifted, from a restrictive definition comprising explicit gender references to much broader but contestable indexes such as the use of sexist language particles, pitch of voice and intonation, references to sexuality and gendered activities. Implicit indexes are
potentially ambiguous, open to disagreement between analysts, and generally more difficult to make claims about. For example, Hopper and LeBaron argue that the activity ‘car mechanic’ indexes male gender. But there is nothing intrinsic in this term that indexes gender, this example can only be given (and any subsequent analysis performed on it) if the analyst imports something of their own background knowledge about gendered references and activities.

In a later article in the debate Schegloff (1999a), moving away slightly from his earlier claims, suggests that a stance supporting the omnirelevance of gender to interaction ‘has much to recommend it’ (1999a: 566). More specifically, he argues that vocal pitch will ‘introduce gender identity into any interaction’ (1999a: 566). As well as vocal pitch, perceptually available categories such as gender could be regarded as omnirelevant (Jayusi, 1984). However, just because gender categories are available via appearance and voice pitch, it does not necessarily follow that participants treat them as relevant, a point Schegloff concedes. Conversely, just because things are not interactionally displayed does not mean that they are not relevant (Frith, 1998).

What can we conclude about this issue of indexing gender? First, we argue that the most straightforward answer to the question ‘what counts?’ is to restrict any claims about the relevance of gender to instances where speakers use explicit gender references: ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘man’, ‘woman’, and so on. Pitch and intonational cues might be omnipresent, but they have to be evidenced as relevant by speakers. To further complicate matters, perhaps there are two types of index or ‘relevancies’ – one where we can simply spot speakers using explicit gender references, but these do not appear relevant to speakers in the ensuing turns at talk, and a second where it is ‘noticed’ in the subsequent interaction. The first of these, as well as pointing to terms such as ‘car mechanic’, references to sexuality and demeanour, requires the import of cultural knowledge on behalf of the analyst. This is problematic for conversation analysts who argue that explanations must be grounded in what participants do and say. CA has a restricted notion of ‘context’ as we have seen, and Schegloff is critical of methods that involve importing and imposing background knowledge on the data. This brings us on to the next conundrum in our discussion of CA and gender.

**Conversation analysis, context, background knowledge and culture**

That conversation analysis should be unmotivated and deal entirely with member’s orientations or participants’ terms is the stance upon which Schegloff (1992, 1997) insists. Wider contextual, cultural and social issues are simply not the concerns of analysis unless participants orient to them, and culture itself is largely unexplicated in the CA literature. We have a number of related criticisms of this position. While some observers do talk about member’s use of ‘commonsense knowledge’ (sometimes used interchangeably with ‘culture’), they do not talk about the role of the analyst in the interactional production of culture and hence have a restricted notion of who ‘members’ are. Typically, when analysts
talk about members, they refer only to participants in the fragments of transcript they analyse. They rarely include the analyst as a member. We argue that analysts are also members and bring to bear their common-sense knowledge in the process of analysis. In order to make any leap from what speakers say (a simple paraphrase) to analytic commentary, researchers must draw upon their own interpretative resources. This is left unacknowledged and implicit in CA. Furthermore, common-sense knowledge itself is treated as ahistorical and homogeneous, as if all members have access to the same resources. In contrast, we suggest that people draw upon different versions of common-sense knowledge, and what feminists treat as common-sense is likely to differ from what non-feminist researchers do (Billig, 1991; Smithson, 1999). So if analysts draw upon their member’s knowledge, then their own position and agenda is necessarily woven into analysis.

Interestingly, conversation analysts themselves are not in agreement in the limited commentary on this issue. As a result, Schegloff’s stance is not completely representative of the CA line on importing background knowledge. The debate is the subject of a collection of papers edited by Watson and Seiler (1992). In his introduction, Watson asks the mischievous question: ‘how far is extra-textual material necessary to the carrying on of analysis at the level of concreteness common to ethnomethodology [and] conversation analysis?’ (Watson and Seiler, 1992: xiv). There are two competing stances on this point. The first position is stated perhaps most strongly by Sanders (1999: 130) who claims that ‘in principle, necessarily, culture is an unapparent and functionally unimportant element of routine everyday interactions’. CA is usually described as having a restricted notion of context, (Tracy, 1998). However, writers such as Moerman (1988), who argues for a culturally and ethnographically contexted CA, have promoted an alternative position on culture and background knowledge. Some have acknowledged that the import of analysts’ common-sense knowledge into analysis is inevitable because they are members of the culture that produces the talk (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Although CA aims to explicate what participants do in interaction, in so doing ‘we need to have some access to the interpretative and inferential resources which the participants are relying on’ (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 113; emphasis added). In a rare example of comment on this issue, Ten Have (1999: 35) extends the notion of ‘member’ suggesting that ‘the researcher’s own comprehension, “as a member”, so to speak, is also and inevitably involved’.

