(Hetero)sexist microaggressions in practice

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Abstract

Verbal microaggressions perpetuate inequalities and negatively impact wellbeing. Yet, there is little work on microaggressions in situ. *We address this gap, connecting microaggressions research with scholarship concerning prejudice and discrimination in situated interaction, and focusing on (hetero)sexist microaggressions. Conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) are applied to excerpts of naturally-occurring and focus group conversation to determine what (hetero)sexist microaggressions look like in practice; how they affect conversations; and whether they map onto well-documented CA/MCA phenomena. Findings suggest that when people produce microaggressive utterances, they use various devices (e.g. pre-sequences, idioms, humour) to mitigate accountability. Furthermore, concerning recipients' reactions, the treatment of an utterance as microaggressive can involve hallmarks of dispreferred turns including hesitation and/or indirect challenges involving deletion/repair initiation. We therefore propose that such features are criteria for an utterance/sequence to be considered microaggressive. Moreover, such strategies suggest that speakers/recipients are agentic in the (re)production of (hetero)sexism, and therefore may be agentic in effecting change.*

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*Microagressões verbais perpetuam desigualdades e afetam o bem-estar neg-
ativamente. Porém, há poucas pesquisas sobre a ocorrência de microagressõs
in situ. Preenchemos esta lacuna ao associar pesquisas sobre microagressões
com o conhecimento disponível sobre preconceito e discriminação em interações
situadas. Focalizamos microagressões (heteros)sexistas. Aplicamos a Análise
da Conversa (AC) e a Análise de Categorias de Pertencimento (ACP) a excer-
tos de interações naturalísticas e em grupos focais com vistas a determinar as
formas que microagressões (heteros)sexistas assumem na prática; como afetam
conversas; e se têm correlações com fenômenos já investigados pela AC/ACP. Os
resultados indicam que quando pessoas produzem enunciados microagressivos,
usam diversos dispositivos (e.g., pré-sequências, expressões idiomáticas, humor)
para mitigar a prestação de contas. No que tange às reações de interagentes,
o tratamento de um turno como microagressivo pode ser marcado por turnos
despreferidos e seus constituintes como hesitação e/ou desafios indiretos como o
apagamento/iniciação de reparo. Propomos, portanto, que tais características
são critérios para considerar um turno/sequência como uma microagressão.
Tais estratégias sugerem que interagentes têm agência na (re)produção do (het-
eros)sexismo e, assim, podem ter agência para efetuar mudanças.*

KEYWORDS: MICROAGGRESSIONS, CONVERSATION ANALYSIS, MEMBERSHIP
CATEGORISATION ANALYSIS, (HETERO)SEXISM

Introduction

Microaggressions are defined by Nadal (2008:23) as 'brief and common-
place daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether
intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or neg-
ative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups'. The concept
of microaggressions can be traced back to the work of psychiatrist Chester
Pierce and colleagues in the 1970s (see Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez and
Willis 1977, as cited in Nadal 2013). It was occasionally picked up by schol-
ars in the years since then; however, Derald Wing Sue and colleagues are
generally attributed with its development and dissemination within psy-
chology during the early years of the 21st century (Nadal 2013).

   (Hetero)sexist[1] microaggressions have to date been conceptualised as
subtle manifestations of (hetero)sexism that have emerged in Western soci-
eties in response to decreasing tolerance for explicit (hetero)sexism (e.g.
Nadal 2013). Consistent with traditional psychological theorising, they
are generally understood within psychology to result from enduring traits
or attitudes intrinsic to individuals. In this article, however, (hetero)sexist
microaggressions are reinterpreted from a social constructionist perspec-
tive as discursive practices which manifest in interactions between peo-
ple and serve to (re)instantiate available gender identities and (re)produce

socially dominant gender relations. This reinterpretation has implications for the empirical exploration of (hetero)sexist microaggressions. Existing research on microaggressions tends to focus on recollections, typically within focus group situations, of moments when microaggressions have been experienced or 'difficult dialogues' have ensued (Lau and Williams 2010). These data have been used to validate taxonomies of types of microaggression derived from existing literature; however, such strategies are unable to yield insights into how they become relevant to do prejudice in an interaction – that is, how, when, where and why (hetero)sexist microaggressions are deployed – nor to the effects this can have on subsequent talk, such as how, when, where and why difficult dialogues reportedly often ensue.

We argue that a conversation analysis (CA) approach can enable such lines of exploration because it facilitates examination of how ways of using language can lead to confrontation, and how such confrontations can be avoided, managed and resolved through language. It is not, as in the case in cognitivist research, concerned with how certain statements may evidence particular attitudes held by speakers. Instead, the focus is on how particular ways of saying things operate in the interactions within which they manifest, and how they are understood and responded to by other members of the conversation (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). Further, membership categorisation analysis (MCA), as outlined by Stokoe (2012a), provides a toolkit to explore the strategic use of social categories within situated interaction. This is relevant for the study of microaggressions for two reasons. First, prejudicial talk necessarily involves the (re)production of social categories. Second, because social categories are shared systems of meaning, they can be strategically invoked in ways that allow things to be implied rather than explicitly stated. It is such inference, and the opportunities for plausible deniability it creates, that is characteristic of microaggressions.

