Reading material for our course.
This material consists of four chapters from the coming book:

Doing interview-based qualitative research: a learner’s guide
Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek

The chapters are:
Chapter 8: Finding meanings in people’s talk
Chapter 9: Analyzing stories in interviews
Chapter 10: Analyzing talk as action
Chapter 11: Analyzing for implicit cultural meanings
Chapter 8
Finding meanings in people’s talk

In semi-structured interviews, participants talk about various topics, stories, and reflections that are pertinent to the researchable questions that a researcher has formulated. Such interviews yield a substantial amount of loosely structured material, much of which pertains in some way or another to the researchable questions. In this chapter, we take up analyses that address questions such as: What sense do people make in regard to the phenomenon that you are studying? What are the experiences that shape those meanings? These questions flow directly from the general theoretical framework of this book. The analyses we describe are based in a view of people as actively engaged in making meaning of the events in their lives and as located in social contexts that may set narrower or wider frames for personal meaning-making. A number of specific approaches within the general theoretical framework draw on the types of analyses we describe here.

The analyses that you will learn in this chapter enable you to examine the patterns of shared meanings and variations that typified the group of people whom you interviewed. You could say that these analyses concerns the “what” (or rather the “whats”) of people’s talk. In other words, what reflections, points of view, experiences, and emotions do people typically bring forward to give meaning to their experiences? Larry Davidson, for example, whose work you read about in Chapter 2, studied the ways that people with severe mental illnesses understood their experiences of frequent re-hospitalization. Sometimes meanings are explicit and directly stated. In such cases, they are fairly easy to identify. But often people also make meaning in less explicit ways. You may therefore have to attend to oblique references, to the use of “loaded” words or phrases, and perhaps to asides. You may also need to consider what goes unspoken – that is, what is simply not part of the local talk about an issue. This chapter explains analytical procedures for getting at people’s meanings. The procedures involve interpretation; that is, they go beyond a mechanical search for specific words. They require you to exercise your judgment about the meaning of what participants say. They also require you to draw on your expertise regarding the cultural background of your participants.

We begin at the point when you have completed transcribing your interviews. We work through systematic procedures for identifying shared meanings (which we call “repeating ideas”) and end with a discussion of how to synthesize the shared meanings. As with every systematic analysis of rich talk, the analysis begins with narrowing your focus of attention. There are two steps to do this. The first involves formulating a set of sub-questions that amplify and specify your researchable questions. The second step involves selecting the portions of the interview material that pertain to each of the sub-questions. This process of narrowing your focus enables you to do systematic and close analyses of the interview material. We now turn to these two steps.

Formulating sub-questions for analysis

The researchable questions that a researcher formulates at the beginning of a project are usually quite broad. You saw some examples of researchable questions in Chapter 2. To move forward with your analysis, you have to “unpack” such broad questions. In other words, you need to compile a set of specific sub-questions that can shed light on the researchable questions. Having a set of sub-questions will enable you to work systematically with the interview transcripts.
Together, they provide a plan for the analysis. In what follows, we describe three things to do while you are devising sub-questions.

One is that you should review the notes you made in your research journal. Reading these notes may yield ideas about possible sub-questions to explore. The second is that you should review the interview guide. When you designed the interview guide, you composed interview items that would help participants to talk about experiences, issues, and ideas that were germane to your researchable questions. You are likely to find that some of the items can be used directly as sub-questions to organize the analysis. Other items may point you to formulating sub-questions. The third thing to do is to read and re-read the interview material. You need to read with an eye to the portions of that material that are relevant to your researchable questions. In the process of reading, you will begin to see that the relevant material is relevant in different ways to a researchable question and to different aspects of it. As you come to recognize these differences, you will see possible sub-questions and issues to explore in the entire corpus of interview material. Furthermore, as you re-read the interviews, you are likely to see that some of the participants expressed perspectives, experiences, and ways of thinking that you did not foresee. These passages can point the way to additional sub-questions. What you learn from the interview material may also lead you to rethink your researchable questions: you might revise a question or add a new question.

We give two examples below. The first one is from a project carried out by Karin Sannetorp (2012). Reading the interview material led Karin to formulate an additional sub-question for analysis. The second example is taken from a project carried out by Matthew Oransky. Matt’s reading of the interview material led him to expand the focus of his original knowledge interest and thence to develop an additional researchable question.