These concessions, while infrequent, imply that although the boundaries of context are strict for Schegloff and others, not all researchers accept such a position and are happy to import their own agenda, culture, and background knowledge into CA. This division can be seen more sharply when we split conversation analysis into sequential CA (represented by Schegloff and colleagues) and another, lesser-known strand of ethnomethodological inquiry called membership categorization analysis (MCA). Few CA texts engage with MCA (but see Lepper, 2000), with the majority of research focusing on sequential issues in interaction.
Whereas SCA focuses on the organization of mundane conversation (for example, preference structures; adjacency pairs), MCA examines the ‘locally used, invoked and organized membership categories’ (Hester and Eglin, 1997: 3) and claims to be the study of culture-in-action. When speakers problematize some aspect of the interaction, common-sense knowledge or culture is displayed to each other and to the analyst.

MCA is based on Sacks’ (1992) earlier writings. Users of MCA often appear to adopt a less restricted notion of culture and background knowledge: ‘they are entirely happy to work within the margins of cultural familiarity that Sacks [then] allowed himself . . . and . . . to call upon what they know is conventionally associated with membership of various categories’ (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998: 10). Sacks later dropped MCA because of its potential for ‘wild’ analysis, in which the interpretations of the analyst might prevail over the evidence in the talk (Lepper, 2000). MCA is organized around the notion of the Membership Categorization Device (MCD). According to Sacks, the MCD explains how categories may be hearably linked together by native speakers of a culture. For example, he provides this now-classic example taken from data in which a child says: ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up’ (Sacks, 1974). Sacks claimed that we hear links between mommy and baby, specifically that the mommy is in fact the mommy of the baby. He aimed to provide an explanatory apparatus that allows this ‘fact’ to occur: the MCD. In this case, the MCD of ‘family’ allows the categories ‘mommy’ and ‘baby’ to be linked together. Moreover, Sacks argued that categories are ‘inference-rich’. This means that they are linked to particular activities (‘category-bound activities’) such that there are ‘common-sense’ expectations about what constitutes a ‘mommy’s’ or ‘baby’s’ normative behaviour.

There are three problems with MCA with regards to the issue of culture and background knowledge. First, MCA talks regularly about culture, in terms of its location in interaction and as something that speakers display. On the other hand, ‘sequential’ conversation analysts such as Schegloff are explicit in their rejection of invoking the context that carries on beyond the specific orientations of speakers. However, the role of the analysts’ background knowledge in MCA remains ambiguous. As Watson notes,

... while it might be agreed that background knowledge is necessary in order to understand discourse the question . . . remains: what background knowledge? That which the analyst brings with him or her and imposes by fiat? Or that which we can show informants using? (Watson and Seiler, 1992: xvi)

Second, accounts of MCD and categorization-in-talk are bound up with evaluative words such as ‘conventional’, ‘properly’ or ‘usual’. For example, Widdicombe (1998: 53; emphasis added) comments that ‘categories are conventionally associated with activities, attributes, motives and so on’. Hester and Eglin (1997: 4; emphasis added) similarly note that category bound activities are those that are ‘expectedly and properly done by persons who are incumbents of particular categories’. Words such as these are not analytically neutral but value-laden and,
as Billig (1999) notes, import a particular ideological view of the world. Finally, when analysts draw their readers’ attention to the links made by speakers between categories and category-bound activities they do so without considering their own position in making that link and without problematizing any links made. As Cicourel (1992: 294) writes (of CA more generally), ‘the investigator’s ability to comprehend [conversational] exchanges is assumed to be self-evident and is seldom if ever an aspect of the analysis’. For instance, Silverman (1993: 74), glossing Sacks’ position, comments that ‘categories can usually be read off the activities in which people engage’. So people who pick up babies may be hearable as ‘mother’. These descriptive examples are not produced neutrally by authors. Hester and Eglin (1997: 4) further write: ‘some membership categories can be used and heard commonsensically as ‘going together’, while others cannot be so used and heard’. The analyst makes this decision. What s/he decides ‘go together’ and ‘don’t go together’ will vary depending on the stance and commonsense knowledge of the researcher. CA does not deal with how claims like this can be made, and how some categories may not be linked.