A handful of recent studies have applied microanalytical discursive/linguistic methods such as CA to the exploration of microaggressions. Wilkes and Speer (2021), for example, consider the construction of accountabilities for prejudicial actions in kinship carers' retrospective reports of questions, challenges and suspicions and show how these actions are constructed as microaggressive. Elder (2021) discusses, with reference to extracts of dialogue from the film *Knocked Up*, the linguistic grounds upon which a recipient can suggest that a microaggression has been committed and the extent to which a speaker can claim that they have been misunderstood and should therefore be excused. Yet as far as we are aware, little attention has been given to the systematic study of microaggressions as they occur in situated interaction. We seek to address this gap and, in so doing, connect microaggressions research with broader scholarship concerning prejudice

in situated interaction – most notably MCA/CA research on '-isms' (see Whitehead and Stokoe 2015), but also papers such as Joyce, Bogdana, Ristimäki and Doehring's (2021) examination of 'mansplaining' (which might be considered a form of sexist microaggression). Of direct relevance is Stokoe's (2015) paper on '-isms' in situated interaction in the context of mediation, in which CA is used to explore how participants orient to their own or others' talk as potentially prejudicial.

The aim of this article is therefore to demonstrate that a micro-level approach to studying microaggressions in situated interaction can enable us to better understand prejudice and discrimination – specifically (hetero)sexism – at an interactional level by identifying mechanisms through which (hetero)sexist ideas are (re)produced. It allows examination of the systematic ways in which gender and sexualities become relevant in particular settings. It also supports Stokoe's (2013:1) argument that by using such methods, 'robust empirical claims can be made about the gendering of social life, and that such claims may be grounded in what people do and say, rather than in what analysts presume'. In this case, reframing microaggressions as social practices moves away from identifying microaggressions with reference to *a priori* taxonomies and towards tracing how practices are oriented to as microaggressive by participants (or 'members'). Hence, findings relate to 'possible microaggressions', following Whitehead and Stokoe's (2015) reference to 'possible -isms'. In addressing the following research questions (RQs), the aim of this paper is to contribute to an ongoing academic endeavour to document and account for discrimination at the interactional level of analysis, as well as to offer insights into what possible difficult dialogues look like, how they are navigated and to what functions:

RQ1: What do possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions look like in practice?

RQ2: How do possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions affect the courses and outcomes of conversations?

RQ3: How do possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions map onto well-documented CA/MCA phenomena (e.g. '-isms')?

Methodology

We use CA methods to study talk at the micro-interactional level of analysis. CA has evolved out of work undertaken by Harvey Sacks and colleagues during the 1960s–70s, who argued that 'talk is action' (Austin 1962). Data typically consist of audio or video recordings of naturally occurring conversations, transcribed in detail to aid analysis (see Jefferson 2004). These

data are subjected to fine-grained systematic analysis of aspects such as 'sequence organisation' (see Schegloff 2007), 'repair' (see Kitzinger 2013) and 'word selection' (see Stokoe 2008).

MCA, as outlined by Stokoe (2012a) is also utilised. MCA might be considered to cross over into the macro- or representational level of analysis, as consideration is given to culturally significant meanings. In this article, this allows consideration of the interplay between situated action and wider social context. MCA permits the tracing and evidencing of the forms that social categories take, the uses to which they are put and how they are taken up or resisted within specific interactions. This approach is useful for exploring prejudicial talk because such talk necessarily relates to social categories. MCA offers a number of empirically-grounded tools (e.g. 'category-bound activities' and 'category-tied predicates') for identifying incidences where categories are implied rather than made explicit yet can still be evidenced as oriented to by participants and as used by them to do specific things which privilege certain people in relation to others. Thus, MCA is highly useful for studying 'subtle' forms of prejudice including microaggressions.

In adopting this framework, (hetero)sexist microaggressions might be defined in terms of how they are treated by recipients (e.g. as an insult), rather than by their fitting a category predefined by researchers. Relatedly, difficult dialogues are conceptualised here as sequences that involve actions treated by participants as 'prejudicial' (i.e. insults that explicitly or implicitly invoke membership categories, in this case relating to sexuality and/or gender).

Data sampling

With the exception of Excerpt 3 ('The army'),[2] all the data analysed in this article are existing natural conversational data sourced from CABank (MacWhinney and Wagner 2010), accessed via TalkBank (https://ca.talkbank.org/). TalkBank is an open access, anonymised repository hub, and CABank is the element of this which deals with conversations between adults. Data were used in accordance with TalkBank's conditions of use.

CABank contains many sizeable corpora, so it was first necessary to identify appropriate ones from which to sample. Corpora were shortlisted in accordance with the following criteria: (1) the data are English-language and recorded in the United Kingdom; (2) the corpus is open-licensed; (3) the data are conversational (rather than lectures, interviews, etc.). Two suitable corpora were identified. Of these, one contained only recordings of telephone conversations. The other was the CABNC Corpus (Albert, de Ruiter and de Ruiter 2015), which contains 1,436 conversations recorded

by various people across contexts at several locations in England during 1991 and 1992. It is from this corpus that the data were sampled.

Some might argue that data from the early 1990s may be limited in informing understandings of how microaggressions operate in contemporary society. Words and phrases can fall in and out of favour, be replaced or come to represent different ideas over time. This is acknowledged in the analysis, which explicitly references the historical context where appropriate. Further, the intention is not to generalise shared understandings from the 1990s to the present day, but to identify mechanisms through which (hetero)sexist ideas are (re)produced. As evident in the CA and discursive psychology literatures, such mechanisms (e.g. disclaimers [Hewitt and Stokes 1975], question-and-answer sequences, various forms of repair, etc.) reflect broader conversational norms and tend to be relatively slow to evolve.