Karin’s project

Karin’s general knowledge interest was how non-heterosexual persons (specifically, gay men and lesbians) in Sweden experienced being “out” or closeted in their workplaces. One of the researchable questions that Karin had formulated was:

*In what situations and settings and in what ways is non-heterosexuality made salient in the workplace?*

Using the procedures that we outlined above, Karin devised sub-questions and issues that were pertinent to this researchable question. Initially she identified four sub-questions, which she named as follows. Incidentally, you may note that some of these sub-questions are not literally questions, but rather issues and areas to investigate. This is very common.

*Should non-heterosexuals see themselves as an information resource in the workplace?*
*Heterosexual people’s ignorance*
*The disappearance of homo-jokes*
*Negative encounters*

As Karin contemplated the interview material in its totality, she realized that many of the participants spoke at length about aspects of their appearance (such as their style of clothing, their hairstyles, and their body build and gait). They described how others repeatedly “read” (or failed to read) these aspects as gay or lesbian or straight. The matter of appearance and dress styles had not been included in any of Karin’s original researchable questions. Nor was it something that she had queried participants about in her interviews. However, participants’ talk about these matters was certainly relevant to her general interest in being out or being closeted at work. Moreover, these matters were frequent topics of conversation in the interviews. Therefore, Karin added “*Clothing and appearance*” to her list of sub-questions. If you see, as Karin did, that
many of your participants spoke about a new topic, and if that topic it is relevant to your researchable question, you should add it to your list of sub-questions.

Matt's project

Matt’s general knowledge interest concerned middle-class American boys in early adolescence and their ideas and practices of masculinity. In this project, Matt initially had two researchable questions:

What are boys’ ideas about proper masculinity?
What are boys’ ideas about and experiences of caring, emotional support, and intimacy in close friendships with other boys?

Matt’s initial list of sub-questions and issues contained the following:

When can boys disclose hurt feelings and vulnerabilities to other boys?
Activities and practices in boy-boy friendships and male peer groups
How do boys respond to a (male) friend’s distress?
What are boys’ ideas about “manly” self-presentation?
The continual presence of homophobic and sexist insults in boys’ interactions

As Matt read the transcripts, he saw that many boys described themselves as habitually engaged in “mocking,” “teasing,” and “making fun” of others, and some described “pushing around,” “shoving,” and “picking on” boys who seemed weak and vulnerable. The boys said that the intention behind such actions was “toughening up” a boy who was “weak” or preventing a boy from “breaking down,” crying in public, or otherwise “going down the tubes.” This unexpected aspect of boys’ emotional lives was certainly germane to Matt’s general knowledge interest, though it was not incorporated in any of his researchable questions. Therefore he formulated an additional researchable question: What is entailed in the mutual upkeep of masculinity?

As with Matt and Karin, you may sometimes find that the participants introduce a new perspective regarding your general knowledge interest. This is neither uncommon nor surprising. When you listen closely to people’s talk about their experiences, you inevitably encounter stories about a topic and ways of thinking that you did not expect. As a meaning-centered researcher, you seek to capture how your participants make sense of a phenomenon. Therefore, you need to be open to – and take note of – all the meanings in the interviews that are relevant to your knowledge interest. If the participants’ accounts veer in directions that you had not foreseen, you should adjust the researchable questions or the sub-questions to accommodate those accounts.

How many sub-questions should you formulate? There is no single correct number. Karin initially identified four sub-questions. She added one as she gained familiarity with the interview material, giving her a total of five. Matt had four sub-questions to his first researchable question and added others. As you will see below, carrying out the analysis of each sub-question adequately requires a considerable amount of work. Therefore, more than eight sub-questions is likely to be unworkable.

Selecting excerpts and assembling a file for each sub-question

The next step is to prepare the interview material for analysis. You need to reduce the material to a manageable amount by selecting the portions of each interview that pertain to each sub-question. Taking the sub-questions one at a time, you re-read the interviews in order to pick out the segments that pertain to each sub-question. You should excerpt these segments and place
them into files, with a separate file for each sub-question. These files will be called the sub-question files. To assemble sub-question files, consider each sub-question in turn, and create a separate word processor file for each. To compile a sub-question file, you read each interview with that sub-question in mind. Copy every segment that seems relevant to the sub-question and paste into the file. A segment of an interview may seem relevant to more than one sub-question. If so, you should copy it into every sub-question file for which it is relevant. Note as well that a substantial part of an interview may not be relevant to any of the sub-questions and therefore will not be entered in any of the sub-question files. You should continue to work on the sub-question files until you have completed the entire set.