How might all this be related specifically to gender categories? Sacks argues that some categories may be classified as ‘natural’ categories, as opposed to ‘topic-occasioned’ categories. He therefore makes some rather prescriptive-sounding claims about what constitutes a certain categorization device. For example, he states that ‘an instance of a categorisation device is the one called ‘sex’; its collection is the two categories (male and female)’ (1974: 219). Now, Hester and Eglin point out that it is relatively easy to disrupt the category of ‘sex’, with possible categories such as ‘chromosome’ or ‘gene’ (depending on the topic occasioning). However, they do not trouble the dichotomous categorization of male–female to give, for example, intersex, third or fifth sex (Fausto-Sterling, 1998). The categories that Sacks treats as ‘naturally’ linked are so done only by employing a particular epistemological position, not a neutral or atheoretical stance.

All in all, CA has a restricted notion of culture and pays scant attention to that which is beyond text. In so doing, it privileges aspects of context that can be pointed to in talk at the expense of the larger conversations that surround any isolated segment. This is an analytic choice, not a neutral position. It therefore follows that analysts do not rely solely on participants’ orientations to phenomenon in conversation. In the final part of this article, we explore the extent to which CA, despite its own claims, depends on culture as a resource that members, including analysts, have available to them in the accomplishment of interaction and description thereof. We examine fragments of talk from two sets of discourse data and adopt a Schegloffian CA approach to its analysis, focusing on participants’ orientation to gender. Additionally, we investigate instances of membership categorization in the data. In so doing, we consider the following issues as debated in the first part of this article:

1. To what extent can a CA approach enrich the field of gender and discourse?
2. As feminists can we use CA to make claims about the wider social effects of members’ local practices?
3. As conversation analysts, is it fruitful to rely on descriptions of and orientations to gender solely in participants’ own terms? And what counts as an ‘orientation to gender’?

**Method**

The fragments of conversational data that we draw upon to explore the above questions are based on video or audio-taped recordings of interactions in focus group and educational seminar discussions. Focus group discussions come from a large-scale project on young adults’ expectations of the future, including their employment and family orientations. Part of this project involved running focus groups in 5 European States (Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Portugal and the UK). Each group involved 6–10 people between the ages of 18 and 30 from a variety of backgrounds. Twenty percent of the participants were from ethnic minority backgrounds. The groups were mainly single-sex groups of people at similar ‘life stages’, that is, all university students, in training, unemployed, in semi-skilled or professional jobs. This article draws on the British sub-section of the data. The second set of data was recorded in a UK university college. The seminar classes of undergraduate and postgraduate students (drawn from education, psychology and behavioural sciences departments) were video-recorded while involved in discussion-based activities. Typically, students would talk in groups for 45 minutes with a ‘plenary’ session at the end, managed by the tutor. Topics covered included ‘the uses and abuses of punishment’, ‘cognitive heuristics’ and ‘experience of writing in the primary classroom’. One small group of students (3–4 participants) was video-recorded while talking about the day’s task. All but one of the students were white (one student was Black Caribbean) and had English as their first language and a small proportion were classified as mature (aged 21 or older).

Both sets of recorded data were transcribed in detail according to conventions adapted from Jefferson (1984) by Wetherell (1998). The transcripts were read repeatedly in conjunction with the recorded data. Turns at talk were considered for the sense-making orientations of the participants. We focused on instances of talk in which gender was made relevant to the discussion. In the focus group data, gender crept into discussions on parenthood and employers’ childcare policies. In the educational data set, gender was invoked during the students’ discussions across a variety of topics.

**Analysis**

In the following sections of analysis, we will attempt to address the research questions set out above. In each of the data fragments, we focus on speakers’ orientations to gender as they actively produce the conversational order. We also examine the categorization devices and category-bound activities that are made relevant in the interactions. In so doing, we consider the level of commentary on discourse and gender that a Schegloffian CA can stimulate. Linked to this, we
interrogate the extent to which cultural knowledge is both displayed by speakers but also drawn upon by analysts, as a resource for explication at both local conversational and analytic levels. Second, we want to consider whether it is possible to make wider claims about gender as an organizing feature of culture based solely upon a Schegloffian analytic approach and whether this is consistent with a feminist agenda. We will consider the final issue, which questions more generally a CA-based approach to the study of gender and discourse, in the discussion section of the article.

