



# Reading What is Not There: Ethnomethodological Analysis of the Membership Category, Action, and Reason in Novels and Short Stories

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## Abstract

This paper investigates how the reader of prose fiction fills in the blanks regarding a fictional character's membership category, action, and reason for the action. Aligning with an ethnomethodological approach to texts and appropriating membership categorization analysis (MCA), we analyze how the readers of J. D. Salinger, an author whose works are well known for their ambiguity and ambivalence, would grasp the unwritten identities of characters and the meanings of their actions. Our analysis specifies two types of methods deployed for the reader to understand the fictional texts. First, in an at-a-glance way, the reader can supply the missing categories and sequence of actions by turning to the commonsense knowledge and social norms regarding the association between the category and the activity. Second, the reader can construct various interpretations regarding the recognizably ambiguous scenes of the text by turning to the conceptual knowledge of the relevant social phenomena, the maxims specific to the act of storytelling, and the writer's techniques peculiar to the fictional texts. The findings demonstrate the vast applicability of an MCA approach to the analysis of the work of reading prose fiction and shed light on the detailed operations of the author's maxims and techniques in the textual configuration of prose fiction, thereby indicating the possibility of ethnomethodological analysis including the interwoven consideration of the reader's activity and the textual organization.

**Keywords** Ethnomethodology · Membership categorization analysis · Prose fiction · J. D. Salinger

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## Introduction

When we read a novel, we understand both what is written and what is only implied; sometimes, we even recognize and enjoy the ambiguity of the text, which is open to various understandings and interpretations. If reading fiction is not reducible to rendering what the printed letters are explicitly saying, what is the act of reading, and how can it be done? What methods does the reader deploy to properly understand the fictional text in conjunction with the textual clues?

These questions are mainly engaged by literary critics of reception theory or reader-response criticism, who shifted the focus of analysis from the text to the reader and the practice of reading. Reception theorist Wolfgang Iser postulated a general model of the reader implied in the text and its active role in the process of reading as guided by the structure and organization of the text, thereby bridging the gap between the analyses of the text and the reader's activity (Iser, 1974). Likewise, renowned reader-response critic Stanley Fish credits the readership with general linguistic skills and literary competence, which is also presupposed by the author when organizing the text in the first place (Fish, 1980: 177). Either way, previous literary theorists have tried to analyze the general act of reading by stipulating a theoretical model of the reader equipped with specific knowledge and competence prerequisite for literary readership.

Taking up Iser's and Fish's arguments, Rod Watson proposes an ethnomethodological approach to the practice of reading. While accepting Iser's view on reading as invited by the structure of the text and Fish's focus on the skills and competence necessary for interpreting the literary text, Watson argues the need for an approach to reading in terms of an in-situ accomplishment:

I can take Iser's notion of the "implied reader" further by not simply dealing with the textually-implied reader (or readership) as a set of overall procedures or in terms of a generally-characterised "interpretive community", but in terms of a set of local, i.e. locally-situated and locally-operative, devices potentiating particular and specifiable procedural operations on the part of readers. (Watson, 2009: 75)

Here, Watson proposes a praxiological approach to reading, which is locally accomplished based on specific procedural operations of the reader's skills, competence, and devices instead of reducing such in-situ operations to the theoretical concepts of the "readership" or "act of reading". This paper aligns with this ethnomethodology of text approach (see also Eglin & Hester, 1999, 2003; Jayyusi, 1991; Livingston, 1995, 2006; Lynch, 2002; Sacks, 1972b; Sharrock & Ikeya, 2000; Smith, 1990; McHoul, 1982), which will be further discussed in the following sections, and delves into the practice of reading prose fiction, that is, novels and short stories.

We chose prose fiction because it has been a missing target for the ethnomethodology of text, contrary to its paradigmatic role accorded in the arguments of literary theorists. Take a closer look, for example, at Livingston's ethnomethodological approach to text (Livingston, 1995). He underscores the importance of

treating the text and its reading as closely intertwined by introducing the concept of the “text-reading” pair. According to his argument, the text is not an independent entity but reveals itself in the course of reading; concurrently, the reader cannot read the text arbitrarily and idiosyncratically but must do so in a way consistent with the clues given in the text as to how it should be read. Given this, Livingston (2006) argues that analyzing the mundane practice of reading prose fiction is more difficult than poetry since its effects “take place over more extended periods of time and are more hidden by the transparency and ordinariness of reading’s work” (2006: 656). He also admits that explicating the lay reading of prose fiction may sometimes fall upon a seemingly unnecessary paraphrasing of the text, which he defends as a vital starting point to divert from the excessive intellectualization of professional reading (2006: 660).

However, what if the transparency and ordinariness of reading prose fiction are themselves accomplished through the work of reading? What if, as Livingston (2006) argues about poetry, such work comprises a process of finding out what is “not literally in the text” (2006: 658)? In this vein, it is notable that Virginia Woolf praises the artfulness of Jane Austen’s unfinished novel *The Watsons*, saying, “She stimulates us to *supply what is not there*. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial” (Woolf, 1925: 174, emphasis added). Furthermore, Woolf argues that it is possible for the reader to enjoy Austen’s abstract art of configuring the scene in a similar way as one enjoys poetry.<sup>1</sup> When reading prose fiction, the reader has to engage in the work of grasping the membership category, action, and reason for the action, which are not always explicitly written. Understanding who is involved, what happens, and why that happens, and appreciating their ambiguities, must be a source of pleasure in reading prose fiction. By analyzing the methods that the reader of prose fiction employs to fill in the blanks as to the identities of characters and the meanings of their actions, we can shed light on the “seen but unnoticed” (Garfinkel, 1967) aspect of the work of reading. Moreover, as many theorists and writers have suggested, such investigation will also help us elucidate how the text “stimulates” the reader to fill in the blanks (Woolf, 1925; Iser, 1978; Fish, 1989).

