Constructing blame for school exclusion in an online comments forum: Membership Categorisation Analysis and endogenous category work

Abstract

In this article we use Membership Categorisation Analysis to analyse conversations in an online forum in the British newspaper *The Guardian.* The comments thread followed an Op Ed piece that discussed the exclusion of 'under-performing' children in British secondary schools. Our analysis of these comments contributes to existing studies of online forums as a mode of public discourse and demonstrates the importance of research that focusses on interactional practices rather than on notions such as 'politeness' or 'framing'. We show the ways that participants used endogenous conversational categories to produce epistemic alignment and disalignment with each other, employing various strategies such as expanding category collections, creating relations between 'culpable' categories and 'trouble' categories, and re-describing categories through alternate category predicates. Through this, we see that the conversational actions undertaken in the forum are much more complicated than current concepts allow for, and we reflect on what such complexity might mean for the study and design of news forums.

1. Introduction

This paper explores an online comments thread in the British newspaper *The Guardian.* Our analysis focusses on a thread that discussed an article published on 18 September 2018 entitled '*Blame cuts – not headteachers – for school exclusion'*. The article commented on the practice of school exclusion and 'off rolling' in the UK, which is the process of removing children from school to either improve statistics of school performance, "to 'game' the school performance system, or to relieve financial pressure on schools." (Long, 2019: 1). The article argued that the reason that such exclusion occurred was because of funding cuts to education, which, it suggested, have reduced the resources available to schools and their ability to provide extra and alternate forms of support to children. Although it is difficult to measure, in the UK off-rolling seems to be a growing phenomenon. A 2019 government report (Long, 2019) showed that school exclusion has increased overall from 0.07% to 0.10% over a five-year period, and that it particularly impacts students in years 9 and 10 (between 13 and 15 years old). However, this statistic includes other forms of exclusion, and not just the 'informal' (and, according to the government report, illegal) exclusion of children for non-disciplinary reasons.

Our concern in this paper is not with the process of off-rolling itself, nor with the policy practices surrounding it; rather, our interest is in the discussion of the article in the forum and the resources that users employed to establish epistemic positions in relation to one another.

1.1. Civility, framing and the analysis of online news forums

Online comments threads in newspapers are one of a range of mediated 'discourse genres' that comprise spaces/contexts of communication for networked publics (Johansson 2017: 6). News threads are a comparatively new phenomena that became common from around 2004 and have been widely touted for their potential to re-shape the general public's practices of engagement with news (Hughey and Daniels, 2013). Citizens are said to have the potential to exercise (discursive) 'power' through their comments (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2017) by acting on and with news directly in the places where news is created/disseminated.

In spite of these optimistic views, a common finding of early research in this area was a high prevalence of inflammatory offensive and antagonistic discourse known as 'flaming' - abusive writing where users are directly and personally criticised through swearing and derogatory language (Jane 2015). In this context, issues of 'civility' and 'politeness' became core areas of research in online communication in general, and particularly in relation to news forums (Hackl and Newman, 2015; Ksiazek, 2015; Muddiman and Stroud, 2017). Researchers interested in this topic have explored diverse issues, such as the reaction of journalists or users to uncivil writing (Muddiman and Stroud, 2017); the impact of comments on perceptions of journalistic quality (Prochazka et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2017); how to predict user responses to different types of content (Ziegele et al., 2014); how to promote more civil content (Ksiazek, 2018), and the relationship between technological architecture and commenting practices (Knustad, 2018).

Another very popular framework for analysis news forums is 'Frame Analysis', which is particularly dominant in journalism research. Framing is understood as "the lens through which issues are understood" (Holton et al. 2014: 825), where a 'lens' refers to something like the kind of understanding that a given text emphasises. Examples of frames include 'thematic frames', which focus on social trends (e.g. a shared social responsibility towards climate change); 'episodic frames', which focus on individuals or case studies (e.g. the policy of a particular company towards climate change, or the responsibility of that company's CEO); 'gains' framing, which emphasises the 'benefits' of a given practice or experience (e.g. the benefits of particular social policies relating to limiting carbon emissions); or 'losses' frames, which emphasise problems and negative aspects (e.g. the detrimental impact of current industry practices of carbon emissions) (Holton et al., 2014; Suran et al., 2014). This approach to framing often involves asking questions about the relationship between the frames given in newspaper content and the frames that users employ in their posts (Dargay, 2016; Hackl and Newman, 2015; Zhou and Moy, 2007). This can be conceptualised in terms of media effect theory (Goodwin et al., 2017), and the ways that news content 'causes' certain views in the general population or, more subtlety, how they are used by the public.

