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Mentality or morality?
Membership categorisation, multiple meanings and mass murder

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Abstract

A central topic for social psychology is how we identify, categorise or represent ourselves to ourselves and to each other. Previous work on this topic stemming from attribution theory, social identity theory, self-categorisation theory and social representations theory, has tended to accept the dominant cognitivist tenet of an interior self which is (with varying degrees of success) re-presented in ordinary discourse. Against this tradition, and drawing on membership categorisation analysis, we argue here for an attention to ordinary members' methods of categorising the self. Such devices are constitutive of a culture. Accounts of the self (whether lay or professional) cannot avoid reliance on such devices.

Our particular case involves a corpus of materials from the press surrounding the Port Arthur massacre: the shooting of thirty-five people by a lone gunman, Martin Bryant, in Tasmania in 1996. In this case, where public accountings for what 'makes up' a particular person are tied to an otherwise inexplicable but ultra-newsworthy event, we find that lay and professional methods of accounting are remarkably congruent. One of the reasons for this congruence, we suggest, is that the categorisation of persons is a fundamentally moral matter. Devices for producing everyday moral accounts, in actual practical circumstances, precede and ground, for example, 'technical', 'clinical' or 'scientific' judgments. We conclude that describing such routine (but ultimately grounding) cultural devices can be a central goal of social psychology, as opposed to explaining 'the self' by tacitly relying upon those same devices in an unacknowledged and unproblematized fashion.

When, as happened at Port Arthur, Tasmania, in April 1996, someone goes out and shoots down thirty-five people, the grounds for explanation become problematic: for the courts, for those who knew the gunman personally, for psychological and psychiatric experts, and for the journals of record. In contrast to established social psychological work on the methods by which persons categorise such actions and the individuals who perform them, we use membership categorisation analysis (MCA) to look at the forms of identification employed (officially and unofficially) to try to account for such a case in newspaper coverage of both the shootings, and the subsequent trial of the perpetrator Martin Bryant. In the 'lay' accounts of the perpetrator and his actions reported in the newspapers, we see little evidence of a confusion of understandings (or 'representations', c.f. Morant, 1995) – rather we encounter a range of commonsense categories which explain the shootings in terms of the madness, peculiarity and/or 'otherness' of Martin Bryant. However, turning to the accounts of the 'experts' what we find is a series of incongruities amounting to a paradox. For the psychiatric experts, the mass murderer is 'personality disordered' but not insane; he is intellectually deficient but insufficiently retarded to be excusable (e.g., as 'criminally insane'). The central question addressed in this study then, is: is this precarious professional identification any different from everyday commonsense categories such as 'psycho', 'nut' and the rest when it comes to doing the moral work of categorisation and explanation?

Approaches to categorisation

The matter of identification, or categorisation, has long been central to social psychology. A variety of approaches – from attribution theory (Heider, 1958), social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987) to social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984) – have sought to account and how identification is accomplished, for how persons and their actions are categorised. From Heider on, these theoretical approaches have not only idealised ordinary persons and sought to explain their (equally idealised) ghostly internal mechanisms, but have also implicitly or explicitly relegated 'lay' or 'ordinary' accounts, explanations, and characterisations to a realm of usage inferior to that offered by

'expert', 'scientific' accounts (Antaki, 1994).

In keeping with the prevailing cognitivist emphasis in contemporary social psychology, self-categorisation theory (SCT), for example, suggests that individuals account for their own identity in specific circumstances via an in(tro)spection of an 'output' – or 'specific self-image' – that is 'switched on' by social circumstances. Turner et al., for example, suggest that:

the functioning of the social self-concept is situation specific: particular self-concepts tend to be activated ('switched on') in specific situations, producing specific self-images ... as a function of the interaction between the characteristics of the perceiver and the situation. (Turner et al., 1987, p. 44)

Such formulations, described elsewhere as a form of 'cultural dopism' (McHoul & Rapley, 2001), inevitably produce a theory of categorisation-in-practice as the product of a mechanistic and depersonalised cognitive machinery. On such accounts, the categorisation (identification) of self and others is not so much an activity performed by persons in specific social situations for particular (social, personal, rhetorical) purposes but is, rather, a deterministic mental process which, 'activated' by features of the situation, merely animates its passive human vehicle.

While accounts of categorisation offered by social representations theory benefit from recognising that representations can be theorised as both 'cognitive structures' as well as 'public rhetorics' (Breakwell, 1993, p. 2), work in this tradition still faces a number of problems engendered by precisely this insistence on the double life of categories, and an essentially structuralist, reductionist, account of 'representations' or categories (Potter & Wetherell, 1998).

A considerable body of work has examined social representations of 'mental illness' or 'madness' (for example, Gigling, Guimelli, & Penochet, 1996; Jodelet, 1991; Petrillo, 1996; Wagner et al., 1999). This work has noted that both 'lay' and 'expert' representations of 'mental illness' are describable as 'multiple, complex and encompass[ing] a range of ambivalent reactions' (Morant, 1995, p. 11). Yet it has not addressed the point that representations/categories may be more profitably understood not as fixed, yet changeable, a priori cognitive or rhetorical 'structures', but rather as an array of interactional resources for managing meaning in their local

deployment for specific purposes. Such a respecification moves us away from the sort of questions posed, for example, by Breakwell (1993) in her proposal to effect a merger of social identity theory and social representations theory – questions like: Why don't all group members share x representation of y? How is it that some individuals can reproduce or accept a particular representation while others cannot? What determines the actual form of a given representation? These questions begin by assuming that representations/categorisations exist in some a priori form. Our respecification begins by asking what categorisations can do and moves us towards an analysis of the way they are used in everyday social practices, rather than considering them as reified objects in social scientific space.