The relative status of gender categories

The first fragment of talk comes from a focus group discussion participant. B is a university student and, in this extract, is discussing gender differences in life course expectations:

**Extract 1: Focus group data, university students**

125 B: I would say though that this could be a class thing as well
126 because (0.2) I think if you looked at the working class (0.2)
127 women uh:: (.) and (0.4) the (0.2) not not so much middle class
128 (. ) lower middle class (0.4) then you would see (.) that they are
129 predominately looking for
130 (0.4)
131 A: mmm =
132 B: = gettiní a partner and gettiní married and (0.4) whereas itís the
133 (. ) I think itís middle class (. ) I know Iíve not (. ) Iíve noticed
134 it (0.2) at university (. ) obviously (. ) um:: (0.6) because the
135 \( \rightarrow \) women here are carefree and (. ) they are looking at (0.2) getting
136 a career for themselves (. ) but I also work in a working class
137 \( \rightarrow \) type pub (0.2) and the (. ) the women that come in there (. ) um the
138 girls (. ) they are looking for (0.3) a partner to settle down with
139 for (0.2) for the rest of their lives you know (. ) want to have
140 children (0.4) so I think itís a class thing as well

Both ‘class’ and ‘gender’ are categories that are often treated by critical discourse analysts as somehow extra-discursive, embedded in institutions and inextricably linked to power. As Schegloff (1997) has argued, this results in loose and ungrounded theories of gender and structural relations. Here, however, they are observably grounded at the micro-level of interaction as members’ categories, oriented to by B as a relevant feature of the conversational context. A first, and quite simple observation based on this data fragment is that class and gender may be analysed, in participants’ terms, at the level of talk-in-interaction.

What is interesting analytically is the repair from ‘women’ to ‘girls’ at lines 137–8 and its sequential location. B uses the category of ‘women’, in describing female university students but offers ‘girls’ as a same-turn replacement item for ‘women’, when talking about customers in a ‘working class pub’. The terms ‘girls’
and ‘women’ are different categories and so are likely to have different ‘category bound activities’ associated with them. Here, then, the speaker occasions the categories of class and gender and so we can claim that they are relevant to the interactional context.

The second fragment comes from the educational data set: a post-graduate certificate of education (PGCE) group’s discussion about children’s spelling. The group had drifted away from their focus on spelling and had begun talking about singing as a method of helping children to understand spelling strategies. In the following extract speaker S is describing a cappella singing:


461 S: no it’s where you all start singing we used to do that in Devon
462  → brilliant I saw four girls (.) at erm (.) four women at erm (.)
463  Portobello Road market (.) and they were incredible (.) stunning
464  (3.0) oh I haven’t got my watch (.) what’s the time

In this fragment, S makes gender the relevant thing about the singers being described. S initially describes the singers as ‘four girls’ on line 462 but then repairs this description to ‘four women’. This reformulation displays interactional trouble. S need not have produced the repair as the number and sex of the ‘a cappella’ group had already been established with the expression ‘four girls’. However, S orients to the use of gender categories in describing the singing group.

Let us consider the first two extracts in some detail. First, both speakers use two different gender categories. Both use ‘girls’ and ‘women’ at different points in the interaction and both are instances of same-turn self-initiated repair. Such repairs display particular gender references as trouble sources and so promote the salience of gender as part of the context (Hopper and LeBaron, 1998). The repair in extract 1 (women – girls) is in the opposite direction to extract 2 (girls – women) but in making the repair gender becomes relevant for the speakers as part of their conversational activity. From here, we can inspect the data to find out at what sequential point the gender references are repaired. This is as far as conversation analysis can take us. We have pointed to instances where participants’ invoke gender categories and can therefore claim that gender is relevant to the current interactional business. But can we take this analysis a step further and still be committed to a Schegloffian CA approach?

Returning to extract 1, we observed that speaker B used the term ‘women’ to describe university students and switched to ‘girls’ when describing a working-class group. We noted that the categories ‘girls’ and ‘women’ are likely to have different ‘category bound activities’ associated with them. As Edwards (1998) notes, these might include normative assumptions about age or marital status, with the category of ‘girl’ arguably being lower status than that of ‘woman’. What Edwards is describing here is the relative status of such categories. So we might argue that in extract 1, the speaker downgrades the use of gender category while also downgrading the relative ‘class’ of the women being described. Class is therefore not simply oriented to by the speaker, but is constructed in talk itself as
evidenced in B’s gender category repair. In extract 2, the speaker orients to the troubling of gender categorization but does not explicitly invoke a reason for the repair. We could argue that S orients to the relative status of gender categories and that women should be referred to as such unless they are female children. S makes a switch in the opposite direction from extract 1, from ‘girls’ to ‘women’, thus raising the status of the gender category used.