A critical issue from the perspective of this paper is that much of this work is conducted through content analysis and the exploration of large data sets through keyword searchers and similar methods. Indeed, content analysis remains a common way of approaching the study of online forums in general (see, for example Çatalbaş Ürper & Çevikel 2016; Ellis 2015; Ksiazek 2018; Milioni et al. 2012; Paskin 2010; Torres Da Silva 2015; Ziegele et al. 2018).

The aggregation of discursive phenomena through content analysis is an understandable response to the problem of 'big data', but it limits researchers' ability to answer questions about the distinctive language practices within a given context as it strips the detailed features of action in order to conduct comparison across large data sets. Similarly, concepts such as 'civility' and 'politeness', which are also understandable framings given some of the well documented antagonistic phenomena in social media, potentially lead researchers away from an analysis of the language practices through which 'a lack of politeness', for example, is produced. 'Politeness' is contextual, and to understand it we need to analyse what 'doing politeness'/'impoliteness' looks like in a given setting. In the same way, Frame Analysis, while providing an interesting way to conceptualise the relation between institutional media text and users' text also directs attention away from the specific practices that comprise people's own language work in comments threads. As we will show below, MCA provides a way of unpacking some of the complexities of language practice in online forums.

1.2. The discursive turn

In Frame Analysis and in much 'civility' research, users' comments are treated as reflections of contributors own (and real) behaviour and attitudes. This has been heavily criticised by studies that focus on discursive practices. As Koteyko notes, much of this analysis "involves classifying statements for what they are rather than what they do" (Koteyko et al. 2013: 76) and "inevitably misses out on local interactional business that participants may attend to in online spaces, such as defending, undermining, constructing and maintaining authority and so on" (ibid).

Discourse approaches to the study of forums look at the relationship between societal 'discourse practices' and interactional forms. 'Discourses' are defined in varying ways, but in general terms refer to patterns of knowledge and practice that become enshrined in people's sense-making apparatus. Drawing particularly on Goffman's use of the term, discursive approaches often also invoke the notion of 'frame' when studying online forums, which, in this context means something like "An ideological construct made up of culturally shared ideas that people invoke to legitimise and make sense of the activity they are accomplishing" (Del-teso-craviotto 2006: 468). Some of the topics that have been commonly studied through discourse studies include harassment (Parson, 2018), particularly gender harassment (Rodríguez-Darias and Aguilera-Ávila, 2017), and the ways that publics engage with media discourse (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2017).

To take one example, Pinto-Coelho et al. (2017) used Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate how commenters used 'citizenship discourses' to position themselves in relation to each other and to the articles that they read. The authors argue that forum contributors' citizenship discourse was a normative framework that structured people's talk online. Different positions emerged within this discourse, with some users acting as 'bounded citizens' who presented themselves and others as outsiders to political decisions, and others as 'agentive citizens' who acted towards the creation of policy change.

The strength of this kind of analysis is that it is based on a close examination of people's conversational actions. In our study we draw on MCA, which has close links with the discourse studies in that it is concerned with the organisation of a 'stock of knowledge' (Schutz 1967) as a means of producing social phenomena. MCA contrasts with DA in that it focusses more on the 'action sequences' (Wooffitt 2005) or 'culture in action' (Fitzgerald,

2012) rather than on the 'social functions' or discourse structures that are said to contextualise those actions. The differences between MCA and DA have been discussed in detail elsewhere (see Wooffitt 2005) and we will not deal with them in detail here.

1.3. Membership Categorisation Analysis

MCA is a 'sister discipline' of Conversation Analysis (CA), both of which have their origins in the work of Harvey Sacks (Sacks, 1992). CA itself has had a long-standing interest in issues of epistemics and, as a part of this, in argumentation and conflict (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1990; Maynard, 1985) and a broad-range of concepts have been developed to analyse these topics (for overviews see Ten Have, 1998; Sidnell, 2010; Silverman, 1998). While we make reference to some of this literature through our discussion, it is not the focus of our analysis and we will limit our discussion to MCA, which is a much less widely discussed perspective

MCA looks at how people use language categories as a 'moral machinery' to constitute each other "through reference to specific attributes, activities and associations" (Housley et al. 2017: 5). Categories are 'moral' because they make claims to what 'things' *ought* to be like (Jayyusi, 1984). The categories that people use to organise and negotiate knowledge/praxis come with *inferential trajectories* (Jayyusi, 1984) that members use to build relevant associations of those categories and the people they implicate. It is beyond the limits of this paper to provide a full review of MCA (for more details see (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2015; Hester and Eglin, 1997; Jayyusi, 1984; Stokoe, 2012), but we do give an overview of how it has been used to date in the study of forums.