In the ballroom scene of *The Watsons*, for example, categorizing a character in a specific way (e.g., unmarried, young, woman) provides an understanding that she is expected to behave in a certain way as an incumbent of the categories, that is, trying to become acquainted with a man of fortune. Against this backdrop of commonsense knowledge, the reader can understand that her spur-of-the-moment offer to dance with a ten-year-old boy who has missed his partner is an act of exceptional kindness (Austen, 1871/1974: 122). In this way, we understand the meaning of action by utilizing the commonsense knowledge of categories. This opens up vast prospects for the applicability of membership categorization analysis (MCA) for the analysis of reading prose fiction since MCA has addressed members’ deployment

<sup>1</sup> Somewhat reminiscent of Woolf’s argument here, Harvey Sacks states that “making distinctive observations about the world and its persons” is the job of both novelists and poets (Sacks, 1992b: 217). The task of this paper is to elucidate how the writers do their job in organizing fictional texts.

of commonsense knowledge and social norms in categorization practices in various social settings.

The following section overviews previous ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies on category, action, and reason, focusing primarily on recent developments in MCA studies. We show how these studies can be appropriated for analyzing the practice of reading prose fiction and the various textual methods employed to invite, stimulate, and organize the reader's experience. Then, following a brief discussion on why we chose J. D. Salinger's novel and short stories as the data for this paper, our ethnomethodological analyses of Salinger's texts elucidate how the reader fills in the blanks as to characters' membership category, action, and reason for the action. The last section summarizes our arguments and analyses, fleshing out the implications for ethnomethodological and MCA studies.

## **The Intelligibility of Membership Category, Action, and Reason in Texts**

Ethnomethodological studies on membership category and action have their root in Harvey Sacks's seminal paper "On the analyzability of stories by children," where he engages the task of clarifying how members understand the unwritten action and reason and their orderliness in the text, delving into the mundane methods of utilizing commonsense knowledge and social norms when reading a story.

Focusing on a child's story, saying, "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up," Sacks (1972b) analyzes the method we use to understand the sequential order of the events depicted by the two sentences, the categorial relation of "the mommy" being the mother of "the baby," and the reason "the mommy" picks up "the baby". He starts by observing that we, as natives of a natural language, recognize that the order of the two events (i.e., the baby's crying and the mother's picking it up) corresponds to the order of the two sentences referring to each event. This understanding of the order of the actions described in the story is justified because "if the occurrences ought to occur in that order [of the sentences]" and "if there is no information to the contrary," we find it a rule that "the order of the sentences indicates the order of the occurrences" (Sacks, 1972b: 331).

With regard to our research interest in action and its reason, more significant about Sacks's argument is that we understand not only the sequential order of the actions but also the reason for the action. He argues that the reader can recognize that the first action is the reason for the second one with the help of the social norm that "[a] mother ought to try to soothe her crying baby" (Sacks, 1972b: 338). Thus, for the reader to understand the reason for a given action, the relevant membership category of the agent and its related commonsense knowledge and social norm are of vital importance (see also Raymond, 2019; Sacks, 1972a). The understandings of membership category, action, and reason for the action in texts are thus interrelated in a mutually referring and co-constructing way.

Following the path of Sacks's argument on membership categories, we shed light on the practice of reading and understanding prose fiction while at the same time clarifying the text's configuration enabling the reader's practice. As Watson (2009) argues, we

cannot perform an adequate analysis of text “without including an intricately interwoven consideration both of textual organisation and of reading as an activity” (2009: 23). Whereas the reader utilizes commonsense knowledge and social norms to understand who is involved and what happens, the text is organized to invite such understanding. The interwoven relation of reading and text enables the reader to infer the implied identities and the meanings of actions that are not explicitly described in the text.

It may well be said that recent MCA studies take up Sacks’s initial research interest in the intelligibility of action and reason, developing empirical analyses on various social settings (e.g., Fitzgerald & Housley 2015; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002, 2009; Stokoe, 2012). While the main foci of such MCA studies have been categorization practices in conversations, some researchers have also analyzed categorizations in texts (e.g., Lee, 1984; Eglin & Hester, 1999, 2003; Housley et al., 2017). Such membership categorization analysts ask how the text explicitly or implicitly categorizes persons and how the reader understands the category, action, and reason for the action described or implied in the text.

For instance, Stokoe (2012) introduces an online discussion forum where a poster explicitly refers to the gender of a person at issue, thus inferring the reason he has behaved in a certain way and expecting the way he is likely to behave (2012: 291–293). Likewise, Housley et al. (2017) analyze antagonistic posts from Twitter accounts and argue how background knowledge and social norms operate for the general audience to recognize the posts as antagonistic. Eglin and Hester (1999) also investigate the intelligibility of unwritten reasons for action in text. Focusing on a suicide note written by the perpetrator of the mass shooting, they try to clarify the methods he employs to categorize the victims as “feminists” and how such categorization provides a vital footing for the implicit self-justification of his atrocity.