Stemming from Potter and Wetherell's (1987) classic text, work in discursive psychology has begun to draw attention to the shortcomings of traditional social psychological accounts of members' practices of categorising and representing themselves. Drawing on work in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis inspired by Harvey Sacks (1992), studies in this tradition have pointed to the flexibility and indexicality of categorisations and identity claims or ascriptions in everyday (as opposed to experimental) usage. Discursive psychological work – such as that of Potter and Edwards (1990) on attitudes, categories (Edwards, 1998), causal explanations (Edwards, 1995; Edwards & Potter, 1993), and on the close link between description and explanation in commonsense accounts (Edwards & Potter, 2001) – has, in its questioning of the adequacy of mainstream social psychological accounts, given rise to a body of work which has begun to respecify how matters of identity and categorisation may be approached. Antaki, et al (1996), for instance, examined naturally-occurring conversation and demonstrated the moment-by-moment fluidity of the identities invoked by 'speakers' own orientations'. In his analysis of couple counselling, Edwards (1998) illuminated the highly specific, and intensely local, interactional work which particular descriptions of 'salient' features of persons can accomplish in terms of the candidate social identity proposed for particular individuals. Similarly, in their analyses of set-piece political speeches, Rapley (1998) and LeCouteur, et al (2001) have shown that theoretical accounts of categorisation which rely upon notions of perceptuo-cognitive automaticity not only

miss the specific rhetorical and practical work that categorisations do, but are also difficult to sustain in the face of the examination of actual social practices. In this paper then, we draw upon work in discursive psychology, particularly that informed by membership categorisation analysis, and set out to examine how particular forms of categorisation do social and moral work in actual, naturally-occurring, use. As we show, in this extension of our earlier analysis (see McCarthy and Rapley, 2001), such categorisation devices are generally and equally relied upon by both lay and professional (here, forensic psychological and psychiatric) accounts of the event in question, a 'mass murder'.

Historical background

In November 1996, a twenty-nine year-old Tasmanian named Martin Bryant was sentenced to life imprisonment on thirty-five counts of murder for which he had been indicted after the shootings at the historic site of Port Arthur in April of the same year. In sentencing him, Chief Justice Cox told the court that consideration of the prisoner's mental condition at the time of the shootings was at the 'forefront' of the case. Regardless of his change of plea to 'guilty' during the trial, it was possible for the Court to find that Bryant was not criminally responsible for his actions under the insanity provisions of Tasmania's Criminal Code 1924. In order for an insanity defence under Section 381 to apply, the Court had to be satisfied that Bryant was afflicted with a 'mental disease', to the extent that he was unable to understand 'the physical character' of his actions or to know that he should not have acted as he did (Section 16). It is explicitly provided that 'mental disease' includes 'natural imbecility' (Section 16(4)). Insanity, under these terms, operates as a defence (Section 381) so that the Court may return a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity. There is also, under Section 16(3), a delusion provision: if affected by a delusion, but otherwise criminally responsible (i.e., not insane according to the preceding subsections) one can be found to be only responsible for what one believed to be the case. An example would be if, at the time, Bryant was not 'insane' but thought that everyone was out to get him.ⁱ Such a verdict (and the disposal options so afforded) turn as much on the moral as the legal status accorded to the accused. The 'insane'

(including the 'imbecile') by virtue of their membership in these categories, are excluded from the category 'ordinary accountable actor' and are, as such, exempted from moral responsibility for their actions.

Three forensic psychiatrists and a forensic psychologist were given the task of assessing Bryant's psychological condition and, despite disagreement among the psychiatrists as to the correct diagnosis, all agreed that while Bryant 'suffered' from a 'significant personality disorder', he was not insane. Other (psychological) evidence suggested that while Bryant had an IQ of 66, this level of intelligence did not imply that he was sufficiently impaired to satisfy the criteria for 'natural imbecility'. The judge accepted the psychiatric account, acknowledging Bryant to have been 'grossly disturbed from early childhood'. He added: '[T]hat the prisoner, through these handicaps ... has developed into a pathetic social misfit calls for understanding and pity even though his actions demand condemnation'.

The Port Arthur massacre (as it came to be known) attracted considerable media interest throughout Australia and overseas. In the Australian press, journalists were unanimous that Bryant was a culpable agent deserving of the severest punishment; but most conceded that they could not answer their own most pressing question: why did he do it? The shootings placed heavy demands on the news media for explication of the event and what 'manner of a person' its perpetrator was. As the editorial in The Australian (Extract 1) immediately after the shootings shows, the fourth estate was well aware of its institutional role in both rehearsing society's 'expected queries' about such momentous happenings, and also of its (self-appointed) responsibility for offering definitive accounts of them.

Extract 1: 'Violence the resort of young, disturbed men'

The Port Arthur massacre has raised the expected queries of what manner of person would go berserk in this fashion and how far the crimes could have been anticipated. Without wishing to pre-empt later legal findings the report thus far is that the killer is a young man believed to have had a history of mental illness. How is it possible that such an apparently disturbed young man has escaped scrutiny for so long?

(The Australian, 30th April 1996)

As is further apparent from this extract, in the immediate recourse to the category 'mental illness' as an explanatory resource, the media drew upon (and in so doing reproduced) the 'institutionalised' common sense of the culture on which they were reporting.