Sack's (1972) famous example of the opening of a children's story 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up' shows the rudiments of MCA. Sacks showed that we hear ' the mother' as being the 'mother of the baby'; assume the baby to be young (rather than a metaphorical baby, such as someone who is immature); understand that the mother is picking up the baby *because* it cried; see that picking up the baby because it cries is the morally 'correct' thing to do. All of this understanding is embedded in the ways we culturally hear the categories of mother and baby as being, in Sacks' terms, a 'standardised relational pair', and as invoking certain 'category bound activities' (picking up the baby).

Fitzgerald and Housley (2015) point to three ways in which categories work in interaction. First, turns at interaction (be they talk or text) undertake category work in relation to one another so that, for example, we can see how invoking one category can lead to the production of related categories in the next turn, or how people claim categorical relations to topics or to each other. Second, categories can be invoked to account for certain phenomena, such as invoking the category of a 'type of person' to account for a particular opinion or set of behaviours. The names/descriptions/roles given to people are critical to how we come to understand the interactions we are encountering (Watson, 1997). Naming relates closely to CA's interest in 'recipient design' – how users construct conversations to make it relevant to the people they are engaging with (Sidnell, 2010). In MCA, this issue is explored by looking at how categories are mobilised to achieve specific interactional work.

Third, in the specific context of action there may be a 'meta' category - or 'omnirelevant' categories - which frames the participants' demonstrable understanding of what types of actions are relevant to the ongoing interaction. So, participants may invoke certain categories as being central to the context at hand and use them to "enable and constrain interactional

understandings" (Rintel 2015: 125). Examples of such categories might be that a given practice is a 'criminal act', a 'classroom conversation', or 'just a joke'.

LeCouteur, Rapley, and Augoustinos' (2001) work gives a useful illustration of MCA in practice. The authors explore the organisation of political rhetoric in relation to aboriginal land rights in Australia and how "the categories of `Aborigine' and ` farmers', groups central to the dispute, are strategically constructed to normatively bind certain entitlements to activity to category membership" (2001:35). Their analysis of political speeches shows the different ways that the categories 'aboriginal' and 'farmer' were built and used to construct difference and to either avoid or to claim responsibility. In their own words, their analysis highlights that "The deployment, disputation and local working-up of apparently mundane categories […] points to the highly contested and problematic nature of social categories in everyday social and political life" (2001: 54).

MCA has been shown to be a useful methodology for exploring conflict and positionality in media spaces (Dori-Hacohen, 2012; Sneijder and Molder, 2005) and in online interactions (W. J. Gibson, 2009; Housley et al., 2017a; Lawson, 2008; Stommel and Koole, 2010). The following two examples illustrate the ways that MCA can inform our understanding of online interactional spaces. First, Andersen and Rathje (2019) look at how members of online communities moralised other users' conduct. They show that users invoke age related categories to explain why a user may have breached a behavioural norm and to question someone's right to make an assessment about what counts as 'normal' behaviour. As they point out, age categories are not actually available to online users due to the 'disembodied' nature of the interaction, and yet age formed an important part of how moral judgements were made. Users built a picture of others using whatever social information was available and used these pictures to construct categories that gave sense to other users' activities. As a second example, Housley et al. (2017) used MCA to look at the ways that the Twitter account of a celebrity created controversy in the UK. The authors analysed these texts as 'category formulations' and how these became tied with specific readings of the texts as 'antagonistic' or 'controversial'. They illustrate that the tweets were designed as 'ignition points', constructed through the use of particular categories to generate controversy.

In each of these examples we see how MCA informs a contextual understanding of how users achieve particular kinds of interactional work. Identities such as 'aboriginal', 'outsider' 'antagonistic' are built by people through their talk, and they are bound up with the production of other activities like 'making a claim of entitlement', 'justifying other people's behaviour', or 'producing antagonism'. Our analysis follows these concerns in relation to the practices of epistemic alignment in a comments forum in *The Guardian.* In the next section we provide an outline of the data and an overview of the procedures used in our analysis.

2. Methods

The data analysed here come from a publicly accessible thread on *The Guardian* website. This is a moderated forum, and *The Guardian* states that it removes posts that breach its participation guidelines, which includes aspects such as that posts must not include personal attacks; misrepresent content of *The Guardian*; be offensive or threatening; or contain hate speech. We downloaded the comments a week after the article's publication, at which point there were 21 separate threads, with a total of 79 comments from 48 different users. Each thread contained between one and ten comments, with most threads being between two and

four comments in length (14 threads in total). Only five threads were longer than this, and only two threads longer than nine comments (See Table 1).