In line with such research trends in MCA studies focusing on textual data, this paper analyzes how the reader of prose fiction can understand characters’ membership categories and actions that are not explicitly written. We elucidate how the reader deploys commonsense knowledge and social norms to fill in the blanks as to the characters’ identities and the meanings of their actions in the fictional text. By so doing, we show the usability of MCA in clarifying the intelligibility of the category, action, and reason for the action, which must be a source of the pleasure of reading. Moreover, analyzing data from prose fiction contributes to exploring the research frontier of ethnomethodological studies. As we have argued, the analysis of the reader’s understanding necessarily involves the analysis of the organization of the text. By analyzing the configuration of prose fiction, a type of text that the author elaborately organizes to bring about specific aesthetic effects on the reader’s side, we can clarify the unnoticed operations of the author’s maxims and techniques, as shown in the discussion.

## Data and Methods

The data for this paper come from the works of American novelist J. D. Salinger, specifically the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and the short stories collection *Nine Stories*. Salinger’s writings are suitable for our research interest as his novels and short stories are all well known for the ambiguity of the meaning of the characters’

actions, sometimes leaving much information unspecified as to what a given character does, other times giving a detailed description of the character's behavior except for the reason why.<sup>2</sup> Our paper aims not to decide the correct ones among the conflicting interpretations of previous literary criticisms but to turn attention to the common ground enabling such various interpretations, thereby clarifying the methods deployed when reading such recognizably ambiguous fictional texts.

We analyze Salinger's fictional works from an ethnomethodological perspective on texts, whose basic principle is to analyze the text in its own right and as an in-situ accomplishment by focusing on the accountability and intelligibility of the events, actions, intentions, motives, and reasons depicted in the text (Jayyusi, 1991, 1993; Livingston, 1995; Lymer & Blomberg, 2019; Watson, 2009). In performing such analysis, the focal point should be how we, as lay readers, utilize commonsense knowledge and mundane inference. Watson argues:

.....[Ethnomethodology as a sociological approach] treats reading activities as culturally-based and socially-organised and above all as local: that is, these activities are conducted on the basis of the cultural knowledge shared by members of a given group or society, where such knowledge is frequently employed conjointly by people, e.g. the writer(s) and recipient(s) of a letter. (Watson, 2009: 21)

Instead of understanding arbitrarily and idiosyncratically what the text is saying, the reader is guided to reach a specific understanding instructed by the recipient design of the text. Such understanding is also grounded in the skills and techniques of deploying the commonsense knowledge shared by members, including various methods to discern and ascribe categories of people, utilize the generic rule on the sequential order of the text, and situate the text in the relevant social context (Watson, 2009: 21). Livingston (1995) also attends to reading skills, emphasizing their practical character rather than background knowledge as a mere collection of propositions. Aligned with Watson's and Livingston's orientation to cultural skills and techniques, we demonstrate how prose fiction's intelligibility is accomplished in conjunction with the commonsense knowledge and the mundane methods shared by both the reader and the author of the text.

Above all, this paper focuses on the intelligibility of membership category, action, and reason depicted in prose fiction in line with the fundamental orientation of MCA argued in the previous section. MCA studies have elucidated how we explicitly categorize people using category terms and implicitly categorize them by mentioning category-related activities or predicates (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2015; Sacks, 1972a; Stokoe, 2012). From this perspective, we analyze how prose fiction describes a character (including a first-person narrator) in the text and how the reader reaches a specific understanding of the categories, actions, and reasons of characters grounded in such descriptions and embedded in a storyline.

<sup>2</sup> For the flourishing of the conflicting views of the literary criticism of Salinger's works, which is sometimes contemptuously referred to as the "Salinger Industry," see Davison (1981) and Prigozy (1995).

The data for our analyses come from scenes where characters' categories and/or actions are not explicitly written. By analyzing such cases, we shed light on the ethno-methods of the reader to reach a specific understanding as to such implied categories and actions as well as the textual methods deployed to invite and stimulate such understanding given the reader's inferential competence to utilize common-sense knowledge and social norms.

## Analysis

First, we address a scene where a narrator is not using a category term but doing implicit categorization (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005; Speer & Stokoe, 2011; Stokoe, 2012). Although there is no explicit mention of category terms, the reader can understand the category of the actor and the reason for the action. Excerpt 1 is the last sentence of "The Laughing Man" in *Nine Stories*, a short story narrated by an adult man recalling the memory of his boyhood.

Excerpt 1 "The Laughing Man" in *Nine Stories*

(...) I arrived home with my teeth chattering uncontrollably and was told to go right straight to bed. (Salinger, 1953/2010: 110)

We can understand the sequential order of the events referred to by the two clauses separated by the conjunction "and" and the reason relation between the two events: he is told to go right straight to bed *because* his teeth are chattering. We know that the chattering of teeth is generally a sign of cold and, in some special circumstances, fear. Although the narrator is presumably trembling both from cold and fear,<sup>3</sup> he is misperceived to have been out in the cold and told to warm himself in bed by someone who does not understand his fear. With the help of our commonsense knowledge on what the chattering of teeth generally signifies and the specific occasion the narrator provides in the scene, the reader can infer why he is "told to go right straight to bed" and that a bit of misunderstanding is involved in the interaction.