Existing transcripts were developed from audio records to achieve completeness and obtain the necessary notation. The next step was to build a collection of sequences which contained talk that might be considered 'microaggressive', operationalised with reference to the literature on '-isms' as: 'utterances in which speakers appear to justify inequality of some kind' (Speer 2015:464); and/or talk in which 'participants explicitly name a [. . .] category [and] associate it with a negatively-assessed activity' (Robles 2015:391). In particular, instances were sought where the categories invoked related to the membership categorisation devices (MCDs, Sacks 1992) 'gender', 'sex' and 'sexual orientation'. The issue of the (ir)relevance of intent is overcome by it being speakers *or recipients* who can treat the utterance as problematic.

A number of sequences were identified and analysed using the procedure set out below. Excerpts selected for inclusion in this article were re-transcribed using Jeffersonian notation (Jefferson 2004) in order to aid fine-grained analysis and facilitate the reporting of findings.

Analytic procedure

Following Stokoe (2012a), the analytic procedure used in this article combines MCA with more conventional CA considerations. Whereas CA is concerned with the sequential organisation of talk, MCA is further concerned with the deployment of categories to particular effects. MCA has not enjoyed the same level of attention as CA, likely due to the difficulties associated with capturing categorical phenomena (Stokoe 2012a). In recent years, researchers have increasingly applied MCA to explore 'hearably prejudicial talk' (e.g. Robles 2015) or 'possible "-isms"' (see Whitehead and Stokoe 2015) in situated interaction.[3] MCA has the advantage of allowing

one to trace and evidence the forms categories take, the uses to which they are put and how they are taken up or resisted within specific interactions by examining them across conversational sequences and with reference to established findings.

Analysis attends to both the sequential organisation of talk and the reflexive use of categories within it in order to map the constituent action/s in a given sequence; how actions are initiated, responded to and progressed or resisted; and how gender/sexuality categories are made relevant and taken up or resisted. This procedure is not intended to produce exhaustive conclusions concerning microaggressions as interactional practices, but merely to shed further light on how, why and to what functions they manifest within situated interaction, in relation to particular data and research questions, namely what possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions look like and how they affect conversational trajectories.

Findings

Conversational outcomes relative to (hetero)sexist microaggressions are considered in terms of conversational 'trajectories' – that is, the courses which conversations take and, in particular, conversational outcomes following possible microaggressions. As summarised in Table 1, illustrative excerpts are organised into two sections, each reflecting patterns relating to sequence organisation, turn design and action orientation. The first section relates to the positioning of potential microaggressive comments within sequences (i.e. how it becomes relevant to say something microaggressive, how this is done and to what effects). The second section discusses accusations and responses to them, examining how microaggressive talk might both incite accusations and manifest in defences against them (i.e. 'difficult dialogues').

Table 1: Data excerpts

Section	Excerpt	Details	Trajectory
1: Question and answer pre-sequences and comments	1. Long hair	Possibly microaggressive comment in first-pair part.	A possible microaggression being said and ignored.
	2. Rugby	Possibly microaggressive comment preceded by Q&A pre-sequence.	A possible microaggression being said and agreed with.
2: Accusations and responses to them	3. Blind date	Personal accusation of prejudice and defensive response.	A possible microaggression being said, challenged and defended.
	4. The army	Impersonal accusation of prejudice and repaired response.	A possible microaggression being said, challenged and repaired.

We demonstrate that understanding direct challenges to microaggressions as potentially problematic in interactional terms accounts to some extent for why difficult dialogues are so difficult; that is, it relates not just to their controversial content, but also to their controversial format. CA findings suggest that disagreement tends to be done with delay and elaboration, whereas agreement is more straightforward (Pomerantz 1984; Edwards 2014). Challenges to hearably prejudicial talk are often indirect, for example involving delays, mitigation and accounts (Whitehead 2015), deletion through reformulation (Stokoe 2015) or repeating back what the speaker has just said (Robles 2015). Existing evidence suggests that there is a normative order at play – a shared convention that must be navigated by those wishing to raise challenges. Specifically, it can be more problematic to directly challenge something hearably prejudicial than to say it. This may also be related, we argue, to whether it is what is being said that is being challenged or the person saying it – i.e. to identity and stake – and to how preceding talk can determine which course of action is taken in this respect.

Question and answer pre-sequences and comments

This section features two examples of possibly microaggressive comments which operate on the basis of categorisations. In the latter, the comment in question is preceded by a question-and-answer pre-sequence and succeeded by an affiliative response. The absence of these features in the first example highlights, by contrast, one of the potential functions of pre-sequences in terms of eliciting (affiliative) responses to comments from recipients. According to Stivers (2013:205),

> If we consider social actions such as assessments, noticings and other 'comments', we see that although they are commonly responded to, there are times that they are given no response at all. Moreover, this nonresponse does not generally appear to be treated as problematic.

Excerpt 1 features such a nonresponse. Albert and Colin have just been watching a boxing match on television where one opponent has very swiftly beaten the other. Both opponents are men. The excerpt is at the start of a sequence which begins in response to the outcome of the match.

Excerpt 1: Long hair

```
01  Albert:     Boom boom (.) He's got long ha:ir and a:ll!
02              (4.0)
03              ((Coughs))
04  Colin:      He's gonna be next world champ that Michael
05              (.)
06  Albert:     D'you think so.
07              (5.4)
08  Colin:      Between him and that (0.6) Lennox bloke.
```

On line 1, Albert expresses surprise that the champion has long hair. As neither Albert nor Colin orient to this noticing as problematic, can it be considered possibly microaggressive? A compositional feature of the first speaker's talk suggests so. A link is made between a group of people (those with long hair) and a negative attribute (a lack of fighting ability). Because having long hair is in itself no obvious barrier to boxing success, we can infer that Albert is implying something and expects Colin to understand what. As long hair is more commonly associated with women, and fighting ability with men, it seems likely that this relates to the MCD 'gender'. In this instance, 'long hair' might therefore be considered a 'category resonant description', i.e. one which does not explicitly mention a category, but does mention attributes associated with one and as such conveys a sense of being deployed as one (Stokoe 2012a). One could also argue that long hair and fighting ability are both category-tied predicates relating to the MCD 'gender'. This categorical incident is then considered possibly microaggressive because in it a category is associated (by implication) with a negatively-assessed activity (Robles 2015). Specifically, it is considered possibly (hetero)sexist because it seems to involve a relative privileging of masculinity over femininity.