The matter-of-fact tone adopted in the editorial (re)presents and naturalises the mundane notion that only madness could account for Bryant's actions. However, despite (or perhaps because of) its seeming transparency and taken-for-grantedness, this is not a notion that can be left unexamined. The flexibility and fluidity of psychiatric diagnostic categories – and their local and contingent deployment to manage the moral status and moral accountability of Bryant in the print media – form the focus of the rest of this paper.

Theoretical and methodological background

As we have seen, there is a considerable body of work on what may, broadly, be called the 'representation' of 'mental illness'. A related body of work has specifically examined the representation of madness in the media. With very few exceptions this literature focuses on the errors or contradictions in media depictions of the 'facts' about 'mental illness', noting the ongoing 'stigmatisation' of the 'mentally ill' (see for example: Conrad, 2001; Diefenbach, 1997; Hannigan, 1999; Hyler, Gabbard, & Schneider, 1991; Jorm, 2000; Martinez et al., 2000; Petrillo, 1996; Philo, 1994; Rose, 1998; Wahl, 1992; Wilson et al., 1999).

Here we wish to add to the very small corpus which does not presuppose the veridicality or correctness of psychiatric categorisation, and which does not take the 'errors' of the media as its analytic premise – most notably Eglin and Hester's (1999a; 1999b) elegant use of membership categorisation analysis in their study of practical reasoning in the reported utterances and posthumously available textual materials of the perpetrator of the 1989 Montreal massacre, Marc Lepine; the work of Leudar and Thomas (2000) on the 'frenzy of Anthony Smith' as recounted in the British press and Jalbert's (1999) edited collection on ethnomethodologically-inspired approaches to media studies.

Following ethnomethodological findings that professional/scientific resources are, ultimately, minor transformations of generally-available lay resources, we offer a demonstration of the analytic power of Membership Categorisation Analysis to illuminate very precisely the way in which such matters as the ‘correctness’ of psychiatric classifications are not merely issues of professional disputation, but are rather always already ordinary members’ concerns. We do not seek to stipulate what is to count as the ‘correct’ use of psychiatric terms, or indeed what is to count as a psychiatric category qua psychiatric category a priori. To do so would simply buy into the notion which psychiatry (and much social psychology) trades upon; namely that terms have some fixed referent outside of the occasion of their use. To anticipate our argument, we do not see any clear and principled way to draw lines of epistemological – as opposed to moral – demarcation between these ‘lay’ and ‘expert’ usages.

We examine the ways in which the (notionally scientific) categories of psychiatry and clinical psychology are deployed in the media as an institutional explanatory resource for the moral categorisation of troublesome social actors and, reflecting their more pervasive cultural use, as an apparatus for the moral management of unwanted conduct. This paper thus employs the theoretical and technical tools of MCA to contribute another case study to an ongoing analysis of psychiatry-as-social-practice. Studies of psychiatry-as-social-practice have typically focused on theoretical critique of professional texts (see for example Sarbin & Mancuso, 1984; Boyle, 2002). In contrast, our analysis looks at how psychiatric activities such as ‘diagnosis’ are played out in public media discourse. As Leudar and Thomas (2000) and Leudar and Nekvapil (2000) have shown, materials such as newspaper stories, letters to the editor and news interviews do not exist in vacuo but are best seen as part of a broader dialogically distributed network of ‘conversation’.

Our analysis rests on two observations made by Harvey Sacks (1992). Firstly Sacks’s insight that, in coming to understand a culture, one may assume that cultures show order at all points and, second, that descriptions of persons and their actions may be ‘correct’ in an indefinite number of ways – such that mere ‘correctness’ cannot be the basis for selecting any given description.

Schegloff puts the Sacksian position on the issue of 'order' very clearly, contrasting it with the idea that valid results can only be arrived at by properly sampling (and then aggregating) instances of a cultural phenomenon:

Sacks points out that [sampling] depends on the sort of order one takes it that the social world exhibits. An alternative to the possibility that order manifests itself at an aggregate level and is statistical in character is what he terms the 'order at all points' view. This view ... understands order not to be present only at aggregate levels and therefore subject to an overall differential distribution, but to be present in detail on a case by case, environment by environment basis. A culture is not then to be found only by aggregating all of its venues; it is substantially present in each of its venues. (Schegloff in Sacks, 1992, p. xlvi)

The importance of this first observation for our analysis is that so-called 'positivistic' methods in psychology – based as they are upon an aggregationist model that is absolutely essential to the natural sciences – must always miss the equally essential cultural (and therefore non-aggregable) grounds of human action (see McHoul and Rapley, 2001). A close enough look at a 'molecular' instance (a fragment) of a moral-cultural universe will reveal important properties of its whole: cultural-moral phenomena will show up in regular ways regardless of sampling, distribution, aggregation, statistical techniques, etc.

With regard to the second observation, Sacks, in contrast to the 'correspondence theory' of categorisation frequently adopted by psychiatry and psychology, argues that there can be indefinitely many 'correct descriptions' of persons (or 'identifications', as he calls them). The correctness of the identification is not the point, however.ⁱⁱ The point is that particularly selected correct identifications can do, among many other things, explanatory work:

We can start out by noticing that the problem of selecting identifications is by no means a simple one. It is in principle never the case that persons are simply faced with applying a correct identification. And the procedures whereby they then go about selecting identifications in systematic ways, are a major problem for us. Now one whole range of ways that identifications get

picked turns on category-bound activities. (Sacks, 1992, p. 588)

By 'category-bound activities', Sacks means kinds of actions routinely associated with particular categories of persons, such that if the category is known, then the activity can be inferred – and vice versa. Hence, if I tell you that a particular person wears a particular uniform and drives a red van from house to house delivering letters, you can hear the specific category (from the membership categorisation device (MCD) 'occupations') to which they belong. And vice versa: if I tell you that someone is a 'postman', you can hear from this description alone their expectable (category-bound) activities.