More interesting concerning Sacks's argument on category and action (1972a, 1972b, 1992a, 1992b) is that we can understand the membership category of "someone" who tells the narrator to go to bed although there is no explicit mention of category terms. When one can tell the other to do something, we can reasonably expect some category relationship is involved, where one has the right to order, and the other has the duty to obey, for example, such category pairs as teacher/student or doctor/patient. In the excerpt, as the venue of the interaction is mentioned as "home," we can infer that the parent/child pair is relevant, thus enabling us to assume that the narrator is told to go to bed by his parents. In this way, our reading of the scene is grounded in a social norm that parents can order their child to do something, and reflexively, we can understand that the parents intend to take care

<sup>3</sup> In this scene, the narrator is shocked by the sudden and tragic end of the story that a man named "Chief" has told orally. As one critic argues, "the violence with which he [Chief] concludes the story of the Laughing Man profoundly affects the narrator" (Prigozy, 1995: 122).



of their child based on a misunderstanding that he merely feels cold, which again clarifies the reason relation between the “chattering of teeth” and “being told to go to bed”.

Next, we focus on a similar scene where a first-person narrator does implicit categorization by describing another character’s behavior but is followed by the character’s resistance. Excerpt 2 is a scene from *The Catcher in the Rye* where the narrator, Holden Caulfield, a teenage boy who has been expelled from school, recalls what he has experienced during his stay with his former teacher, Mr. Antolini.

Excerpt 2 *The Cather in the Rye*

Then something happened. I don’t even like to talk about it. I woke up all of a sudden. I don’t know what time it was or anything, but I woke up. I felt something on my head, some guy’s hand. Boy, it really scared hell out of me. What it was, it was Mr Antolini’s hand. What he was doing was, he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head. Boy, I’ll bet I jumped about a thousand feet.

“What the hellyya *doing*?” I said.

Nothing! I’m simply sitting here, admiring—

“What’re ya *doing*, anyway?” I said over again. I didn’t know *what* the hell to say—I mean I was embarrassed as hell.

How ’bout keeping your voice down? I’m simply sitting here—

“I have to go, anyway,” I said—boy, was I nervous! I started putting on my damn pants in the dark. I could hardly get them on I was so damn nervous. I know more damn perverts, at schools and all, than anybody you ever met, and they’re always being pervery when I’m around. (Salinger, 1951/1994: 207, underscore added)

While the narrator, Holden, is sleeping on the sofa, he notices Mr. Antolini is sitting next to the sofa. The conversation between the two characters is an excellent example of what MCA calls implicit categorization and its resistance. Sacks argues about the categories ascribed to people that “a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories,” enabling us to derive many expectations from a certain category (Sacks, 1992a: 40). By knowing the category of a person, we can infer the likely course of action the person would take; alternatively, by mentioning some category-incumbent features or category-bound activities, the category of a person can be implied (Stokoe & Benwell, 2006: 67).

In this scene, the narrator describes Mr. Antolini’s action as “sort of petting me or patting me” rather than, say, “putting his hand on my head,” thus doing implicit categorization: by describing his action with vocabularies that have sexual connotations, given the age gap of the two, the narrator implicitly categorizes him as “pederast”.<sup>4</sup> Antolini understands Holden’s implicit categorization, shown in his following

<sup>4</sup> In the following scene, the narrator recalls Antolini’s action as “making a flitty pass at me” (Salinger, 1951/1994: 209f.), using a slang term strictly associated with homosexuality and commonly used until the 1960s in the United States (Dynes, 1990). For the loose connection between homosexuality and ped-



remarks. Interestingly, Antolini resists Holden's categorization (Leudar & Nekvapil, 2000; Robles & Kurylo, 2017; Roth, 1998) not by negating the category or claiming a different category but by refusing Holden's initial description of his action. He tries to downgrade the sexual connotations of the initial description by redescribing his action as "simply sitting here" instead of "petting or patting" and thus resisting the category "pederast". Looking back on the night and the conversation with Antolini, the narrator says in the present tense that "I know more damn perverts," retrospectively categorizing (Stokoe & Attenborough, 2015) Antolini as such.

In terms of the intelligibility of reason relation, it should be noted that the conversation between Holden and Antolini is grounded in the commonsense knowledge of the United States at that time that being a pederast can be a possible reason for an incumbent of the category to "pet or pat" an adolescent boy. Furthermore, the reader and the author of the text also share the background knowledge on the category and category-bounded activity or the action-reason relation, which provides grounds for the reader to make practical inferences on the category, action, and reason of a character.

Thus far, we have analyzed those cases where the characters' actions are explicitly described, whereas their categories are only implied. We move on to a scene where the reader must infer both the categories and the actions of characters from the clues implied in the text. Excerpt 3 is a scene taken from "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" in *Nine Stories*, where a third-person narrator depicts the relationship between the two main characters, Eloise and Mary Jane.