**How much material should be included in an excerpt?**

An excerpt cannot be just a single word; most will be longer than a single sentence. The excerpted material should be ample enough to retain important parts of the context within which it was spoken. That is, it should give a sense of what was going on in the interview interaction and how the participant understood the topic that was being discussed. Most often the excerpt should include the interviewer's question or comment immediately prior to the segment of the participant's talk. This additional material will help you to make an accurate judgment about the meaning that the participant intended. You also need to include information that identifies whose interview the excerpt was drawn from and the location in the interview from which it was drawn. In the examples below, this identifying information is in the lower righthand corner.

**Examples of excerpts**

**Example 1:**

*Karin:* How do you usually tell someone that you are a lesbian?

*Lisa:* “It isn’t that I introduce myself and then tell them what my sexual orientation is, it’s more that you have a conversation, just this everyday thing, like ‘My girlfriend Linnea and I are going away to do this or that.’ It sort of comes naturally.”

[Lisa, pg. 8, lines 9-13]

**Example 2:**

*Matt:* Can you think of the type of thing that someone might do to get called a fag?

*Brian:* “Actually, personality has a lot to do with it. And interest, like if you have a particular – I don’t know – athletic sport – or you swim – that’s one that people get called fag for. It normally has to do with just personal preferences of activity [.] swimming, um, let’s see – tennis. For some kids, it’s not – If you’re good in any sport, almost never. But then there’s also, umm, it depends on some [.] um, certain types of [.] like photography. Kids who are in photography class. What else? Art. Drama is another one. You know, if you are really into drama. There was a kid last year named Martin who [.] was an amazing composer – like a really natural genius on the piano and people made fun of him, called him a fag.”

[Brian, page 6, lines 20-28]

**Deciding if an interview segment is relevant to a sub-question**

Selecting pieces of talk for the sub-question files requires interpretation. It is not a matter of mechanically searching for particular words or phrases. When you decide to select a piece of talk for a particular sub-question file, you make a judgment about whether or not the meaning of what was said pertains in some way to the sub-question. How much interpretation is involved in that judgment varies. In some instances, the talk bears explicitly on the sub-question and hence requires little interpretative effort to connect it to the sub-question. In other instances, the connection may be indirect and therefore it may be more difficult to decide whether or not the piece of talk is relevant to the sub-question.
Let us first consider instances in which it is easy to judge whether or not a piece of talk is relevant to a sub-question. One such instance is the situation in which the interviewer’s question is directly related to the sub-question and the participant gives a direct reply to the interviewer’s question. Consider this example from Karin’s research:

Karin: Can you give me an example of a time at work when you were made especially conscious of your sexual orientation?
Lisa: [after saying that IVF is a frequent topic of conversation over coffee in her workplace.] “Because of the IVF debate [“The IVF debate” refers to the public debate about lesbians’ rights to assisted fertilization, which was ongoing at the time] and all the problems that can arise for men and women, this has been a theme in many conversations. And then, of course, I am always the answer book [laughs]. [a short piece of talk left out] And I have a colleague who came to me and said that she had thought a lot about me now that that question had been brought to her notice. So she came to me because I am homosexual, and she had questions about it. [a short piece of talk left out] And she thinks it’s unfair and was upset, though I wasn’t. [a short piece of talk left out] Then I explained how I think about it.”

This excerpt is clearly pertinent to the sub-question Should non-heterosexuals see themselves as an information resource in the workplace? Similarly, it is easy to judge that a spontaneous statement (that is, one that is not a direct response to a question about a topic) pertains to a sub-question if the participant uses words that are explicitly related to the sub-question. The following example from Karin’s study is such an instance. Per, a gay man, commented as follows:

Per: “I think there are many heterosexuals who do not realize that as a gay man, one always has to think about – for instance, if you are traveling as a couple – where you travel to. You can’t travel to just any country. But you have to sort of check which hotels you can stay in and such things, so that you can stay there without being harassed. That there are those things that you have to check on all the time. And they probably don’t think about that, because, I mean – why should they?”