However, in order to warrant some analytic commentary and so produce the above argument, we have necessarily drawn upon our background and extra-textual knowledge about gender categories and the category bound activities that are conventionally associated with them. So whereas CA is a useful tool for identifying the relevance of gender for speakers, and its sequential location in talk, it has not permitted further analytic commentary or speculation as to the relative status of such categories. It cannot tell us what the relative status actually is. This can be done only by importing the cultural knowledge that society’s members, including the analyst, have available to them. Perhaps the relative status of the terms ‘girls’ (lower, offensive) and ‘women’ (higher, politically correct) is more salient for feminist work than non-feminist approaches. We suggest that the analysis of extracts 1 and 2 becomes more interesting with this additional commentary and, as feminists, simply pointing out gender relevance to speakers is not the most interesting aspect of the data. But to get to this more interesting commentary, one must go beyond describing data in participants’ own terms.

The ‘generic female parent’ in talk about childcare

In another example of CA-based work on speakers’ orientations to gender, Stringer and Hopper (1998) explored people’s use of pseudo-generic he in conversation. They focused particularly on instances in which speakers refer to ‘sex-unspecified incumbents of traditionally male social categories’ (1998: 213). They provide the following example:


S: You would have to speak with our operations manager about that
P: Is HE available now?

Stringer and Hopper point out that the operations manager in question was female. A version of the generic he was also evident in the focus group data, for example:

**Extract 4: Focus group data, university students**

1360 H: I think the best thing is to (.) is to reduce the hierarchy so
1361 → that your boss is not (.) some guy that you donít (.) you hate
1362 → talking to (.) but someone you (.) some (.) just another guy who
1363 you work with that you can talk with and discuss your problems
1364 with or anything you want to change or any suggestions (.) it
1365 should be open to that as opposed to the boss just giving you
Although the pronoun he is not used, ‘some guy’ is arguably used to describe a potentially female or male boss. Interestingly, on reading a draft of this article a colleague commented that there was no generic he in this extract and that ‘guy’ can be used to refer to people of both sexes. This disagreement raises precisely some of the issues discussed earlier regarding the exact definition of an orientation to gender. For us, a generic he was straightforwardly ‘there’ in the data. ‘Guy’ is used in exactly the same and problematic way as ‘he’ is used as a collective category for male and female. On a related issue, we might claim that although speaker H uses a gender reference and so in that sense is the participant’s category, it is noticed by us as analysts. The gender reference is not picked up in subsequent turns at talk and so in this sense gender is not relevant to the speakers. This illustrates the point we made earlier that there are perhaps two types of orientation to gender: one in which it is noticed, repaired or in some other way attended to by the speaker (as in extracts 1 and 2) and another where a gender reference is used but not oriented to except by us as analysts (as in extract 4).

Generic gender categories were occasioned in other ways in both data sets. In the next three segments, we focus on participants’ orientation to gender in discussions that can be glossed as being about ‘baby care’. In extract 5, a group of professional workers are discussing employers’ policy issues around working parents:

**Extract 5: Focus group data, professional workers**

77 I: So what do you think? Have you got any suggestions as to what you could do in that sort of circumstance?

78 (1.0)

80 P: No

81 D: Well (0.2) you’re asking more (.) more (.) uh job flexibility for

82 parents so that they can work

83 P: Part time opportunities and crèche facilities and (0.4)

84 N: And that’s one of the major issues in departments like, you can see it in the health service, there’s so many people work in the health service but the crèche facilities and baby care facilities are (.) absolutely abysmal (.) I think that anything with (.) uh

87 → perhaps above seventy percent of female (0.2) the people you’re working for would personally provide =

90 P: → = but why should it be:: uh (0.2) because the women’s (0.2) where

91 the women’s jobs are (.)[why can’t it be]

92 N: [but that’s ]

93 P: where the male’s job is?
Once again, our claim that gender is relevant to the interaction is grounded in the speakers’ orientation to such categories. In the above segment, N suggests that crèche and baby care facilities should be improved in health departments where more than seventy percent of the staff is female. N thus invokes the ‘generic female parent’ at line 88 but, interestingly, this is embedded in a negative assessment of the health service’s baby care facilities. In other words, N criticizes the health service for its lack of support and locates the responsibility of baby care, whether it be parental or provided by a crèche, firmly with women. Issues around baby care are therefore constructed as gendered by N and, more specifically, as a problem for women.