Excerpt 3 "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" in *Nine Stories*

Twenty minutes later, they were finishing their first highball in the living room and were talking in the manner peculiar, probably limited, to former college roommates. They had an even stronger bond between them; neither of them had graduated. Eloise had left college in the middle of her sophomore year, in 1942, a week after she had been caught with a soldier in a closed elevator on the third floor of her residence hall. Mary Jane had left—same year, same class, almost the same month—to marry an aviation cadet stationed in Jacksonville, Florida, a lean, air-minded boy from Dill, Mississippi, who had spent two of the three months Mary Jane had been married to him in jail for stabbing an M.P. (Salinger, 1953/2010: 28–29, underscore added)

It has been implied in their frank way of talking to each other that Eloise and Mary Jane are close friends. This scene explicitly indicates that they are "former college roommates" who have left the college simultaneously. Mary Jane's reason for leaving the school is described as something quite understandable in the context of 1942: She has quit college to "marry an aviation cadet stationed in Jacksonville". On the other hand, Eloise's reason for leaving is implied more subtly. The text specifies only a succession of two events, her leaving in her sophomore year and being

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Footnote 4 (continued)

erasty existent before the 1970s, see Thorstad (1991). Also, for the gay rights movement's endeavor to dissociate homosexuality from pederasty and pedophilia in reaction to the right-wing backlash of the 1970s, see Paternotte (2014).

“caught with a soldier in a closed elevator on the third floor of her residence hall”. Given the use of the explicit time reference “a week after,” the reader can clearly understand the temporal order of these events. Furthermore, the reader would understand the reason relation between the two events: Eloise leaves college *because* she has been caught with a soldier in a closed elevator of her residence hall. The crux of this understanding lies in the method the text deploys in describing the first event, Eloise’s being caught in her residence hall, as will be explicated below.

As a starting point for the explication of the excerpt, let us turn to Sacks’s argument again. In a lecture closely related to the children’s story paper, he notes that “when a character who has some proper grounds for occurring and some proper thing to do, has its cue, then there’s no need to account for how they happened to have come on the scene” (Sacks, 1992a: 183). In Excerpt 3, Eloise is such a character who has reasonable grounds to appear in the scene: It is quite natural for a resident to use the elevator of her residence. On the contrary, “a soldier” has no such proper grounds to be in there. When a character can be categorized as someone who has no grounds to appear in the place, that is, an outsider or an intruder, this can be reasonable grounds for the character to be caught, especially when it is a residence hall for a women’s college.

However, both Eloise and the soldier are caught in this scene, and the passive voice here—“she had been caught with a soldier”—ascribes the event more directly to Eloise than the soldier. The descriptive methods employed here pose a puzzle of incongruity for the reader to solve (Watson, 2009: 14), albeit a subtle one. This puzzle is solved when the reader fills in the sequence of Eloise’s inviting the soldier into the residence hall<sup>5</sup>: This filled-in sequence also provides the reader’s expectation that the relationship between Eloise and the soldier is an intimate one, that they are probably lovers. In this way, the methods employed here to describe the actions and the location of the event pose a puzzle, thus stimulating the reader to fill in the missing sequence of actions and the categorical relationship of the characters. All this enables the reader to understand that Eloise leaves college because she was discovered to have let the soldier into her residence hall.

The reader can find, if they will, such minute blanks as to the reason relations between actions and events in Salinger’s works. When passing by such blanks in the course of reading, the reader supplies what is not in the text, perhaps in an at-a-glance way, and continues without recognizing that they are doing so. However, in what follows, we will focus on two scenes where the absence of the reason for a character’s action is recognizable as such, where the readers have to construct their own interpretations to fill in the absence. Excerpt 4 is from the last scene of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” in *Nine Stories*. This story begins with a telephone

<sup>5</sup> In the latter part of the lecture cited above, Sacks argues how a hot-rodder tells a story about a police encounter and his arrest without explicitly mentioning the reason for the arrest. The sequence of the drag race, which is the reason for the arrest, is only implied in the hot-rodder’s use of technical terms but is “filled in by the hearer” (Sacks, 1992a: 184). In another lecture on “the inference making-machine,” with regard to somewhat similar case of police appearance, Sacks analyzes how the interlocutor, who is remote from the scene, can nonetheless see the storyteller’s account is imperfect and even fabricated (Sacks, 1992a: 114). This method of “seeing lies” would have a crucial bearing when reading a story told by an “unreliable narrator” (Lodge, 1992).

conversation in a resort hotel between Muriel Glass and her mother, who is worried about the abnormal behavior of Muriel's husband, Seymour. As Muriel casually disregards her mother's appeal for the need to see the psychiatrist, the reader cannot decide who is closer to the truth. Meanwhile, Seymour spends his time on the beach telling a little girl the depressing story of bananafish, which overgrew to death due to their unbounded appetite for bananas. After parting with the girl, he returns to the hotel room, where Muriel is asleep, and behaves as below:

Excerpt 4 "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" in *Nine Stories*

He glanced at the girl lying asleep on one of the twin beds. Then he went over to one of the pieces of luggage, opened it, and from under a pile of shorts and undershirts he took out an Ortgies calibre 7.65 automatic. He released the magazine, looked at it, then reinserted it. He cocked the piece. Then he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple. (Salinger, 1953/2010: 26)

This excerpt describes a series of actions of Seymour: taking out a pistol, looking at Muriel, aiming the pistol, and shooting himself. In this scene, the reason for his minute actions, such as "releasing and reinserting the magazine" and "cocking the piece," is given not in the preceding sequence, as in Sacks's child's story, but at the end of the scene where he fires a bullet through his right temple. As J. L. Austin argues, "we can import an indefinitely long stretch of what might also be called the 'consequences' of our act into the act itself is, or should be, a fundamental commonplace of the theory of our language about all 'action' in general" (Austin, 1975: 110).