Per’s comment is directly pertinent to the sub-question Heterosexual people’s ignorance. In many instances, however, it may require more judgment (that is, interpretation) to see the connection between a piece of talk in an interview and a sub-question. Participants often say things that are relevant to a sub-question without using any of the expressions or terms that the researcher uses or expects. In some cases, participants may say something that is obliquely or tangentially related to the sub-question even though they are speaking about a different topic. The relevance of the talk to the sub-question may not be apparent on the first reading. It may become apparent only after reading further in the interview. Indeed, its relevance may become apparent to you only as you read other interviews and encounter similar examples. For example, one of the boys whom Matt interviewed gave this description in response to Matt’s question “What are the kinds of things you and your friends talk about?”

George: “Um, we talk about either how, like, fat our [female] teachers are or how, like, stupid they were in class today. ‘Oh, I don’t want to go to English class today because all they do is moan about, like, Native Americans, not, like yeah, whatever.’ And then, we either talk about stuff like that or we talk, like, uh, in a way that, like, will be accepted. We translate ‘How was your day?’ [said in a sing-song voice] to, like, ‘Oh yeah, how was your day with your English teacher?’ [said in a sneering, sarcastic tone of voice] or something like that. We always complain about how stupid the daily community meeting was.”

Although George was answering Matt’s question about what he and his friends talked about, George’s answer also introduced many other ideas. He placed himself and his male friends in
clear opposition to girls and women. His choice of words gratuitously disparaged women and girls ("fat", "stupid", "moan about", his singsong imitation). Further, George took pains to
distance himself from (and make fun of) women’s concerns for social justice, for everyday
courtesy, and for community building – practices that he identifies as feminine. So Matt included
this excerpt in two sub-question files:

Activities and practices in male friendships and peer groups
and

What are boys’ ideas about “manly” self-presentation?

We close with some general guidelines for selecting excerpts for the sub-question files. First
and most important, you should not select excerpts for the sub-question files on the basis of
haphazard hunches or vague feelings. The interpretations you make are not matters of intuition.
They are judgments that are grounded in your knowledge of the sub-questions, the theoretical
background you have accumulated through your reading of the research literature, and the
practical knowledge you have gained through carrying out interviews and through your close
reading of them.

Second, if you are in doubt about whether a piece of talk is relevant to a sub-question, you
should include it in the sub-question file. In other words, it is better to err on the side of over-
incusion when you are entering excerpts into files. If an excerpt does not actually pertain to the
sub-question, this will become apparent in the later phases of the analysis and you can set it
aside. If you omit it, however, it is likely that it will be overlooked.

Third, double-check your work! After you have read through all the interviews, you will have
a sharper eye for relevant material than you had when you began. In particular, you will have a
greater appreciation of the variety of ways people talk about a sub-question. Therefore, when
you have finished your first reading and excerpting, you should read the interviews again, this
time to pick up material that you might have missed. In this second reading, it is likely that you
will add more excerpts to your files.

Annotating the excerpts

At this stage, you have a set of sub-question files, each containing a number of excerpts from the
interviews. The next task is to write brief notes about each excerpt. You can write the notes
either in the margin next to the excerpt or just below the excerpt. These notes serve as thumbnail
sketches of the contents of excerpts, which will enable you to do a rough sorting of the excerpts
into clusters of repeating ideas.

To compose the notes, you should work with one sub-question file at a time. Begin by
reading the whole file from beginning to end, all the while thinking about the meanings of what
you are reading. This reading will give you a first impression of the variety of meanings in the
interviews and perhaps a sense of which meanings occur frequently. Write your impressions and
reflections in your research journal. At this point your ideas can be speculative. It is useful to
check them against the literature, which may contain additional ideas. After this preparation, you
are ready to make notes about the excerpts.

In the excerpting phase, the task was to decide whether or not a piece of talk had anything
to do with a sub-question. When composing the notes for each excerpt, the task is to judge how
that piece of talk relates to the sub-question. The notes are succinct records of these judgments.
There is nothing mysterious about make such judgments; people make similar judgments (that is, interpretations) repeatedly in daily life. People often judge in what way something is relevant to
something else.

Each note should describe in brief how the excerpt relates to the sub-question. You may
have several things to note. You might briefly describe the substance of the excerpt or comment
on how the material in the excerpt relates to the sub-question. You might also jot down a telling
turn of phrase or word. There are no hard and fast rules about what to say. The more thoroughly
you have thought about your researchable questions as you were developing the sub-questions,
the easier it will be to decide what to note about an excerpt. The notes you make are meant for
your eyes only and therefore you can use any shorthand and abbreviations that are efficient.
Below, we give several examples of notes about excerpts.