MCDs are then superordinate collections of individual category memberships along with specific rules of application.ⁱⁱⁱ The MCD 'family', for instance collects together categories/identities such as 'mother', 'baby', 'father', 'brother', 'sister' and so on. It is by virtue, Sacks suggests, of the existence of MCDs that a pair such as 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up' is routinely hearable as referring to the picking up of the baby which belongs to the mommy (despite the absence of a genitive) and not to a stranger, a neighbour or the plumber (Sacks, 1992).

Perhaps most importantly, these inferable ties between categories of person and their category-bound activities can have explanatory value. If some action is known to have occurred (e.g., a migrant neighbourhood was attacked) then, if there is a category of person for whom that action is 'category-bound', it can be routinely inferred that that category of person ('racists') was responsible for the action. Then, should it turn out that such a perpetrator was in fact responsible, that finding (e.g., 'It was a racially-motivated group') can be used as an explanation of the event:

In the first instance, a way that you go about selecting an identificatory category – given, say, that some action is going on, done by some person – is to determine if there is a category-bound activity of that sort, and if that person is a member of that category, then use that category to identify them. Now these kinds of things are not just 'correct descriptions', they're correct descriptions in quite powerful ways.... Whereas lots of category-and-activity combinations will pose problems like 'Why in the world did that happen?', 'Gee, isn't that unusual', in the specific cases where you've got a category-

bound activity and the category for that is applied to some scene, why the thing happened is not a question. That it happened is explained by the very characterization. (Sacks, 1992, pp. 588-589; our emphasis)

We follow Sacks's lead in assuming that, in the examination of fragments of a culture (e.g., newspaper articles), what operates across a culture as a whole, will come clearly into view – and professionals such as forensic psychiatrists can never be exempted from being cultural members in this respect, despite claims to, for example, 'scientific indifference'. And we also (with regard to his second observation) assume that, when we look at such 'holographic' fragments, we will find more than mere 'names' and 'events' – as perhaps is assumed by both cognitive social psychology and 'neutral' journalistic reporting. If Sacks is right, we will also find logically-implied and naturally-inferable explanations in the obvious-but-unstated connections between 'identifications' (ways of referring to persons) and 'activities' (ways of referring to what they did).

What we seek to do here, then, is to examine the way in which a sample of the Australian print media's reporting of events at Port Arthur deploys characterisations of Bryant in the service of explaining the massacre (a term that, as in the case of the Montreal 'massacre', is not ours, but the media's and which clearly does its own work on constructing the events it (merely) appears to describe). We examine how the press reproduces and underpins the intertextuality of commonsense and psychiatric 'thinking'; and simultaneously, how it exposes the contingent – and inescapably moral – functions which such 'psychiatric' categorisation serves.

Materials^{iv}

All of Australia's daily and weekend quality national and capital city papers (The Australian, The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald, The West Australian, The Brisbane Courier-Mail, The Canberra Times and The Hobart Mercury) – roughly analogous to 'broadsheet' newspapers in Britain – were searched for stories reporting, or editorials commenting upon, the Port Arthur shootings and the later trial of Martin Bryant in the period between the date of the shootings (April 28th 1996) and the conclusion of the trial (November 22nd 1996). All stories about the case

were collected. As our specific interest here is in the use of 'lay' and 'specialist' deployment of 'psychiatric' membership categories, we have selected examples from those parts of our corpus which specifically and hearably invoke 'mental state' or, otherwise, 'psychiatric' categorisations, be they 'lay' or 'professional'. The extracts presented are not, following Sacks, intended to be a 'statistically representative sample' in the way in which those terms are routinely understood in contemporary social psychology. Rather, what the extracts offer is a set of perspicuous instances of the categorisation work we discuss — as such we do not offer here a gerrymandered set of best possible cases to support our analysis. We have repeatedly trawled our data corpus for variant materials — what, at the risk of some ambiguity in the present context, are sometimes called 'deviant cases'. The nearest instance we could find involves a set of reported statements from a spokesperson for the Schizophrenia Fellowship which blended both 'lay' and 'expert' terms ("Schizophrenics "run for cover"", The Canberra Times, 30th June, 1996).

Manufacturing the 'psychiatric case'

The focus of this analysis then is on the descriptions of Bryant in newspaper texts which attend to the necessity of accounting for the events at Port Arthur, or which report on the consequences of those events. We examine what journalists, as members of a shared social order, count as valid descriptions of the nature of persons and the reasons for their actions, and the work such identifications accomplish. We briefly outline the candidate membership categories offered by the media reporting of the events and then examine, in more detail, specific instances of the deployment of 'psychiatric' membership categories by those with (and without) ratified expertise in the use of these categories.