Also, note that in the course of the last sentence, where Seymour "looked at the girl, aimed the pistol," the reader would be misled that Seymour is about to shoot Muriel, for it is natural for the shooter to look at the target before aiming at it. The real target for Seymour is not given until the last phrase of the sentence, thus creating a sense of suspense,<sup>6</sup> which consists of "delaying the answer" (Lodge, 1992: 14). Given the consequence that Seymour fires a bullet through his right temple, the reader retrospectively understands that Seymour was not just fiddling with the pistol, nor trying to kill Muriel, but carefully and intentionally preparing for suicide (see also Jayyussi, 1993: 431).

However, such retrospective understanding still leaves a vast blank as to why Seymour commits suicide in the first place: While Seymour's shooting himself is clearly shown as an intentional act (as we have just confirmed), the details of his intention are not specified in Salinger's text. Given this, previous literary criticisms of this piece have tried to fill in the blank by stipulating Seymour's madness (Bellman, 1966), his thirst for attention from his significant other (French, 1988), or his despair over both the material world and the mystical life (Galloway, 1981). We take a different tack here: Instead of establishing a "correct" interpretation of the reason for Seymour's suicide, we shed light on the textual methods employed to present

<sup>6</sup> The sense of suspense here would be amplified for the reader, who already knows Seymour's possible mental issue implied in the initial telephone conversation.

a recognizable blank, which provides common grounds for the various literary interpretations.

Jack Douglas (1970) provides an essential step for clarifying the textual methods regarding the blank as to the reason for the suicide. He argues that suicidal phenomena have a fundamental dimension of meaningfulness in that members of a society have their own “adequate” method for interpreting such phenomena. Members consider such items as motives, situations, and intentions to make up an adequate interpretation of a specific suicide. There is a certain standard as to what constitutes adequate motives or situations for suicide—for example, depression or the death of a loved one would pass. Most important when deciding whether certain phenomena can be called suicide is an intention. Douglas argues: “If the observers (or the actor himself) cannot adequately determine whether the individual intended to commit the actions, or intended the consequences of the actions, then the actions are not seen as very ‘meaningful,’ except insofar as categorizing some phenomena as being ‘accidental,’ ‘strange,’ ‘mysterious,’ ‘weird,’ ‘meaningless,’ etc.” (Douglas, 1970: 272). Thus, he reminds us of the conceptual knowledge we have of suicide and its close association with the actor’s intentions, motives, and situations.

Given Douglas’s argument, we can understand the minute method employed in the text of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” which ascribes a clear suicidal intention to Seymour while at the same time leaving blanks about the motives and the situations that have driven him. On one hand, it is clearly shown in the detailed descriptions of his preparations that he has explicit knowledge of the consequence and a suicidal intention. By turning to our conceptual knowledge on the association of suicide and the intention to die (see also Coulter 1979: 12), Salinger’s text accomplishes the action description that “Seymour committed suicide” without using the word.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, it is only vaguely implied in the overall text what motives Seymour has or what situations he has been trapped in. This textual presentation of a recognizably deficient account of Seymour’s suicide, deliberately placing his death on the periphery of our paradigmatic understanding of suicidal phenomena, stimulates the readers to an endless search for the missing reason for his suicide. Different literary interpretations of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” are themselves the products of members’ work to build up a meaningful—and “adequate” in terms of our commonsense standard as to suicide—interpretation of the situation where the character deliberately commits suicide, but the reason for it is recognizably absent.

By analyzing “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” we specified entangled methods fictional text deploys to stimulate the reader to reach a specific understanding of the text. The text presents the character’s action and its consequence, sometimes with suspenseful delay, thereby inducing the reader to understand the action by incorporating its consequence. Also, turning to the commonsense knowledge of social phenomena for which we have a certain standard as to what an adequate explanation

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<sup>7</sup> In other stories of the Glass saga, most notably “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” it is clearly mentioned that Seymour “committed suicide in 1948, while he was on vacation in Florida with his wife” (Salinger, 1963/2018: 5), which might be called an inter-textual action ascription.

is, the text depicts the phenomena in a way deviant from its standard and creates a recognizable blank as to the reason for the character's action.

In the last analysis, we delve into a similar scene, from "Teddy," where the reader encounters a recognizable blank but can barely fill it by deploying a specific norm proper to storytelling, not only the commonsense knowledge we use in other social settings of everyday life. This story centers on a child genius named Teddy, traveling back from Europe with his family in an ocean liner. He claims to have experienced Vedantic reincarnation and be able to foresee when and how people die, including his own death. In a preceding scene, he foretells to another character, Nicholson, his tragic death awaiting him in five minutes, saying, "What might happen, though, I might walk up to the edge of it, just to have a look at the bottom, for instance, and my sister might come up and sort of push me in. I could fracture my skull and die instantaneously". Excerpt 5 describes the following scene where Nicholson finds the consequence of Teddy's foretelling.