	Number of posts in thread									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency of threads	4	4	5	4	0	1	2	0	1	1

Table 1: Length of forum threads

We began our analysis by coding the data in NVivo which involved three phases. First, we began by categorising the 'direction of blame' that the posts produced (parents, schools, headteachers, teachers, politicians, children), and the types of epistemic relations that were created between the posts (alignment, disalignment or ambiguous alignment).

We use the term 'alignment' here to refer to conversational actions that support or build on the epistemic claims being made in previous posts, while 'disalignment' is used to characterise the introduction of alternate epistemics or to actively undermine existing positions and 'ambiguous alignment' describes interactional work that is not clear in its epistemic orientation. Consistent with other studies of online communication, our usage of alignment treats it as more or less synonymous *for our purposes* with terms such as 'affiliation' (Georgakopoulou, 2011) (see also Steensig and Drew's (2008: 9) discussion of its similarities with 'agreement' and 'preference'). In doing so we do not claim that there is no analytic difference between such practices: as Steensig and Drew (2008) make clear, there are many instances where the terms characterise different interactional phenomena. Stivers' (2008) research on storytelling describes alignment in terms of supporting asymmetry in the story-telling process by aiding (or interrupting) the progressivity of the telling, and distinguishes this from *affiliation*, which involves endorsing a specified position. In this account 'alignment' (as *progressivity*) would seem to be less relevant for asynchronous/quasi-synchronous communication where turns are produces as completed units (Giles et al., 2014). As such, we maintain the more general characterisation of the terms outlined above.

We developed a set of codes relating to the pragmatic work being undertaken within the posts (such as 'but' formulations; extreme case formulations; metaphor, incumbency claim, incumbency rejection). Table 2 gives an outline of the frequencies of some of the codes we developed. This coding process was used to gain familiarity with the data prior to undertaking our detailed analysis, which involved using the concepts outlined in Table 3 to write a detailed narrative account of the category work being undertaken in each thread. In presenting the data we have chosen examples that show the most common forms of category work found in the production of alignment and disalignment.

	Total Instances	No. of threads
Blaming Children	4	2
Blaming Head Teachers	3	3
Blaming Teachers	9	7
Blaming Politicians	12	9

Blaming teachers	3	2
Incumbency Claim	11	7
Incumbency rejection	2	1
'Wh' questions	4	3
'How' Questions	4	4
'But' formulations	3	2
Personal story	8	7
Extreme case formulation	6	3
Metaphor	6	3

Table 2: Code categories and frequencies for 'blame' in off-rolling

Concept	Definition	Example
Membership Category	The individual categories that can be seen to make up a broader collection of categories.	'Mother' and 'baby' are categories of people that form a part of the category device 'family: 'teacher' and 'pupil' can be heard as part of a category 'school'.
Membership Categorization Device (MCD)	The 'device' through which different categories can be heard as part of the same category.	
The Hearer's maxim	When two categories are used together then they can be heard as part of the same MCD.	Describing a 'pupil' talking to a 'teacher', we hear this as the pupil of *that* teacher: they are bound as part of the same category device.
Category Predicate	The characteristics associated with a particular category.	We can treat the description of children as 'well behaved' or teachers as 'hard working' as *predicates* of the categories 'children' and 'teachers'.
Category-Bound Activity	Activities that have a relationship to particular categories.	The phrase 'The children are playing in the playground, and the teachers are chatting in the staff room' invokes categories of 'playing' and 'chatting' that are associated with the categories of children and teachers.
Positioned Categories	Categories that are placed in a hierarchy.	'Head teacher', 'deputy head' and 'teacher' can be seen as existing in a hierarchical relation, as can 'teachers' and 'pupils'.

Table 3: Key concepts in Membership Category Analysis

Ethical issues surrounding the seeking of permission within internet research are complex due to the different and often competing ethical positions in academia and those of online communities themselves (Whiteman, 2010). Guidelines emphasise the importance of considering the potential harm of either anonymising or not anonymising data when making it public (Markham and Buchanan, 2011): no firmly established practices for how to approach the issues exist as such matters depend on context. We took the decision to anonymise the posts by removing their chosen usernames. There are of course moral consequences to this move which strips the users' identity signifiers. Usernames are potentially important for framing the construction of identity as they can foreshadow issues such as a user's political position, their cultural allegiances or their aesthetic tastes. Further, the interplay of usernames and texts can be revealing in helping to provide clues about how to read particular textual actions (Aleksiejuk, 2013). However, we felt that removing the usernames offered protection to the users as it minimises the risk of their views being exposed outside of the particular context that they produced them in. We name each user with a four-digit identifier, which is given directly after the number of the post. Where posts are positioned in reply to an existing one, the identifier of the original author is given second. The numbering system we use for the posts comprises two numbers (e.g. 1.2. or 6.4) where the first number identifies the position of the thread in the forum (with number one being the oldest) and the second number identifies the sequential position of the post in that thread.