Although the gender reference ‘female’ has been used (line 88), we might argue that until this point gender is not relevant for the speakers. Gender is brought sharply into context at line 90. P challenges N’s assumption that women are responsible for baby care arrangements: ‘why can’t it be where the male’s job is?’, adhering to a ‘gender neutral’ stance on this issue. As feminists, we might want to comment on the problems with gender neutralism or the ‘reality’ of baby care as women’s work but this would violate CA’s focus on participants’ sense-making orientations. We can simply claim that gender is relevant to speakers themselves. A further example of the ‘generic female parent’ can be seen in extract 6:

**Extract 6: Focus group data, professional workers**

294 I: So do you think there’s things employers can do to make things
easier for working parents?

295 L: Yes (.) start building some crèches and things

296 I: Mhmm

297 T: Or letting them work more flexible hours and (0.2) these new (.)
um working from home (0.2) schemes (0.4) where you have like a

299 computer and modem and everything you need to work =

301 A: = It’s becoming a lot easier isn’t it? (.) with that?

302 [computers and ]

303 T: → [Yeah that should be an option (.) for more (.) mothers

304 → (. ) or fathers (0.2) who want to stay at home and look after their

305 children

The analytic focus in extract 6 is on the same-turn self-initiated repair at lines 303–4. Speaker T makes suggestions about practical solutions for working parents but places responsibility for taking such actions on the female first then, after a short pause, offering ‘or father’ as a same turn replacement for ‘mother’. This repair displays the gender reference ‘mother’ as a trouble source and, like speaker P in extract 5, displays T’s orientation to the need for a gender-neutral account. So both speakers N and T, in data fragments 5 and 6, invoke the ‘generic female parent’ for parenting in talk that could be glossed as promoting egalitarian ideas about childcare. An example of the same phenomenon from the educational data can be seen in extract 7. Here, four behavioural science students are talking about childcare and developmental psychology:
In talking about the pros and cons of letting babies sleep with their parents, the generic female parent is invoked collaboratively by speakers H and I between lines 43 and 46. The other group members ratify the comments (lines 48–50). In this instance, unlike fragments 5 and 6, there is no orientation by speakers that using the generic female parent is a trouble source. In extract 5, another participant challenges speaker N. In extract 6, speaker T repairs their own use of it. However, in the above fragment such ‘noticing’ and subsequent repair work does not occur. The question again arises as to whether gender is relevant to speakers in extract 7, or just to us as analysts? If it is the latter, what sorts of claims about the data can we make?

This leads to our next issue in analysing speakers’ orientations to gender. What happens when we, as analysts, want to make a claim that talk is ‘sexist’ or in some way difficult but speakers themselves do not orient to this interpretation? The ‘generic female parent’ in extracts 5–7 is invoked in similar ways but it is only problematized in the first two. What happens in other instances of problematized sexism?

**Problematized (and unproblematized?) sexism**

Across both data sets, speakers often resisted explicitly the identity category of ‘sexist’. For example:

**Extract 8: Focus group data, vocational trainees**

1 M: But er what I find (.) like I said (.) no detriment to women you
2 → know I’m not a chauvinist or anything (.) but er say you’ve got a
3 single mother

**Extract 9: Educational interaction, psychology students**

554 N: no (.) she’s always been (. .) been er (.) a an addition to
555 → whichever bloke (. .) not to be sexist

In the above cases, the speaker prefaces or suffixes talk which could be glossed as sexist with some variation on the classic disclaimer ‘I’m not sexist, but . . .’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Van Dijk, 1997). Examining such disclaimers and their
sequential location displays the speakers’ awareness that the upcoming (or preceding) stretch of talk is somehow problematic, requiring some careful framing or accountability work. A longer example is provided in the next extract:

**Extract 10: Focus group data, university students**

130 H: → To be honest I **really** (.) I don’t want to be sexist but I **really**
131 can’t see myself (0.2) ironing and stuff like that I don’t know
132 if I could (.) I mean I’m =
133 ?: = mm =
134 H: = **washing** and stuff (0.2) I don’t I don’t I wouldn’t expect my
135 → wife just (.). Go wash! go iron! [but]
136 ?: [Mm]
137 H: but (.) I don’t know how it will work out(.) I just think that
138 (0.2) if we are both committed to the relationship (..) committed
139 to our children it’ll (.). there’ll (.). we’ll find a way (0.3) that
140 is suitable for both of us (0.2) I don’t know

We want to make two points about this fragment. First, H’s disclaimer at line 130 displays an orientation to the possibility that what is about to be said may be treated, by other participants or the interviewer, as sexist. The identities (or ‘subject positions’) that speakers adopt or resist are highly occasioned and need to be analysed in context of surrounding talk (Wetherell, 1998). Here, the speaker actively and explicitly resists the category ascription or categorical identity of ‘sexist’. Second, carrying out membership categorization analysis (MCA) throws up some interesting issues. At line 135, the speaker claims that they would not expect their ‘wife’ to ‘just go wash’ or ‘iron’. H can therefore be heard to link together the membership category of ‘wife’ with the category-bound activities of ironing and washing. Now, MCA may provide the framework for analysing this collection of category and activities, and CA can inform us about its sequential position in conversation. MCA also lets the analyst know about the common-sense reasoning of the speaker in which wives are linked to domestic duties at the local interactional level. But neither type of analysis problematizes such categorization beyond the level of the text. Similarly, in analysing his group therapy data, Sacks (1992) provides an example of gender being made relevant in a speaker’s sequential use of the colloquial category ‘chick’. However, he focuses on the local function of the remark rather than its potentially sexist implications (Edwards, 1998). In this extract, there is nothing intrinsically gendered about the activities of washing and ironing but they are constructed as such by H. The speaker arguably displays their background knowledge of the gendered nature of domestic activities in order to link them to the category of ‘wife’.