While initial reports of the shootings offered a variety of candidate membership categories in their accounts of Bryant, all converged on commonsense understandings of deviance. That is, acts understandable a priori as non-normative (here, engaging in multiple killings of strangers) were characterised by the presentation of complementarily deviant identity categories. While many specific candidate category memberships were offered, all could be heard to share the

membership categorisation device 'deviant' when applied to an adult male. For example Bryant was variously characterised as 'a Jekyll and Hyde' ('Violent loner spooked locals', The Australian, 30th April 1996), as 'a man who sleeps with his pet piglet' and as an 'eight year old' ('Neighbours tell of suspect's "bizarre" habits', The Canberra Times, 30th April 1996). Over the course of 1996, and particularly during the trial, the initially fragmented media characterisations of Bryant coalesced around three categorisations: 'monster', 'madman' and 'child'. Here we restrict ourselves to an examination of the delicate discursive production of Bryant's membership in the category 'madman'/'psychiatric case'.

In characterising Bryant the print media employed both 'professional' and 'lay' genres of non-normal mental state categorisation dialogically to bolster the other: that is both everyday and psychiatric accounts were employed to present a congruence between 'expert' and 'ordinary' versions of Bryant's mental state, and to secure an explanation of the shootings by virtue of Bryant's categorisation as psychiatrically disturbed. In the following extract, a former neighbour of Bryant's describes his experience of the day of the shootings:

Extract 2: 'Explosion of a violent loner'

'I had to stop a couple of times and think was this real. Then I realised the mongrel on the killing spree was the joker who had lived next door. He was a nut, a psycho', said Mr Featherstone.

(The Australian, 30th April 1996)

There are a number of points of interest in this extract. Firstly we observe the direction given to the reader of the sense to be made of the story in the headline: that (in this textual context) 'explosions' are assumed to be the natural predicates of the (unnatural, asocial, odd) membership category 'loner'. Here 'explosion' is obviously metaphorical and sits alongside such descriptions as 'losing it', 'going off one's rocker', and the rest. That it is so is marked by the absence of qualification, such that we do not read of, for example, a 'surprise explosion' or a 'baffling explosion'. In short, 'loner' and 'explosion' (in this particular sense) are assembled here as two expectably congruent descriptions. So, even to begin with, we sense that the mode of categorisation is primarily a moral one. Secondly we observe that the immediacy

and factuality of this account of Bryant and his actions is heightened by the use of direct reported speech (Holt, 2000): these do not come across as the mere speculations of a journalist, but as the vivid recollections of an eyewitness. We further note the careful contrast reportedly worked up by Mr Featherstone between his own status as an observer and checker of the facts and Bryant's status as careless (he was on a 'spree'), out of control and, by implication, out of touch with the 'reality' that Featherstone has had to 'stop a couple of times and think' about.

Such positioning (as well as his avowal of membership in the category of 'neighbour' – one who may thereby be expected to know, more intimately than a stranger would, about the actuality of Bryant's character) works both to provide a warrant for the veracity of Featherstone's account and also to produce him as a normative comparison against which Bryant may be understood. Featherstone's account of his mundane reality-testing procedures when confronted with the inexplicable also clearly has elements of the 'at first I thought X, and then I realised Y' device first identified by Sacks, and subsequently elaborated in Wooffitt's (1992) studies of the telling of stories of the paranormal. The device permits the telling of unusual or unexpected events as such, while attending to the status of the teller as a normal, rational perceiver who is disposed (at first) to see ordinary and not unusual things.

We further note that the direct invocation of the commonsense 'psychiatric' membership categories of 'nut' and 'psycho' is preceded (and hence framed) by unequivocally negative moral judgments: those of 'mongrel' and 'joker'. That Bryant is also described in the past tense ('He was a nut, a psycho') further serves to underpin the 'fact' that he has always been a 'nut', and to cement the commonsense view that, in the long run, a violent outburst ('an explosion') may normatively be expected of those incumbent in the (extraordinarily overdetermined) membership categories of 'psychos', 'loners' and 'nuts'. By definition, then, such categories are always 'extreme case formulations' (Pomerantz, 1986): they cannot be otherwise for they are reserved as explanations of extreme (as we will see here particularly, violent) events.^v

Our third extract, like Extract 1, works in its headline to establish a temporally

sustained 'otherness' as characteristic of Bryant. This furthers the project of the concatenation of commonsense and 'psychiatric' membership categorisations to produce another version of Bryant grounded in the experience of those who may be seen to have a particularly strong epistemological warrant for the claims they make about him.

Extract 3: 'Young man dogged by tragedy'

Bryant, variously described by acquaintances and former friends as slow, mentally ill and schizophrenic, became friends with a woman in New Town who lived in a mansion on Clare Street.

(The Age, 30th April 1996)

Bryant is 'variously' described by 'acquaintances and former friends' (members of categories that must have intimate first-hand knowledge of the man as a natural predicate of such membership) in terms of his membership in both lay and, notionally, expert-defined psychiatric categories: 'slow', 'mentally ill' and 'schizophrenic'. The range of cited categories, and the implication of a broad array of sources, suggests that though there may be dispute about the specific 'type' of problem afflicting Bryant, general agreement exists about problems of a psychiatric nature that have been observed independently by a number of people close to him. We note however, that the headline here implies indeterminacy as to cause: Bryant is a young man (not, say, as would also have been an equally correct categorisation, a 'mass murderer' or 'cold-blooded killer') who has been 'dogged by tragedy'. This exemplifies the central paradox inherent in both the media coverage of the case and the task of the professionals enlisted to account for it: the juggling of the possibility of Bryant's simultaneous membership in incongruous categories (sane vs. mad; normal vs. abnormal; ordinary member vs. not ordinary member) with very different moral implications.^{vi}

Here in short is the paradox – and it is one that shifts the locus of the 'problem' from the 'psychiatric' to the overtly moral plane: if Bryant is indeed best characterised as a 'young man dogged by tragedy', then he is a member of a shared social order and, therefore, morally (and legally) accountable for his actions. If he is sufficiently 'slow', 'mentally ill' or 'schizophrenic' he is not. But if he is indeed an

ordinary member — ‘one of us’ — then the explanation of the shootings accomplished by and through his membership in the category ‘madman’ collapses.