Our analysis is organised into two sections, the first of which looks at the ways that participants constructed alignment, while the second examines disalignment.

3. Analysis: building category collections of blame

3.1. Alignment and the creation of 'morally binding' categories

The first practice we wish to describe relates to the ways that contributors worked together to morally bind a particular category of actors as 'culpable'.

> **Extract 1: Manufacturing 'victims' and 'blameworthy'**
>
> **1.1 FL34.** "Sixth formers are increasingly used to help out. "Now they've cut the funding for A-levels back to 15 hours per week, we're getting sixth formers to work as sports coaches and do tutoring in the leftover time," one head recently told me."
>
> So unbelievably angry.
>
> Tory bastards.
>
> **1.2 JC62 – FL34.** Having lived through four Tory Prime Ministers, they are always the same regarding Education. They always aim to destroy it for the majority of the population whilst handing the children of the rich and well off advantages because they can afford it.
>
> **1.3 FD29 – FL34.** Yep, that really stood out for me too. Every morning it's another depressing story - in almost every single area of the public sector where people are most vulnerable - delivered from a different angle. I try to keep a fair and balanced view on most things but it's getting harder and harder to maintain.

In Post 1.1 FL34 reproduces a quotation from the article that links funding cuts to the use of 'sixth formers' (15-17 year olds) to do tutoring and act as sports coaches. FL34 then links this

to 'Tory bastards' who they invoke as to blame for this (the 'bastards' can be read as an evaluation of the category 'Tory').

JC62's reply (Post 1.2) begins with 'having lived through', which makes accountable their experience and pre-figuring the legitimacy of their turn. They go on to invoke a related modified category 'Tory Prime Ministers'. The 'always aim to' can be thought of as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) that specifies the category feature as an objective (im)moral feature of the category 'Tory'. Two additional categories are produced as a relational opposite pair, where the minority group 'the children of the rich and well off' are set in opposition to 'the majority of the population'. This category distinction, along with the assignment of a preference (by the *Torys*) to 'hand' advantage to the 'rich and famous', further emphasises the (im)moral character of the category 'Torys'.

Following an alignment with the Post 1.1 ('Yep, that really stood out for me too'), Post 1.3 invokes two extreme case formulations ('every morning', 'almost every single area of the public sector') and producing a new category 'public sector' which is characterised as 'most vulnerable'. This post can be seen as expanding on or *populating* the categorisation device 'the majority of the population'

Together, these three posts build a central category of blame, predicates of those categories and relational categories that are presented as 'victims'. Categories are constructed to stand in negative relation to one another, where one category (Torys) is blameworthy and the other (e.g. '6th formers', 'the majority of the population') is the 'victim'. Between them, the posts expand a collection of related categories associated with the collection 'blameworthy candidate' ('tory and 'tory prime minister') and victim ('sixth former', 'the majority of the population', 'the public sector'). The immutability of the text means that these collections remain available, operating as a kind of 'indexical space' of reference. Posts 1.2 and 1.3. can both be seen to draw on the prior posts as a resource to build and continue the category work already initiated by 1.1.

Another way that blame is constructed is by building a relation between a category that is held to be 'at fault' and a separate one that is 'to blame'. The extracts below come from a thread that starts with a short post from user DF81. This opening contribution (Post 6.1) uses the same rhetorical structure as the article title itself to make a claim for blaming parents for school exclusion. The post creates an alignment with a part of the article by suggesting that it is 'parents' that are to blame for 'school exclusion' rather than 'headteachers'. In this way, the post invokes an MCD of 'blameworthy candidates' who may be responsible for exclusion. The construction trades on the idea that parents bear a special responsibility for (their) children and implies that the act of exclusion undertaken by headteachers is not their 'fault', but a result of the failings of parents in their responsibilities. In this way, the device sets up a 'contrast class' (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2009) between parents and teachers and downgrades the actions of the school by foregrounding a particular social responsibility relating to the special relation between children and parents.