Excerpt 5 "Teddy" in *Nine Stories*

At D Deck the forwardship stairway ended, and Nicholson stood for a moment, apparently at some loss for direction. However, he spotted someone who looked able to guide him. Halfway down the passageway, a stewardess was sitting on a chair outside a galleyway, reading a magazine and smoking a cigarette. Nicholson went down to her, consulted her briefly, thanked her, then took a few additional steps forwardship and opened a heavy metal door that read: TO THE POOL. It opened onto a narrow, uncarpeted staircase.

He was little more than halfway down the staircase when he heard an all-piercing, sustained scream clearly coming from a small, female child. It was highly acoustical, as though it were reverberating within four tiled walls. (Salinger, 1953/2010: 301–302, underscore added)

The story has provided no sufficient resources for the reader to judge whether Teddy's reincarnation and precognition are real phenomena of the fictional world, or he is just pretending to have such supernatural power with his extraordinary intelligence. Consequently, what happens in the last scene is rather vague. Furthermore, the vagueness of the scene is amplified by the textual method of ascribing the action and event to the character: As the text only depicts the coming of a scream "from a small, female child," the reader cannot decide whether some atrocity occurs before the eyes of Teddy's sister, or it occurs upon her. Given this, literary critics have presented different interpretations of the last scene: Some interpret it as Teddy being plunged to death by his sister, as he predicted to Nicholson (Prigozy, 1995: 127); others construe it as Teddy killing his sister by shoving her off the pool and thus resisting his fate (Alexander, 1999: 169).

Note, however, that the radical disagreement between interpretations of the last scene is grounded in a shared understanding that death is involved here. This understanding is provided by operating a norm known as "Chekhov's gun," which concerns the foreshadowing of storytelling. This norm derives from Anton Chekhov's advice to a young playwright: "If in Act 1 you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act" (Rayfield, 1997: 203). What Chekhov means through this advice is that elements presented earlier in a story should have some role in

contributing to the storytelling. “Teddy” is full of such fragments of foreshadowing: When leaving his family’s cabin, Teddy says to his mother, “After I go out this door, I may only exist in the minds of all my acquaintances,” comparing himself to an orange peel dumped out of the window into the ocean (Salinger, 1953/2010: 265); when keeping a diary at a deck chair, he writes: “It will either happen today or February 14, 1958 when I am sixteen” (Salinger, 1953/2010: 276–277). Given such foreshadowing and hints of death, the reader can infer that the grave consequence that must involve the passing of some character happens in the last scene while being presented with the radical indeterminacy of action ascription. Just as David Lodge argues about such modern novelists as Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling (Lodge, 1992: 31–33), the delicate balance between the implied clues and the unresolved mystery is attained, leaving a vast space for the reader’s imagination.

## Discussion

Aligning with an ethnomethodological approach to texts and an MCA perspective, this paper has analyzed scenes from Salinger’s fictional works where the reader must fill in the blanks as to the characters’ membership categories, actions, and reasons. In Excerpts 1 and 2, from “The Laughing Man” and *The Catcher in the Rye*, respectively, a first-person narrator describes other characters’ actions using activity terms commonsensically coupled with the categories and thus implicitly categorizing them or implying the reasons for specific actions. Excerpt 3, from “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut,” poses a puzzle of incongruity by mentioning the place (residence hall), the categories of the characters involved (resident and soldier), and the consequence (resident’s withdrawal from college), which can only be solved by the reader’s filling in the implied relationship of the characters and the omitted sequence of their actions. The reader may not consciously find the existence of such blanks in the course of the reading as the reader can supply the relevant categories, actions, and reasons in an at-a-glance way by turning to the commonsense knowledge and social norms regarding the categories presented in the texts.

By contrast, in Excerpts 4 and 5, the blanks as to the reasons for the characters’ deaths are recognizable as such, having provided intriguing targets for the interpretive attempts of literary critics. In “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” an apparent suicidal intention is retrospectively ascribed to Seymour by giving step-by-step details of the preparation for shooting himself. In contrast, his motives and situations are never explicated. Such a descriptive method of presenting a purposefully deficient explanation of a suicidal phenomenon stimulates the reader to perfect the interpretation of the event. Similarly, in “Teddy,” the vagueness of the scene is accomplished by the textual method of the ascription of the event: A sheer blank is presented by omitting the entire sequence of actions. The reader has to turn to a norm specific to storytelling, known as “Chekhov’s gun,” to infer what happens in the story’s conclusion from the pieces of foreshadowing given in earlier parts of the text.

In this way, the reader can understand the unwritten category, action, and reason for the action by deploying commonsense knowledge and social norms sharable among and usable to members of society as well as maxims regarding the

configuration of storytelling: In either sense, the reader's method provides the grounds for the author's method for organizing the story, which reveals itself as intelligible and intriguing in the course of reading. By analyzing specific text/reading pairs of Salinger's prose fiction, this study elucidated the methods for ascribing membership category, action, and reason to the characters in the fictional text.