This example, taken with those that follow, also supports Stokoe's (2012a) thesis that MCA can add value to sequential analysis, as it can be used to evidence the uses and consequences of inference via categorisation in a way that sequential analysis cannot. This is particularly useful for the exploration of subtle discursive phenomena such as microaggressions. The next excerpt features an example of an assessment. According to Stivers (2013), first-position assessments carry little obligation to respond. It therefore seems likely that assessments that receive responses will appear elsewhere in a sequence. This is the case in Excerpt 2, which begins with a question-and-answer pre-sequence, followed by the assessment in the base first-pair part and then a minimal post-sequence.

Excerpt 2 is a conversation between Gordon and Kevin, later joined by Elaine. They have been talking about rugby for some time beforehand. Kevin plays rugby and has a match coming up.

The first speaker, Gordon, starts the conversation with a question, initiating a question-and-answer pre-sequence (lines 1–7). Doing so enables him to check familiarity with the notion he wishes to introduce in the base first-pair part (lines 10–13) and probe for the likelihood of affiliation with his stance. The latter endeavour is assisted by the use of an idiom ('They say rugby er the game of rugby is played by gentlemen') accompanied by a common knowledge component, 'don't they' (see Stokoe 2012b regarding the use of common knowledge components in the situated [re]production of commonsense knowledge about gender categories). By framing

the idea of rugby being a gentleman's game as something suggested by others, Gordon does not align with this position for the time being. This means that were Kevin to disagree, Gordon could reconsider his turn at lines 10–13 ('Er (0.9) they never- you know when you watch it on television there's never trouble in rugby like [there is football is there.]'). The fact that Kevin plays rugby and is therefore likely to welcome such an assessment suggests that Gordon's overarching 'project' (see Levinson 2013) concerns the building of affiliation. Using an idiom also allows Gordon to supply a common reference point to increase the likelihood that Kevin will recognise the topic being introduced (although in this case, this hardly seems necessary – again, the accomplishment of affiliation seems a more feasible project). Perhaps more importantly, it strengthens the case he is about to make concerning his observation that, unlike in football, there is never any 'trouble' in televised rugby games – according to Stokoe (2012a:286), 'both idioms and categorical formulations work as figurative, summarizing devices that are normatively "correct about something" and hard to test empirically or challenge'.

Excerpt 2: Rugby

```
01  Gordon:    They say rugby er the game of rugby is played by gentlemen
02             don't they.
03  Kevin:     That's right <It's a hooligan's game played by gentlemen=
04  Gordon:    [Yeah.]
05  Kevin:     =[and ] football's a gentlemen's game played hoo[hooligans.]
06  Gordon:                                                    [Hooligans.]
07             Ah.
08  Kevin:     They say it about watching as well.
09             (2.8)
10  Gordon:    Er (0.9) they never- you know when you watch it on television
11             there's never trouble in rugby like [there is football is] =
12  Kevin:                                          [When i in         ] =
13  Gordon:    = [there.]
14  Kevin:     = [rugby ](0.4)when there's trouble it's face to face (0.4)
15             say what you wanna say and smack 'em.
16  Elaine:    T(h)-hah[hahhahhah]
17  Kevin:             [In foot  ]ball it's wait till the ball's gone
18             then kick 'em from behind.
19  Elaine:    It's chi- it's a bit more [childish]=
20  Kevin:                               [It is.  ]
21  Elaine:    =in't it.
22  Kevin:     It's silly football. Li- little schoolgirls play football.
23  Gordon:    Mm.
```

In this case, the idiom also happens to feature categorisations: 'gentlemen' and 'hooligans'. These terms relate to both the MCD 'gender' and the MCD 'social class'. Gentlemen and hooligans are both types of men, and they are differentiated in terms of behaviours associated with different classes of people. These are relative categories associated with positive versus negative activities and predicates respectively. They are also 'positioned

categories' – ones which occupy a hierarchical relationship in relation to one another (Stokoe 2012a).

On line 8, Kevin adds 'They say it about w<u>atchi</u>ng as well.' This works to include Gordon – someone who watches but does not play rugby – in the category of people being praised. Kevin also mirrors the common-knowledge/idiomatic design, to similar effect. This orientation to Gordon's categorical formulation suggests it has been understood by Kevin as serving a project of affiliation. His nonconforming answers to Gordon's (lines 3 and 12–15) and Elaine's (line 22) yes/no interrogatives support this; rather than simply agreeing, Kevin elaborates on and supports the stances Gordon and Elaine convey via their questioning (Drew 2013; Lee 2013). Additional evidence that affiliation is the primary business at hand is Gordon's anticipatory completion (Hayashi 2013) of 'hooligans' on line 6. Still further evidence that the overall project concerns affiliation relates to the idea that actions can be 'vehicles' for producing further actions (Schegloff 2007; Whitehead 2015). In this case, the series of assessments beginning at line 10 (arguably the base first-pair part of the sequence) could be interpreted as 'vehicles' for affiliation.