Extract 2: Constructing culpability and blameworthiness

6.1 DF81. Blame parents - not headteachers - for school exclusions

6.4. SG02 - OY88. *Some* children may have issues that cause their sh*tty behaviour. Most don't. And that is the fault of parents.

6.5. QS33 – SG02. That is certainly the perception. That 'some' children get away with everything because their parents either do not care or think that they are so wonderful and can do no wrong. That can apply to parents from ALL classes by the way.

Following an unrelated two-turn exchange (not included here) at Post 6.4 SG02 provides an elaboration of DF81's original post. The use of italics on the category 'some children' at the start of the post seems to project a possible argument that children's behaviour is a result of what they characterise as 'issues'. SG02 uses an alternate (implied) category 'most children' to suggest that such issues are not common and goes on to argue that, for this group of children, any bad behaviour is the fault of the parents. In this way the post invokes a further category distinction (some children/most children) and uses it to restate the categorical relationship that had been established in Post 6.1.

Continuing with the example, Post 6.5 aligns with SG02's position. The formulation 'that is certainly the perception' invokes a claim that the view expressed by SG02 is a general one and re-invokes the category 'some' children, but in a different way, this time referring to a category of children who are 'at fault' rather than those who have 'legitimate' problems. Again, we see the use of an extreme case formulation 'get away with everything' to characterise 'some children', and then the production of the category 'parents of these children' and a description of them as 'thinking their children are wonderful'. After this, the post provides a further characterisation of these parents as being non-class specific. Finally, the post undertakes a strategy similar to 6.4. by invoking different category distinctions [social] 'classes') as a way of also projecting possible lines of argument (i.e. that there are class differences in child behaviour).

What we see, then, is that posts 6.5. and 6.4. both expand the initial characterisation of the blameworthy category (in this case 'parents') not by invoking 'victims', but by working through an account that constructs a 'legitimate problem' and a culpable or blameworthy category. The posts identify 'most children' (6.4) and 'some children' (6.5) as the source of trouble but link this trouble to the category 'parents' invoked in 6.1, so that 'blame' is treated as a result of the relationship that this category of people have to another category (c.f. Housley (2002) and Housley and Fitzgerald (2003) for discussion of using categories to construct/avoid blame).

3.2. Disalignment and predicate construction

While epistemic alignment was characterised by the expansion of culpability and the construction of morally binding relations, disalignment most commonly featured the re-configuration of category predicates which were used to construct alternate moral descriptions and relationships between different categories. Extract 3 shows the continuation of the dialogue presented in Extract .1

Extract 3: Re-describing categories and category relations

1.4. MW15 - FD29. Tutoring and sports coaching is something Ib schools make compulsory. Seems a good way to foster community spirit across all year groups, which is something often missing in secondary schools. Keep it up.

1.5. HH76 – FL34. Struggling to be moved. We shouldn't make personal study part of A-Levels? We shouldn't give pupils opportunities to get coaching/teaching experience at their own school?

1.6. DH93 – MW15. I wouldn't have minded doing some tutoring as a 6th former, but only if I'd been paid for it.

In Post 1.4. MW15's response to Post 1.3. (FD29) does not contain discursive markers to project its alignment, but instead begins by introducing a sub-category of schools ('IB' – international Baccalaureate schools), and frames sports coaching as 'a good way to foster community spirit', which they characterise as absent from 'secondary schools'. The post ends with 'keep it up', which is a common ending following a positive evaluation, and which increases the sense of ambiguous alignment here. Overall, this contribution does not produce any of the features held to be common in 'inflammatory' talk (Lee, 2018) , but instead embodies a structure more reminiscent of affiliative discourse.

Epistemic disaffiliation is nonetheless readable in the category work being carried out by the post, and the opposition of a new category 'IB schools' with 'secondary schools'. The category 'secondary schools' had not explicitly been used by other posts, but it forms part of a logical collection of categories along with 'public sector' (Post 1.3.) and perhaps 'the majority of the population' (Post 1.4.). IB schools are oppositional to such categories as they remain a minority class of schools in the UK.

Post 1.5. by HH76 begins with a declination formulation associated with disassociation (Kotthoff, 1993) ('struggling to be moved'), where the contributor signals their disalignment with Post 1.1. The post continues by providing two questions that embody the same 'we shouldn't' formulations, which is a rhetorical form of question similar to 'wh- questions' (Quirk et al., 1985) that display the commenters' opposite view and challenge to FL34's stance. Post 1.5. invokes the category-bound activities 'personal study' and 'opportunities to get coaching/teaching experience' and implies a common-sense link between these and the omnirelevant category 'schools' that is under discussion. Through the formulation 'their own schools' Post 1.5 invokes a moral sense of membership between 'pupils' and schools, where the former are positioned as having certain *rights* that are implicitly connected to the newly described category predicates.