We conclude this paper by laying out some implications derived from our findings. Above all, our analysis has exemplified that the findings of MCA studies can be appropriated for inquiry into the practice of reading prose fiction. MCA studies have focused on how members explicitly categorize people to accomplish various social actions and their methods of implicit categorization in diverse social settings. Some have analyzed how members give adequate accounts for the discursive practices by explicitly mentioning the categories of the people involved, and others have elucidated the methods of accounting for various actions with seemingly imperfect categorizations and descriptions, which have in fact reasonable intelligibilities in their contexts (Sacks, 1972a, b; Stokoe, 2012; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002, 2009; Housley et al., 2017; Jayyusi, 1993; Eglin & Hester, 1999). Our analysis has shown the practical usability of MCA in clarifying the reader's methods of understanding the unwritten category, action, and reason. This finding endorses Fish's argument that "we know 'real people' no more directly than we know the characters in a novel; that 'real life' objects are no less 'ideated' than fictional objects" (Fish, 1989: 80) by addressing the commonality of commonsense resources and methods members deploy to understand real people and fictional characters (see also Okazawa & Kawamura, 2022).

Moreover, our analysis of the reader's methods of supplying what is not in the text specifies the author's norms and methods regarding the organization of stories in prose fiction. As we have shown in the analysis, the reader fills in the unwritten category, action, and reason in prose fiction by deploying myriads of methods: Supplying the omitted categories commonsensically coupled with the action descriptions of characters, inferring the missing category and sequence implied by the descriptions of event and place, and so on. What is important here is that the author also expects these various aspects of reading's work when creating the story, as is shown in Ernest Hemingway's advice to young writers: "If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. (...) The test of any story is how very good the stuff is that you, not your editors, omit" (Hemingway, 1959/1990). Our analysis clarifies how Hemingway's advice makes sense: The author can leave out important things if they are well known, for the author can rely upon the reader's competence to deploy various methods to supply what is not written in the story.

This point invites us to delve into the similarities and differences between storytelling in fictional texts and conversation. In contrast to merely reporting the ordinariness of what happened, Sacks argues in his lectures on "doing being ordinary" and story organization that storytelling in conversation involves a unique work of presenting it as a recognizable story (Sacks, 1992b: 216, 232). According to Sacks, the storyteller sometimes accomplishes this work using a special technique of constructing course-of-action parts, which is quite similar to the one we specified in our analysis of the excerpt from "A Perfect Day for Bananafish". To fully understand the



story, the hearer has to keep in mind what is said earlier and make sense of the connectedness in the sequence. An act of storytelling, either in conversation or fictional texts, is accomplished by relying on the recipient's competence in sense-making.

Obviously, "Chekhov's gun" is another example of the storyteller's techniques grounded in the recipient's competence. The teller can place a foreshadowing clue at the beginning, knowing that the recipient will configure their interpretations based on the relatedness of the clue and the ensuing story. It must be noted, however, that Sacks argues about this technique's different roles in fiction and conversation.<sup>8</sup> In conversation, an item or a character mentioned at the beginning is sure to turn up, whereby the "economy" of the story is retained by assigning some roles in storytelling to those elements. By contrast, Sacks reminds us that such economy of storytelling is not always sustained in fiction, where some events "occur that have nothing to do with anything except that they occur" (Sacks, 1992b: 239). Sacks mentions absurdist fiction as an exemplar of such de-economizing storytelling, but this technique is used in broader fiction genres.<sup>9</sup>

This argument fully resonates with our analyses of "A Perfect Day for Banana-fish" and "Teddy". In both stories, collapse, rupture, or death is hinted at from the beginning; however, the answers to questions such as "Whose death is involved?" or "Why do they kill themselves?" are delayed or left entirely unanswered, thus creating suspense or mystery for the reader of the fiction to indulge in (Lodge, 1992), who is remote from the teller and discharged from attending to the conversational aspect of the storytelling.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, we have respecified the source of "the pleasure of the text," which is peculiar to the act of reading fiction (Barthes, 1975). This finding also demonstrates a direction for future research that respecifies the operations of other norms, techniques, and devices for the organization of fictional texts, such as "the unreliable narrator," "time-shift," and "intertextuality" (Lodge, 1992; Barthes, 1975), by analyzing the practice of reading fiction.

Ethnomethodological and MCA studies have investigated myriads of categorization practices in their practical contexts. This study has focused on the work of reading prose fiction and analyzed the reader's methods grounded in the categorical knowledge of everyday life and specific norms proper to storytelling, thereby respecifying the intelligibility of the author's norms and techniques, some of which are peculiar to the configuration of fictional texts. In this sense, this study has elucidated how the practice of reading and writing prose fiction is accomplished in conjunction with members' knowledge and norms, thereby moving forward the empirical frontier of ethnomethodological and MCA studies.

<sup>8</sup> Although Sacks does not explicitly mention Chekhov, he must be referring to Chekhov's gun when he says, "when the curtain rises, there's a gun on the mantelpiece, you can be sure the gun will go off before the end of the play" (Sacks, 1992b: 238–239).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Hemingway also argues that a character appearing in the first paragraph can go out of the story "just as in life," thus enhancing a sense of realism (Hemingway, 1959/1990).

<sup>10</sup> Sacks argues that a conversationalist can embed their story, for example, in the information request format, which imposes "some sorts of job" on the hearer, e.g., satisfying the request or announcing that they have no information (Sacks, 1992b: 229). The reader of the fictional text is free from this kind of burden.

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## Declarations

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