Of course, like professionals, lay people can be wrong about their appraisals. Institutionally, ‘mental illnesses’ and the ‘proper’ use of psychiatry’s diagnostic categories, require an official diagnosis by those with specifically ratified knowledge entitlements, such as psychiatrists and psychologists. But what, at the time, were such experts saying in their official diagnoses of Bryant?

Extract 4: ‘Danger is a solitary white male bearing a gun and a grudge’
Professor Paul Mullen, who is a Monash University academic and the clinical director of Victoria’s Forensic Psychiatry Service, says that despite the aberrant nature of their crimes, most mass murderers are not technically mentally ill. Most though are clearly abnormal simply by virtue of their abnormal acts. And although each massacre is ‘a unique horror’, the killers can be categorised.

(The Australian, 30th April 1996)

In several respects, then, the professional ‘explanations’ are fraught with incongruity. Mass murder becomes not a ‘symptom’ or predicate of ‘mental illness’, as Mr Featherstone’s commonsensical members’ account may have implied (‘he was a psycho, a nut’); rather here Mullen’s reported characterisation actively seeks to disrupt the normatively expected activity-membership category predication (mass murders are committed by madmen) via a re-categorisation of the action in question. Bryant’s action is categorised as an aberration (a deviation, a wandering from, or lapse of, ‘normal’ forms of comportment) and, in this respect, it is contended that it cannot be attributed to mental illness in the ‘technical’ sense.

So to what does the clinical director of Victoria’s Forensic Psychiatry Service attribute the ‘aberrant nature’ of the crime? Faced with the incongruity we have already noted, what is offered must be true because it is tautological: mass murderers ‘are clearly abnormal simply by virtue of their abnormal acts’. The professional ‘categorisation’ merely tells us that to act ‘abnormally’ is the natural predicate of none other than ... ‘abnormal’ persons. One might speculate whether, if such a characterisation had been warranted by a lesser source than a university professor and clinical director, it would have received such unironic endorsement.

However, the qualification ‘technical’ does, we suspect, some important work in this extract. Professor Mullen’s account (and its implicit endorsement in The Australian’s report) works to underpin the necessity of expert knowledge in accounting for crimes such as mass murder, whilst at the same time declining to offer a substantive ‘technical’ or ‘expert’ account for the events under scrutiny. The notion of the ‘technical sense’ of mental illness (which clearly invokes an unvoiced ‘commonsense sense’ of mental illness) introduced in Mullen’s account may then be read, in conjunction with the earlier uncoupling of normative action predicate-pairing, as a strategic move to privilege psychiatry’s voice in accounts of disturbing conduct. Who else but psychiatric experts have the right to lay claim to mastery of the ‘technicalities’ of those actions which do and do not count as ‘mental illness’, or reconcile the ‘uniqueness’ of such ‘horrors’ with the seemingly consequent impossibility of constructing rigorous taxonomies – ‘categories’ of ‘killers’? Again, paradoxically, by coming close to claiming that shooting thirty-five strangers is the action of a ‘technically’ sane man, Mullen’s characterisation – or at least that reported by The Age as being quoted by Mr Avery, Bryant’s defence lawyer (Extract 5, below) – serves to disqualify ‘commonsense’ accounts as insufficiently informed about the sophisticated ‘technicalities’ of these matters.

Little wonder, then, that, at the trial, no firm ‘technical’ categorisation could be officially reached:

Extract 5: ‘Lawyer says killer accepts his punishment’

Of three medical reports on Bryant, the defence would place most reliance on that of Professor Paul Mullen, which said that Bryant was not insane when he murdered 35 people and attempted to murder 20. Mr Avery said that Bryant was a man of limited intellectual capacity who did not fit into a neat pigeon-hole of a particular mental illness.

(The Age, 21st November 1996)

Even taking into account the notorious unreliability of diagnosis and the questionable validity of diagnostic categories in psychiatry (Boyle, 2002; 1999; see Extract 6 below), the precise, dare we say it, ‘technical’ nature of Bryant’s ‘disorder’ was disputed from expert to expert, so that the only definitive agreement was a

negative one: the experts agreed on what Bryant was not, but could not agree on what he was. The expert witnesses effectively had no more of a positive ‘scientific’ categorisation, hence explanation, than his former neighbours and acquaintances:

Extract 6: ‘First insights on massacre’

Bryant suffered from a lifelong personality disorder that prosecution psychiatrist Dr Ian Sale diagnosed as Asperger’s Syndrome, similar to autism. Professor Mullen disagreed. But all medical experts were unanimous that Bryant did not suffer from mental illness and was not schizophrenic.

(The Age, 21st November 1996)

However, apart from clinicians and those with first-hand lay knowledge of perpetrators, members of other categories may be deployed by the media to complicate these diagnoses. For example, category members with ‘expertise’ on ‘mass killers’ given by their incumbency are produced to officially ratify what may be seen as merely speculative categorisations.