Turning to the final post in this sequence, post 1.6. is a reply to MW15's contribution (Post 1.4). The post begins with a formulation that is common with agreement and acceptant 'I wouldn't mind' and ends with a 'but' formulation indicative of disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984) ('but only if I'd been paid'). Through this structure, the post uses the concept of payment to relate the activity of tutoring to the broader membership category of 'work', which is implicitly set in opposition to the membership category of 'education'.

We can see that Posts 1.4. through to 1.6. each create a disalignment, using different strategies to do so, including using structures reminiscent of affiliation (1.4.); rhetorical 'wh-' questions (1.5.); and 'but' (1.6.) formulations. In none of them do we see the strongly antagonistic forms associated with flaming in online contexts. The absence of flaming is of course partly the result of *The Guardian*'s own moderating practices rather than an endogenous phenomenon of the participants' writing styles, but the *presence* of non-antagonistic forms is nonetheless a noticeable and important feature of how the discourse works here.

The participants construct schools in terms of their social role and associated category bound activities. Contributors invoked category activities ('tutoring' 'sports coaching' (1.4) 'personal study', 'coaching/teaching experience' (1.5.) which they represented as producing category related phenomena ('fostering community spirit' (1.4) 'opportunities' (1.5)). In these ways the posts re-frame the moral relation description of the 'work' being characterised by the article not as 'exploitative' but as 'opportunities' and as positive components of the practices conducted within schools. Post 1.6 re-invokes the notion of work as a form of 'labour' and the moral relation between labour and payment.

The second common way in which posts constructed disaffiliation was through the production of victimhood in relation to different categories of actors.

Extract 4: Constructing victimhood as a category relation

2.1. CX35. Discipline. Remember that?

2.2. FL34 – CX35. Please tell us how permanently excluding children, leaving them with no educational prospects and a blighted future with only crime or menial existences being a way forward helps society?

2.3. ZP90 – CX35. that when you tell a kid off and the parent then rings you to have a go?

2.4. SK55 – FL34. And what about all the other children who have to suffer the effects of violent or disruptive classmates?

In Post 2.1 CX35 produces a category resonant description 'Discipline' that invokes a 'normatively binding' (LeCouteur et al., 2001) between the idea that adults (not specifically teachers, although the 'omnirelevant context' (Rintel, 2015) implies it) should provide discipline to children as they form a hierarchical 'positioned relation' to one another. The 'remember that' invokes the idea that this used to be a normal association.

In Post 2.2. the implicated relationship between adults and children established in Post 2.1. is re-characterised trough the invoked action 'permanently excluding children' (and an implicated category of 'permanently *excluded* children'). In this way 'discipline' is characterised as a predicate of schools as an institution and is used to invoke a class of students who experience exclusion and who have 'no educational prospects', 'blighted future' and 'crime and menial existences'. These category descriptions are linked to a broader moral category device relating to 'society', which subsumes categories of parents and children and implicates a moral claim about the way that actions 'benefit' a broader group.

Post 2.3. shows again the limitations of the alignment and disalignment binary as it can in theory be taken to perform either type of positioning. The post uses a question form to propose that there is a problem with the idea of disciplining children because this can lead parents to complain. The form of this proposal is to hypothesise that the reader (or the contributor of the post) is the teacher in question and to invoke a possible angry parent who complains directly about the act of disciplining. The post could be taken as either a disalignment by pointing to a problems with disciplining as an approach, or it could be seen as an alignment that invokes sympathy for the complaint. However it is interpreted, the

category work produced involves furnishing the description of the category 'teachers' with particular role actions and the category 'parents' with generalised response actions.

Post 2.4. Replies to post 2.2's implied invocation of 'permanently excluded children' by proposing a global category 'other children' and then suggesting that such children 'suffer the effects of' a re-described category 'violent and disruptive classmates'. In this way, the post re-describes children in terms of their institutional role in the school (as 'classmates') and implicates a moral duty that a school has towards this broader category.

These posts exemplify a repeated phenomenon in our data where contributors built a sense of 'victimhood' as a way of characterising the relation between broad categories. Here, Post 2.2 proposed a subset of children that are invoked as something like 'victims' of exclusion practices; Post 2.5 presents teachers as victims in relation to parental complaint; and Post 2.6. presents a category 'other children' suffering the consequences of (by implication) disruptive children. In each case, categories are set in relation to one another (often by splitting categories into distinctive types) and then establishing a form of opposition between them, where one category is described as the 'victim'.