Such discursive phenomena also function at a wider level. Some conversation analysts combine CA with social constructionism (‘conversation analytic constructionism’: Buttny, 1993), arguing that the social world is actively constructed in discursive interaction. ‘Common-sense’ and ‘cultural’ knowledge about gender and domestic activities is therefore negotiated and maintained in everyday talk.
What is important for the purposes of this article is that based upon a CA analysis, we could arguably state that the speaker orientates to ‘ironing’ as a gendered activity and problematizes this. However, from a feminist perspective the issues of domestic tasks such as ironing are already highly problematized (Dally, 1996; Walby, 1990). Speaker H orientates towards a ‘gender-neutral’ approach for determining domestic roles: ‘if we are both committed to the relationship . . . we’ll find a way’ (lines 138–9). However, such an approach has been shown by feminists to result in highly gendered patterns of paid and domestic work (Smithson, 1999). The lack of awareness by participants of such outcomes has been argued to be a major contributing factor to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles (Connell, 1995; Smithson; 1999).

Discussion: making claims as feminist conversation analysts

In this article, we have attempted to address a number of questions around the controversial issues of the future of gender and language research, the potential (in)compatibility of conversation analytic and feminist research positions, and the role of the analyst’s background or common-sense knowledge in carrying out CA. We shall deal with each of these points in turn.

First, we asked to what extent a CA approach could enrich the field of gender and discourse. We have argued that research which attempts to link communication style to gender leads problematically to gender dualism, the exaggeration of ‘sex difference’ research findings and the perpetuation of stereotypes about women and men. A more fruitful way of exploring the links between gender and discourse is provided by a conversation analytic methodology. Rather than imposing analysts’ assumptions on to data in which gender may not be relevant, CA focuses on what participants themselves focus on in talk. Gender can therefore be ‘pointed to’ as relevant to conversational interaction; a claim that is grounded at the micro-level of interaction. To answer our first question, then, we suggest that CA enriches the field of gender and discourse and provides firm evidence that gender is relevant to conversational interaction.

In one sense, CA is the ultimate methodology for empowering participants and letting their understandings of ‘what’s going on’ become the focus of analytic attention. Based upon this argument, CA’s analytic aims are compatible with those of feminist researchers whose goals include focusing on the subjective experience of their participants. Speer (1999: 475) argued that examples are needed of ‘how CA can influence research and policy in the areas that most feminists would see as the crucial test ground for the value of this kind of work’. We have tried to show, as Kitzinger and Frith (1999) have demonstrated also in the pages of Discourse & Society, that CA may be a valuable resource for feminist theorizing. Kitzinger and Frith draw upon CA work on ‘doing refusals’; a conversational action that is complex and involves qualification, mitigation or complimenting the speaker whose request is to be refused. This has implications, they argue, for date rape ‘no-means-no’ assertiveness training for women, in
which it is argued that refusing sex is simply a matter of firmly stating ‘no’. They suggest that this training has not taken account of how refusals get done in everyday talk-in-interaction, and claim that such procedures ought to take on board the findings of CA. In making these claims, Kitzinger and Frith do not come to the data with a ‘clean gaze’ but with an eye for what can be achieved pragmatically for feminists. So although the findings of detailed CA work can inform usefully a feminist research agenda, the starting points of the two approaches remain incongruent, at least superficially. But what if one considers the analytic stance of CA more closely?

CA’s claims to ‘unmotivated looking’ and a clean gaze upon the data has been challenged recently by Wetherell (1998), Billig (1999) and Weatherall (2000). All three commentators are united in their argument that conversation analysts, simply by selecting fragments of talk to analyse, are ‘motivated’. Billig and Weatherall both complain that CA uses specialist rhetoric that is bound up with a particular ideological view of the social world. This can be seen to a large extent in Sacks’ (and many other writers’) descriptions of membership categorization analysis which uses both value-laden terminology and, in the case of the category of ‘sex’, reveals a particular stance on its nature. Furthermore, we agree with Wetherell that in order to develop analysis that goes beyond pure description one must look to the wider argumentative and interpretative resources, of both speakers and analysts, in order to produce analytic commentary. If we agree with these lines of argument, we can discount CA’s claims to a neutral stance and so feminism and CA are consonant once more.