Extract 7: ‘Police portrait of a mass killer’

The gunman responsible for the massacre was aged 29, possibly a schizophrenic, who had planned the murders and probably knew one or two of his victims, police said this morning.

(Sydney Morning Herald, 30th April 1996)

Here, in precisely the same manner as the British press constructed Anthony Smith (Leudar & Thomas, 2000), the ‘portrait of a mass killer’ loses any personal identification, with Bryant becoming a ‘gunman’ who is possibly ‘a schizophrenic’ rather than a person, Martin Bryant, who possibly suffers from schizophrenia. As we saw in Extract 2, where the predicate ‘explosion’ is normatively bound to the category ‘loner’, here the Herald and/or the police bind schizophrenia per se, rather than a specific individual, to violence and killing. ‘Massacre’ and ‘murder’ then, as in Leudar and Thomas’s analysis, appear as ‘natural’ predicates of the category ‘schizophrenic’ – at least according to police expertise and despite the later unanimity of the clinicians ‘that Bryant did not suffer from mental illness and was not schizophrenic’. The explanation of ‘killing’ is accomplished by characterising the ‘killer’: mass killing is what schizophrenics do. To repeat Sacks’s words (above):

‘Why the thing happened is not a question. That it happened is explained by the very characterization’. Then, to bolster this, the warrant of the reporting category ‘police’ works further to give the proffered characterisation a sanctionable ‘truth’.

Again, in this extract, we see the tension inherent in accounting for Bryant’s actions. Inasmuch as the Herald deploys the category ‘police’ to establish ‘senseless’ killing as a predicate of insanity, so psychiatry tells us – in both formal pedagogic texts (e.g. Hamilton, 1976) and in the advice to the lay person offered by psychiatric services (e.g. Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000) – that the natural predicates of the membership category ‘schizophrenic’ are loss of reason and of contact with ‘reality’. Such attributes sit uneasily with the characterisation of the ‘mass killer’ as having carefully planned his actions. Similarly ‘murders’ are, in law, committed by those with mens rea, with agency and with volitional control, predicates normatively understood as outwith the category ‘schizophrenic’.

We have seen that, in reports of everyday characterisation, members produce intrinsically adequate explanatory accounts of the shootings by drawing upon, and blending, commonsense categories (‘nut’, ‘mongrel’, ‘slow’) with what may be thought to be specifically ‘psychiatric’ ones (‘psycho’, ‘schizophrenic’, ‘mentally ill’). We have also seen that institutional psychiatry may work to disqualify commonsense explanation by the manipulation of the membership categories normatively expected to be bound to given specific actions, and the introduction of notions such as the distinction between ‘technical’ and (presumably) non-technical ways of being ‘mentally ill’. But, in terms of the requirements of institutional, and specifically medico-legal, accounting, there is a problem: how can psychiatry characterise Bryant in such a manner that does the work of explanation, but which simultaneously retains his status as an accountable moral actor? We have already seen part of the necessarily incongruous answer (Extracts 4-6), but the following report makes it even more patent:

Extract 9: ‘No Motive No mercy No remorse’

Martin Bryant, in the months following the Port Arthur tragedy, was examined by four psychologists and psychiatrists. They all concluded that, while he suffered from a personality disorder and was, according to

intelligence tests, in the borderline range between intellectual disability and the 'dull normal individual', he was not criminally insane, and did not suffer from serious mental illness – such as depression or schizophrenia. In other words, in the opinion of those psychologists and psychiatrists who examined him, Bryant was capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, and understood, in the words of Paul Mullen, a forensic psychiatrist from Monash University, 'what it meant to be guilty and to be not guilty'.

(Sydney Morning Herald, 23rd November 1996)

We see here a skilful resolution of the essential tension between Bryant's incongruous candidate category memberships. He is produced by psychiatry and psychology in terms of 'diagnostic' categories which essentially place him in a technically contrived third space, a no-man's land. He is 'personality disordered' but not insane; he is intellectually deficient but insufficiently retarded to be exculpable; he is both 'of us' and 'not of us'. Enough is retained of commonsense members' understandings of characterisations such as 'psycho', 'mentally ill' or 'nut' to do the work of explanation (the shootings are explained by Bryant's institutionally-ratified membership in the category 'psychologically disturbed'). Yet he is simultaneously not enough of a 'nut' to be 'let off the hook': he is, again via the ratification of institutional psychiatry, made sufficiently akin to ordinary members, to being 'one of us', as to be held morally and legally accountable.

Conclusion

We have seen that media reporting of social life is an important and rich source of data for the understanding of the workings of a culture. But further: how professionalised knowledges (specifically the classificatory systems of psychiatry and clinical psychology) are brought into play in these reports can show us, following Sacks, that the deployment of identifications/categorisations can and does, in and of itself, do the work of explanation. The repertoires of identity constructed in the Australian print media for Bryant (as 'monster', 'psychiatric case' and 'child') turn upon the category-bound activities associated with such identities, and are organised to accomplish the all-but-impossible task of producing an account

of Bryant and his actions which retain his status as an agentic, accountable, moral actor – and hence liable to the full force of the criminal law – but which also manage the production of an ‘explanation’ of the inexplicable. Thus Bryant was produced as ‘monstrous’, but capable of human kindness; as ‘childish’, but as a child of an age to know right from wrong; as ‘psychologically disturbed’, but not as clinically insane.