4. Conclusions

Our interest in this paper has been to use MCA to examine the kinds of category work undertaken by participants in a comments thread of *The Guardian*. Our argument is that in order to make progress in theorising news forums we must examine closely the conversational actions that comprise them. Frameworks such as 'politeness' and 'Frame Analysis'm which have dominated research in this area, are limited in their ability to provide detailed accounts of the interactional practices of 'doing politeness' or 'using a frame'. Discourse studies aim to produce this grounding, and we have argued here that MCA, as a nuanced empirical language of description, provides a very important but much underused resource to aid this endeavour.

By looking closely at the 'interactional business' (Koteyko et al., 2013) of posts MCA helps us to understand how people make use of and work with the affordances of online forums (W. Gibson, 2009). Different technologies give users distinctive modes of interaction. For example, research on Twitter has shown how features such as the '@' function and hashtags as well as the open nature of the network impact on how people address each other or deal with topic shifts. (Housley et al., 2017b; Rathnayake and Suthers, 2018; Wikstrom, 2019). In the news forums analysed here we saw that the visual adjacency of textual turns (including their 'threading') and the ability to re-read existing posts was critical to building an understanding of who was been spoken to, the kind of epistemic position being constructed in the contribution, and the category work being undertaken through the posts.

While it has not been the aims of our analysis, all of this has potential implication for the study of forum architecture, which has been issues of substantial concern in the field of journalism (Knustad, 2018). Brooker et al.'s (2017) Frame Analysis of forums from *The Guardian* led them conclude that the architecture itself aided the production of polarized positions and "discourages users from developing alternative terminologies for producing counter-narratives" (ibid.: 3201). By using MCA we found something quite different in our data set, as epistemic affiliation and the enactment of an evolving descriptive language were

both strongly present in the data. This suggests that much more close study of forum work may be needed in order to make any generalised claims about how particular forums architectures work.

In our analysis we saw that the posts worked relationally with each other, using the category resources introduced by existing posts to produce epistemic positions. MCA helped to see how the general relations between the posts – alignment/disalignment/ambiguous alignment – could be understood as an interactional accomplishment achieved through endogenous category work. 'Alignment' was constructed by building notions of 'culpability' by placing categories of people in a relationship of 'blameworthy' and 'victims'. Further, users constructed distinction between 'at fault' and 'to blame' and manufactured 'legitimate problems' by morally tying 'culpable' categories and problem categories. This finding mirrors work in other contexts where blame construction has been shown to be organised through the moral pairing of actions (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2003).

Disaffiliation was achieved by reconstructing the 'moral binding' established by other posts through alternate category which were used to re-characterise the relationship between actors, activities and institutions. Established 'problematic' moral relations were re-framed in ways that articulated an alternate moral claim. One of the ways that such moral re-framing occurred was by positioning actors as 'victims' through a re-specification of category relations. We also saw that posts often produced disaffiliation through structures reminiscent of affiliative positions, and that rather than the pragmatic features of discursive construction, it was the category work that provided a 'reading path' (McHoul, 1982) for understanding the 'conversational actions' being undertaken in the posts. In all positioning, we see that the *moral work* of populating category collections and specifying relationships, characteristics and responsibilities of/between categories was key to the construction of the epistemic positions. This, we argue, shows the importance of MCA in enabling to analyse the specific contextual mechanisms through which alignment is configured as an interactional accomplishment.

One of the limitations of our study is that it has focussed on one newspaper context. A comparative analysis of how different internet constituencies use newspaper forums is a very important area of research that remains largely unexamined. Similarly, due to ethical considerations we have not looked at issues such as the role of usernames and other identity markers in the construction of conversations. As Watson (1997) has emphasised, the categories used to describe people (by analysts or by people in everyday interaction) are critical to developing particular readings of what is happening interactionally such as *who is being addressed*, *why they are being addressed*, and *what the implications of this are for the ongoing action* (in CA terms, the 'recipient design 'embedded in the action (Sacks and Schegloff, 1979)). We suggest that the analysis of usernames and avatars should form an important focus in future work. Relatedly, the ethical position of anonymisation adopted in this paper is just one response to complex ethical debates about the use of publicly available data, and we regard this as an important area for continued discussion in digital scholarship. We hope that the 'aesthetic of detailed analysis' that we have provided here helps to show the possibilities of this type of work and how it can inform developments in scholarship and journalistic practice.

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