Nevertheless, although CA provides the tools to explore in fine detail how issues around gender are occasioned in talk, a Schegloffian stance is of limited use if one wishes to comment on the wider social significance of such occasionings. This is because it involves speculation beyond the data and the imports of analysts’ background knowledge. Whereas common-sense or cultural knowledge is displayed when speakers problematize some aspect of the interaction (repair, challenge, account), a similar notion to Wetherell’s ‘troubled and untroubled subject positions’, a Schegloffian CA cannot tell us why such trouble occurs. We can point to speakers shifting between gender categories, repairing their use of gendered terms, challenging each other on the upshot of invoking gender and resisting ‘sexist’ identities, but we cannot draw upon our background knowledge as feminists to produce commentary on such matters. Consequently, we agree with De Francisco (1991), who argues that ‘although translational links [between members’ local practices and analysts’ wider claims] are susceptible to misinterpretation, failure to make such attempts seems elitist and does little to inform people’s lives.’ Thus analysing conversational data without considering the wider social context leaves a gap between technical analysis and that which is relevant socially for speakers (Pomerantz, 1989).

So, as feminists can we use CA to make claims about the wider social effects of members’ local practices? We suggest that if one challenges the analytic stance of CA (and does not take Schegloff’s version of CA as the only possible one) then it
is compatible with a feminist agenda. Alternatively, one may use CA pragmatically to advance feminist goals. However, in order to produce a more interesting analysis we suggest that it is not fruitful to rely solely on descriptions of and orientations to gender in participants’ own terms. As a starting point, CA is a useful tool for exploring what participants make relevant in talk, a stance that produces a less interpretative and more grounded analysis of language and gender. But analysts cannot attend to *everything* that participants make relevant in conversation – analytic choices are made continually. Furthermore, in order to comment on the relative status of gender categories, the wider social effects of adopting a ‘gender-neutral’ position in talk, or the social construction of common-sense knowledge about women and men’s lives, the analyst properly draws upon their own interpretative resources. In demonstrating the relevance of gender in conversational interaction, CA enriches the study of gender and discourse. However, we suggest that culture and common-sense knowledge, of both members and analysts, are largely unacknowledged and unexplicated resources in CA.

**(NOTES)**

1. This position, while typical of feminism within UK psychology, does not represent all feminist accounts of methodology. Many feminists have a clear commitment to positive-empiricist scientific values.

2. In this article we are dealing exclusively with orienting to gender in English; an area for future research might be a conversation analytic study of what counts as orienting to gender in other European and non-European languages. In languages such as French or German gender is indexed constantly simply as a result of their specific grammatical morphemes, although there is no necessary correlation between grammatical gender and sex (see Kothoff and Wodak, 1997 for a debate on this issue).

3. The form of transcription used was modified from the system developed by Gail Jefferson (1984; and used by Wetherell, 1998)

One or more colons indicate the extension of the previous sound e.g. Tha::t
Laughter is marked by hh; the number of hh is a rough marker of duration of laughter, while .hh indicates an audible intake of breath.
A ‘?’ is used to mark upward intonation characteristic of a question.
Underlining indicates stress placed on a word or part of a word.
Extended brackets mark overlap between speakers. [ ]
Numbers in parenthesis e.g. (0.2) indicate pauses in tenths of a second while (.) indicates a micropause.
An equals sign = indicates the absence of a discernible gap between the end of one speaker’s utterance and the beginning of another speaker’s utterance

4. We have not provided any information about the gender of participants, either in the transcripts or in the subsequent analytic commentary.

**(ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS)**

We would like to acknowledge the useful comments made on this article by Félix Diaz, Teun A. Van Dijk, Celia Kitzinger, Susan A. Speer and an anonymous reviewer.
REFERENCES


ELIZABETH H. STOKOE is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology, University College Worcester. Her research interests include conversation analytic approaches to the study of gender and discourse, the interactional organization of neighbourhood mediation sessions and public figure interviews. ADDRESS: Elizabeth H. Stokoe, Department of Psychology, University College Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK. [email: e.stokoe@worc.ac.uk]

JANET SMITHSON is a Research Fellow in the Department of Psychology and Speech Pathology, Manchester Metropolitan University. Current research includes the reconciliation of future work and family for young people in Europe, the effects of workplace change on individuals and families, and discourses about gender. [email: j.smithson@mmu.ac.uk]