During lines 12–18, Kevin further maligns the category 'footballers', affiliating with Gordon and positioning them both (as a player and a viewer of rugby rather than football) positively by comparison. This might be con-sidered 'identity work' – in this case done by linking footballers with the negative attributes of cowardice/dishonesty and, by contrast, rugby players with bravery/honesty: '[When i in rugby] (0.4) when there's trouble it's face to face (0.4) say what you wanna say and smack 'em. […] [In foot]ball it's wait till the ball's gone then kick 'em from behind.'

It is at this point that Elaine, who has until now been dealing with her children, joins the conversation by affiliating with Kevin's stance via laugh-ter (line 16). At lines 19–21, Elaine offers the following assessment of rugby in comparison with football: 'It's chi- it's a bit more [childish]=in't it.' She therefore makes use of a positioned category; 'Some collections of cate-gories occupy a hierarchical relationship […] such that an adult can be accused of behaving like a teenager, and so on' (Stokoe 2012a:281). On the surface, it might seem that Elaine's self-initiated repair during this turn (from 'It's chi-' to 'it's *a bit more* childish') is a downgrade that draws rugby into the category 'childish', albeit to a lesser degree than football. Perhaps a more accurate interpretation, given that the project underway seems to be affiliation, is that the repair is in service of clarification and thus pro-gression of the sequence – simply saying 'It's childish' does less to indicate precisely *what* is childish, whereas 'a bit more' replicates the comparative form of previous turns and in so doing brings the subjects of comparison (rugby players and footballers) to mind.

Kevin orients to this categorisation in the following turn on line 22: 'It's silly football. Li- little schoolgirls play football.' The self-initiated repair at the start of the second turn construction unit (TCU) – 'Li- little' – is most probably not an indication of hesitancy, but instead an artefact of there now being three speakers involved in the conversation and thus increased competition for the floor: 'repairs initiated in transition space are regularly started with audible haste' (Kitzinger 2013:246). Kevin uses a membership categorisation to upgrade his claim that football is 'silly', framing it as something that 'little schoolgirls play'. In doing so, he links groups of people with negative attributes using the derogatory reference term 'little schoolgirls', made relevant by Elaine's descriptor 'childish'. Weatherall (2015:413) notes that 'using the term girl as a negative assessment is a recognised sexist language practice […] The bias derives from its use to constitute a valued attribute as a masculine one and the lack of it as feminine and deficient.'

Little schoolgirls playing football is also arguably a 'category-activity puzzle': 'people can do particular actions by putting together unexpected combinations […] gendering is often marked in this way' (Stokoe 2012a:281). Little schoolgirls playing football is unexpected because football is generally associated with men, so when Kevin says little schoolgirls play football, he implies that men who play football are like little girls rather than like 'real' men. By implication then, rugby is a man's game.[4] It can be argued that, taken together, these features of Kevin's utterance on line 22 mean that it can considered an example of a (hetero)sexist microaggression.

It might be tempting to assume that Gordon's 'Mm' on line 23 is disaffiliative with Kevin's assessment on line 22. However, Gordon is indicating that the response to his action on lines 10–13 is adequate, and the sequence can be closed (minimal post-expansion). Thus, although comparing footballers to schoolgirls is clearly intended as derogatory, it is not oriented to as problematic by the participants in the conversation. This highlights the value of looking beyond simply that which is explicitly treated as problematic when considering prejudice in interaction.

Excerpt 2 features an assessment placed within a sequential structure involving pre-sequence, assessment and minimal post-sequence. Unlike the placement of a comment in base first-pair part, this structure makes a response relevant, and preferably one aligned with the stance conveyed. Within this structure, the design of the first turn can also supply exit routes if one wishes to back away from a stance, for example through deniability or framing the stance as the view of others rather than oneself. In this excerpt, the use of stance-taking in the pre-announcement, idiomatic formulations (Drew and Holt 1988) and the generation of humour distance the speaker from the description, and so mitigate against the risk of appearing

prejudiced by mitigating the subjective quality of the account being given (Edwards 2005).

Accusations and responses to them

In this section, examples relating to different forms of accusations and responses involving possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions will be discussed. Excerpt 3 features Evelyn and Arthur, a retired married couple. In it, Evelyn directly challenges Arthur's hearably prejudicial talk. As discussed, direct challenges to hearably prejudicial talk are potentially problematic. In the excerpt, Arthur and Evelyn are joined by another couple, Tom and Jackie.