It can be seen here, then, that not only can characterisation do the work of explaining, but also that there appears to be no principled way of separating out (as somehow epistemologically distinct) the candidate category of ‘psychiatric case’ (in either its ‘technical’ or its ‘commonsense’ variant), from the others made available in these accounts. Rather, the manner in which the professions (along with and via the popular media) draw upon these membership categorisation devices suggests that they are not the dispassionate, objective, scientific nosologies that the disciplines so often claim them to be. Rather, they are powerful and contingent devices which can be – and here are – pressed into local service in public discourse not to so much to accomplish ‘medical diagnosis’ as to pass ‘moral verdict’ (see Sarbin and Mancuso, 1984).

Can we conclude from this analysis anything of value about the more general question of discourse as such and its possible relation(s) to psychology, given that there are important debates on this matter currently circulating in the discipline (Wetherell, 1998; Schegloff, 1998)? One position we have come to, via this analysis and numerous others involving naturally-occurring textual and conversational materials, is that it is important to recognise that, in terms of methods of accounting (if not, always, of surface ‘content’), there is a much narrower gap than is sometimes supposed between ‘lay’ and ‘professional’ attention to broadly psychological matters. We are not quite saying that professional psychology or its sister disciplines are mere common sense dressed up as science; rather that the ‘how’ of generating accounts, in both cases, draws upon a common set of culturally shared resources, many of which have already been both carefully and elegantly described by, notably, Harvey Sacks (1992). In the present case, for example, this has concerned common means of tying forms of actor-categorisation to moral types in order to

accomplish practical moral judgements; and to accomplish these as opposed to (or at least prior to), for example, 'scientific facts'.

Accordingly we feel no pressing need to theorise how some general formation of human actions and practices – called, perhaps, 'discourse' – should be treated within the professional discipline of psychology itself. Our overwhelming impression is that (in shorthand) the 'psychological' and the 'discursive' are always already practically tied, and importantly, tied prior to any after-the-fact theorisation and that this 'tie' needs to be more carefully and descriptively treated within professional psychology prior to any of its claims to specialised knowledge and, especially, to 'scientificity'. Otherwise (especially 'social') psychology may be missing its fundamental and grounding topic of investigation.

That is, the 'logos' of psycho-logy need not immediately refer to something like 'the science of...'. It can, as it routinely is in English translations of, for example, Aristotle, be thought of as pointing more primordially to something like the word 'account'. (Or, just perhaps, this could be extended from 'account' to 'discourse upon'; though we need not go quite that far.) We can add to this the fact that, in ancient Greek thinking, 'psyché' originally had no cognitivist or mentalistic shades of meaning (these having been imported via Latinisation). Instead, 'psyché' was always something more like a given ground, a basis on which, for example, actions were possible. In the light of this etymological re-working – speculative as it may be; though no more speculative than the now-intuitive idea of 'psyche' as 'mind' or 'soul' – it becomes possible to think of 'psycho-logy' as any accounting for the basis or ground, perhaps even the 'methods' or cultural 'techniques', on which practical actions are possible.

As we have seen in the present investigation, such accountings for the grounds of 'what we are' (and, more importantly, the methods that generate them) are already distinctively and massively present in everyday texts and talk, lay or professional – for example, we can't not refer to our cultural co-members and, in so referring, we cannot but categorise them. To this extent, there is no need for a 'theory' of the relation between 'discourse' and 'psychology'. The latter term always already includes (one version of) the former in its proper attention to both 'logos' and

'psyche'. So professional psychology's self-appointed position as a specialised explanatory science ('logos'?) of the mind ('psyché'?) has, since its (historically quite recent) inception, neglected that a 'logos' of 'psyché' (in the quite different senses of these terms indicated above) has inhabited the ordinary lifeworld since ancient times and, in neglecting this, it has over-ridden its primary descriptive task.

Then, with Wittgenstein (1968, para. 109), we are led to the inevitable conclusion that 'We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place'. Still, the description in question, given the conditions we have outlined here, must entail a respecification of how (the ways in which) persons categorise themselves and each other; and this respecification cannot shy away from the possibility that the traditional avatars of the psy-complex have made an elementary mistake, thereby opening themselves to critique (or, as Wittgenstein would say, 'therapy'). The mistake is this: recondite, scientific, or technical means of categorisation do not precede and over-ride ordinary everyday means of categorisation. Rather they are predicated upon them.

- i. We thank Tracey Summerfield of the Murdoch Law School for this point and her help and advice more generally on this section of the paper.
- ii. These observations, of course, form the basis of the critique by discursive psychologists of attribution theory. We are grateful to Derek Edwards for this point.
- iii. See Silverman (1998, pp. 74-97) for an extended discussion of MCDs and their application rules.
- iv. The materials we refer to in this paper are extracted from an extensive data corpus collected by David McCarthy as part of his Honours work on the Bryant case. The corpus contains every report we have identified from Australian journals of record on the massacre and the subsequent trial. This corpus is available for inspection by readers of this paper who may wish to re-work our analyses of the extracts.

- v. Accordingly, we frequently hear mitigated ascriptions of madness: 'Yeh, he was a nut, but he was harmless' on the assumption that, sans mitigation, violence is madness's routine natural predicate. See Leudar and Thomas (2000).
- vi. Because 'incongruous' can be taken mundanely to mean 'ill fitting', we develop the term from Sacks's usage (cf. incongruous membership ascriptions and avowals) to mean 'elements of a paradox'. Hence the incongruities 'of us' vs. 'not of us' (and the rest) go to make up an overall paradoxical problem of identification.

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