Excerpt 3: Blind date

```
01  Arthur:     Do you ever look at this Cilla (0.4) er Blind Date.
02  Tom:        [Yeah I've seen that.]
03  Evelyn:     [Ooh did you see that] [tonight.]
04  Tom:                              [Yes.   ]
05  Arthur:                           [D'you  ] see t- (0.4) What do you
06              make of that blackie with that lovely (0.7) lovely young girl
07              pretty as a picture (.) and he were doing this round her and
08              (.) leanin' back and his great big lips (0.4) £ooh(h)ooh!
09  Evelyn:     You can't f(h)a:ce it [when (0.5) a white girl gets an  ]
10  Arthur:                           [Well if you were if she were your] =
11              (0.4)
12  Arthur:     = if she were your daughter Jackie what would you have
13              thought.
14  Jackie:     >I know< well I ha didn't see it last week=
15  Evelyn:      [No I didn't see it last week. ]
16  Jackie:     =[but Tom said la:st week didn't ] she say she li:ked coloured
17              people or something.
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As in Excerpt 2, the first speaker – in this case Arthur – begins by initiating a question-and-answer pre-sequence in order to check that the conditions for the base sequence are in place: 'Do you ever look at this Cilla (0.4) er Blind Date.' (line 1). Having received the go-ahead from his audience (lines 2–4), he progresses his project with the base first-pair part that begins on line 5. Whilst this turn is delivered as a question and therefore designed to elicit views on a topic, it also conveys a stance on that topic. Hence, it may be considered to embody multiple actions and, specifically, feature 'off record doings' (Levinson 2013). The design of this turn should in theory maximise the chance of receiving responses, and specifically responses that affiliate with the stance conveyed. This is because – as evident in straightforward versus complicated responses – in response to questions, response is preferred, and in response to the expression of stances, alignment is preferred (Pomerantz and Heritage 2013; Stivers 2013). Indeed, this sequence could be classified as a 'telling'. It features a story preface in the form of a question and is 'built around conveying a

stance toward an event' (Stivers 2013:201). As such, an evaluative stance
– preferably one aligned with Arthur's – is due at the end of Arthur's turn
(Stivers 2013). Yet on line 9, the evaluative stance Evelyn provides is not
affiliative. She issues a direct and personal challenge: 'You can't fa:ce it
[when (0.5) a wh<u>i</u>te girl gets an]'. More will be discussed concerning this
shortly. First, Arthur's turn on lines 5 to 8 will be considered in finer detail.

Here, Arthur's question/telling explicitly references a number of catego-
ries and enlists various categorical devices to construct a particular stance.
The stance concerns the pairing of a white woman and a Black man on
the television gameshow *Blind Date*. The format of the show involves a
contestant (in this case, a woman) asking questions of three possible suit-
ors (in this case, men). The contestant cannot see the suitors and must
select one to go on a date with, based on their answers. Arthur describes a
recent episode where a 'lovely young girl' selected a 'blackie' and asks the
others for their views on this: 'What do you make of that b<u>lack</u>ie with that
<u>lovel</u>y (0.7) <u>lovel</u>y young girl pretty as a p<u>ic</u>ture' (lines 5–7). In this way,
categories pertaining to both the MCDs 'race' and 'gender' are introduced.
These are positioned categories, as evident by the ways in which they are
or are not 'marked' – marking being used to denote the subordinate cate-
gory (Lakoff 2004[1975]). In the case of the former, the Black man's race is
explicitly referenced (i.e. marked) while the white woman's race is implied
(if he is labelled a 'blackie' then she, by contrast, is not a 'blackie'). In the
case of the latter MCD, the woman's gender is marked (via the term 'girl', in
itself a positioned category relating to the MCD 'age') whereas the man's is
implied (and later confirmed by the use of the pronoun 'he'). The woman
is also described in terms of positive attributes, which although gendered
and idiomatic, are specific to her: 'lovely', 'young' and 'pretty as a picture',
whereas the man is described in terms of generic negative category-bound
activities: 'doing this round her and (.) <u>lean</u>in' back'; 'great big lips'; '£ooh(h)
ooh!'. Arthur's mocking of the man is cemented in his smiley voice and
laughter particles at the end of the turn. This also serves to frame his stance
as light-hearted. And so, here we have an example of prejudicial talk which
relates to the intersection of various social categories.

Let us return to Evelyn's challenge on line 9 and consider Arthur's
response to it. Despite Arthur mitigating against disalignment with his
stance through the design of his turn (phrasing it as a question), he does
not have the option of backing away from his assessment as Gordon might
have done in Excerpt 2. This is partly due to his more explicit use of lan-
guage. It is also due to Evelyn issuing a direct challenge. It is largely due to
Evelyn's challenge being a personal one ('You can't f(h)<u>a:ce</u> it'): the criticism
is not of what Arthur has said – which could be defended on the basis of

misunderstanding (albeit tenuously in this instance); it is of Arthur himself. Rather than repair his turn, then, Arthur defends his position.

Arthur produces a recognitional onset mid-turn overlap (Hayashi 2013) before the end of Evelyn's TCU. It is unclear whether Evelyn stops short of explicitly referencing the category 'blackie' ('a white girl gets an') or whether she stops due to Arthur's interjection. However, she also hesitates to use a racial categorisation later in the conversation (data not shown). This, taken with the fact that she challenges Arthur's statements, would seem to support the possibility of the former. The fact that Arthur starts producing a defence well before the end of Evelyn's accusation and not at a transition-relevant place suggests that this is a well-rehearsed argument between the two parties.

Arthur uses the category 'daughter' to defend his stance. This relies on a shared understanding of the MCD 'family' and the standardised relational pairs (SRPs) within it. SRPs are 'pairs of categories that carry duties and moral obligations in relation to the other, such as "parent-child"' (Stokoe 2012a:281). By asking Jackie what she would have thought if it were her daughter, Arthur can recruit her support by placing her in a situation where saying she would not have minded might position her as a 'bad mother'. Jackie affiliates with Arthur on line 14, but somewhat noncommittally and at a rushed pace, swiftly shifting the focus onto not having seen the episode herself, and then onto another party (Tom): '>I know< well I ha didn't see it last week==[but Tom said la:st week didn't] she say she li:ked coloured people or something'. In this way, Jackie's response also attends to the dilemma between alignment with Arthur and nonalignment with Evelyn versus alignment with Evelyn and nonalignment with Arthur. Arthur has put Jackie in an awkward position, and she uses a number of devices to navigate it.

Excerpt 4: The army

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01  P2:   [But-but] the- the army is (.) um (.) w-y-you can now have (.) gays
02        and lesbians in the army, and they're actually gonna chuck 'em, up
03        the front line same as- same as e-everybody else (.) um (.)
04        [but that took a long time]
05  P4:   [You can now           ]-you can now have?
06  All:                                        [(General laughter)]
07  P5:                                         [You no longer    ] =
08  P1:                                         [It was only thirty] =
09  P5:   = [have to sign a declaration               ]
10  P1:   = [years ago that you had to sign a declaration]to state that you
11        have no homosexual intent before you join the army
12  P4:   Is that true?
13  P1:   [Yeah    ]
14  P5:   [((Nods))]
15  P2:   [And now ] you can have (.) er (.) homosexuals are now joining the
16        army and it is acceptable.
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When challenges to hearably prejudicial talk occur, devices are often used to mitigate against potential conflict (Robles 2015; Stokoe 2015; Whitehead 2015). Excerpt 4 is one such example, taken from a group conversation about equality, diversity and inclusion amongst a cross-section of construction industry employees working on the same project. The group have just been discussing why the construction industry might be lagging behind others in this respect. The excerpt is not taken from the same corpus as the other excerpts featured in this article – it was collected in 2019 for a wider project on (hetero)sexism in male-dominated industries.

P2's utterance on lines 1–4 references the category 'gays and lesbians'. When he says that this category of people will now be allowed to fight on the front line in the army 'same as everybody else', he implies that they are *not* the same as everybody else. But this is not the part of P2's turn which P4 takes issue with. Rather, P4 repeats P2's words, 'you can now have', adding emphasis ('you can now have?'). Unlike Evelyn's challenge in Excerpt 3, this challenge is not personal. It is an example of a 'next turn repair initiator' (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). This is a device for addressing hearably problematic (in this case, microaggressive) talk. It involves repeating the problematic part of what has just been said, and so works by offering an opportunity for repair by providing the speaker with a chance to re-hear their utterance and how it could be construed. This is a less confrontational approach than correcting or disagreeing with the speaker and so is likely to yield alignment. Next turn repair initiators are not necessarily appropriate to use in all contexts, however. In the context of discussing 'extreme case (re)formulations' (a specific type of next turn repair initiator), Robles (2015) acknowledges that playful devices such as this may only work amongst people with an established relationship. This was the case here, where the group were colleagues. The device's inherent humour is evident in the group's responsive laughter on line 6. In this instance, P2 takes up the opportunity for repair at the end of the segment in lines 15–16: '[And now] you can have (.) er (.) homosexuals are now joining the army and it is acceptable.' P2's rephrasing gives an indication of what might have been found problematic about his original phrasing. This relates to agency; 'you can now have' is replaced with 'homosexuals are now joining', repositioning members of the category 'gays and lesbians' as agentic. Incidentally, although the term 'homosexuals' is considered problematic amongst the LGBTQ+ community (American Psychological Association 2020; Motschenbacher 2021), this is not attended to in the subsequent discussion amongst the participants.

P2's reformulation occurs after an insert expansion (lines 7–14). Rather than addressing the trouble with P2's choice of words on lines 1–4, highlighted by P4's next turn repair initiator on line 5, P5 and P1 simultaneously

supply P4 with a fact relating to the point P2 was trying to make: 'You no longer have to sign a declaration'; 'It was only thirty years ago that you had to sign a declaration that you have no homosexual intent before you join the army'. It is possible that P5 and P1 misunderstood the nature of P4's challenge – as something being related to content rather than word choice. If this is the case, they may be attempting to back up the point in order to progress the conversation. It is also possible that this is an instance of 'deletion' (Kitzinger 2013; see also Stokoe 2015), a diversionary device that marks misalignment in a nonconfrontational way. In this case, by refocusing on the message P2 was trying to convey, P5 and P1 divert the focus away from P2's *faux pas*, assisting him in saving face. P5 and P1 begin speaking at the same time the rest of the group are laughing with P4, which might support either interpretation. What is certain is that P4 takes up the opportunity for alignment and progression that P5 and P1 have supplied, asking 'Is that true?' on line 12. P1 and P5 close the insert sequence on lines 13–14 with minimal post-expansions ('Yeah' and a nod). P2 then takes up the opportunity to repair his opening turn. The trouble is resolved.

This excerpt indicates that simply banning particular words or phrases is unlikely to be an effective strategy for prejudice reduction. On the face of it, the words 'you can now have' carry no negative associations; they only accrue them when spoken in relation to particular ideas in particular situations. It is therefore perhaps more productive to understand how and why (hetero)sexist talk arises in situationally specific ways, and how it can be managed in interactions. Here we have an example of a challenge being raised and collaboratively handled in such a way that alignment is achieved.

Discussion

This article attempts to address criticisms of the 'microaggressions' construct, for example in relation to: the blanket banning of words or phrases based on acontextual taxonomies; and pointing toward flawed individuals rather than acknowledging shared responsibility for prejudice and discrimination through interaction. Both of these pitfalls run the risk of undermining the efficacy of microaggression-based interventions through insufficient empirical grounding and alienating target audiences, to the point where such measures may even be counterproductive (Lilienfeld 2017). We understand microaggressions as contextual, as evident through participants' rather than solely researchers' interpretations of talk and as collaborative phenomena involving multiple parties who reference shared understandings. Rather than understanding microaggressions as reflections of individuals' attitudes, we conceptualise them as discursive devices deployed in the collaborative (re)production of inequalities. We argue that

this opens up possibilities for change, as microaggressions are understood as strategic rather than inevitable. If this is the case, alternative strategies can be made available.

The strength of the methodological approach applied in this study lies in its rigour. However, the inclusion of a range of complex and in some cases highly technical tools, some of which require familiarity with an extensive literature, means it is not an easy approach to take and so is unlikely to be taken up extensively in applied fields. It would be useful to develop a 'shorthand' approach with better practical utility for use in a broad range of contexts.

The study presented in this article utilised data from the early 1990s. It could be argued that this data has limited applicability to how microaggressions operate in today's society. However, the aim is not to generalise the use of a particular term in one context to its use in another, but to identify some of the discursive mechanisms through which (hetero)sexism is done microaggressively. These mechanisms reflect the structure of conversation more broadly, rather than historically situated norms or situationally specific goals, and thus are relatively stable across time and contexts.

Taken together, the excerpts presented evidence how different turn designs affect uptake of stances, how members align with or resist possibly prejudicial stances and to what functions. To return to RQ1: 'What do possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions look like in practice?', various discursive phenomena are indicative of the presence of microaggressions, such as: inference through categorisation; mitigation against accountability through the deployment of discursive devices like pre-sequences and humour; and mitigation against conflict through indirect challenge. Members can orient to talk involving gendered categorisations as microaggressive in all kinds of ways, and interpreting when this applies requires reference to the extant literature on sequential analysis. This is a key reason for including sequential analysis in the exploration of microaggressions at a micro-interactional level: looking at categorisations allows consideration of the devices used to position people in various ways, and looking at sequencing anchors such analyses in members' own orientations, rather than in analysts' presuppositions, enabling one to trace the relevance of various types of responses to prejudice or accusations of it.

Regarding RQ2: 'How do possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions affect the courses and outcomes of conversations?', difficult dialogues might be best understood as conversations where talk is oriented to as prejudicial by recipients. So, Excerpts 1 ('Long hair') and 2 ('Rugby') would not be considered an example of a difficult dialogue, but Excerpts 3 and 4 ('Blind date' and 'The army') would. Challenges to possibly microaggressive talk are often done with care, for example using discursive devices such as next

turn repair initiators. This is something which can be partly accounted for by the design of microaggressive turns; drawing upon social categories to make inferences provides opportunities for plausible deniability. Further, comments featuring possible microaggressions often involve pre-sequences. This finding is consistent with established CA findings concerning the introduction of delicate topics (see Stivers 2013). Particularly interesting is the fact that when people utter hearably (hetero)sexist talk, they utilise devices such as pre-sequences, as well as design features such as deniability or framing the stance as the view of others rather than oneself (as in Excerpt 2). They do so to create opportunities not only to retreat from their position, but for respondents to disagree with them without causing conflict and thus avoid difficult dialogues.

In terms of RQ3: 'How do possible (hetero)sexist microaggressions map onto well-documented CA/MCA phenomena?', a relevant theoretical aspect of CA work is that in conversations where there is a risk of being considered prejudicial, the speaker has to manage this risk (van Dijk 1987). These risks have been shown to be mitigated by stance-taking in pre-announcements and the generation of laughter, as in the examples presented here, which mitigate the subjectivity of the account being given (Edwards 2005). Idiomatic formulations (Drew and Holt 1988) can be used to put the description 'out there', at a distance from the speaker, and so mitigate against risk of accusations of prejudice.

Another important aspect of what makes something microaggressive as opposed to aggressive is that steps are taken to mitigate against potential conflict. When people say hearably prejudicial things, they often use devices (e.g. pre-sequences, idioms, humour, etc.) to mitigate accountability. On the part of recipients, the treatment of an utterance as hearably prejudicial can involve the hallmarks of dispreferred turns such as hesitation and/ or indirect challenges involving deletion or repair initiation. We therefore propose that the presence of such features of speakers' and/or recipients' talk might be understood as criteria for an utterance or sequence being considered microaggressive and, relatedly, that microaggressions should be read in dialogue.

The findings presented here also support arguments (for instance by Sue and others) that microaggressions are particularly effective for (re)producing inequalities because of their ambiguity, which makes defence against potential criticism easy. We show how this is done through inference, made possible through the (re)production of social categories. Paying attention to how microaggressions actually unfold in practice, as done here, reveals the mechanisms through which discrimination operates in and through our everyday interactions.

The benefits of this approach include being able to determine how inequalities are (re)produced between people as they go about their everyday lives. Relatedly, we argue that there would be worth in devising interventions to target microaggressions at the interactional level, for example in workplace or educational settings. Specifically, we recommend using insights from such analyses to demonstrate what microaggressive language looks like in practice and how it functions in interactions. We suggest that prejudice is accomplished between people in interactions rather than held within them, and that highlighting this holds the potential to encourage and empower managers and employees to do things differently. To facilitate this, practitioners might, for example, design allyship training which uses findings from conversation and membership categorisation analyses of workplace interactions to illustrate how 'difficult dialogues' (Sue and Constantine 2007) arise and might be managed. Furthermore, 'unconscious bias training' has been popular in recent years. However, its effectiveness as a catalyst for change is arguably undermined by the assumption that biases are natural and inevitable: such assumptions absolve people of responsibility for their actions and limit their motivation to – and belief that they can – effect change (Wetherell and Potter 1992). This might be overcome by recasting bias as something that is actively and collaboratively (re)constructed, acknowledged and managed by speakers and recipients in talk (Whitehead and Stokoe 2015).

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Acknowledgements

Notes

1   The terms '(hetero)sexist' and '(hetero)sexism' are intended to capture the interrelation between sexism (prejudice and discrimination targeting women) and heterosexism (prejudice and discrimination targeting sexual minorities).
2   Excerpt 3 is taken from a focus group discussion conducted for a wider study on (hetero)sexism in male-dominated industries.
3   For the purposes of this article, these terms are treated as roughly synonymous with the reformulated concept of 'microaggressions' presented.
4   Interestingly, earlier in the excerpt, Kevin said that hooligans play football. Whilst similarly used as a negative assessment, this is not a category that is synonymous with little girls, so there is a contradiction here.

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