Examples of notes about excerpts

The first two excerpts are taken from Eva’s study of Nordic heterosexual couples sharing housework and childcare, which you read about in Chapter 2. The researchable question was How do couples go about distributing housework between themselves?

Excerpt 1: The excerpt relates to the sub-question of how the couples think their distribution works.
Interviewer: Do you think that your distribution of housework works well as it is now?
Malin: “Yes, I think it works.”
Mattias: “Yes, it works. It would be sort of difficult to do it in a different way, too.”
Malin: “Yes, if you have to begin shopping and cooking, we may get dinner at six, perhaps. Then they [the children] – they would have to go to their activities without food – it’s the most practical to do it this way, yes.”

Notes to excerpt 1:
(i) they say that their distribution works well
(ii) they say that it would be impossible to change it
(iii) they say that it is the most practical distribution; thus a compromise

Excerpt 2: The excerpt relates to the sub-question of whether the partners have similar or different standards of cleanliness.
Interviewer: If you compare your situation with that of your female friends and their husbands...
Malin: “There are sort of friends who have had less luck and more luck, perhaps. I don’t know. Of course one could sometimes wish that one got a little more help at home, and things like that, but it’s – because Mattias works so much more, it has to be this way. And because I – my threshold is lower than his for what needs to be done [in the household] and such things – so I guess I have myself to blame if I think I get too little help.”

Notes to excerpt 2:
(i) she wants to get him to “help” her more [presumably meaning it is her household]
(ii) she has “a lower threshold” for when cleaning is needed than he has.
(iii) it’s her own fault if he helps her too little in the household.
(iv) demands of the husband’s work means that it must be this way

Excerpt 3: This is the excerpt from Karin’s study of being out in the workplace that we discussed above. The excerpt relates to the sub-question “Should non-heterosexuals see themselves as an information resource in the workplace?”
Interviewer: Can you give me an example of a time at work when you were made especially conscious of your sexual orientation?
Lisa: “Because of the IVF debate and all the problems that can arise for men and women, this has been a theme in many conversations. And then, of course, I am always the answer book [laughs]. [a short piece of talk left out] And I have a colleague who came to me and said that she had thought a lot about me now that that question had been brought to her notice. So she came to me because I am homosexual, and had questions about it. [a short piece of talk left out] And she thinks it’s unfair and was upset though I wasn’t. [a short piece of talk left out] Then I explained how I think about it.”

Notes to excerpt 3:
(i) This excerpt relates to recent legal changes in Sweden that were much debated at the time
(ii) Lisa has become the “homosexuality expert” in her workplace. Is she happy about this or not?
(iii) Lisa gives an instance of educating her colleagues about lesbians’ experiences

Excerpt 4: This is the excerpt from Matt’s study of boys’ everyday practices of masculinity. The notes pertain to the sub-question What are boys’ requirements for “manly” self-presentations?
Interviewer: What kinds of things do you and your friends talk about?


George: “Um, we talk about either how, like, fat our [female] teachers are or how, like, stupid they were in class today. ‘Oh, I don’t want to go to English class today because all they do is moan about, like, Native Americans, not, like yeah, whatever.’ And then, we either talk about stuff like that or we talk, like, uh, in a way that, like, will be accepted. We translate ‘How was your day?’ [said in a singsong voice] to, like, ‘Oh yeah, how was your day with your English teacher?’ [said in a negative, sarcastic tone of voice] or something like that. We always complain about how stupid [the daily community meeting] was.”

Notes to excerpt 4:

i) boys’ talk among themselves is chronically sarcastic, hostile, and hypercritical

ii) the actions of girls and women are targeted for complaint, criticism, and mockery in boys’ talk

iii) “translating” ordinary talk to trash-talk is something that a boy must do to be “accepted” by other boys.

As you can see from these examples, notes can capture several types of information. Some notes are summaries of what participants say. Some notes record a condensed version of a story about the participant’s experience. (E.g., note iii about Lisa’s statement). A note might also record what the participant gives as a cause or a reason for his or her action or for someone else’s action. (E.g., note iii for Excerpt 4, regarding George’s statement about “translating” ordinary talk in order to be “accepted”). A note might also point to what strikes you as a revealing word choice or phrase. For example, note i for Excerpt 2 flags Malin’s use of the word “help” to describe her husband’s contribution to housework. That note also includes the researcher’s tentative inference about this choice of words.

You need not worry about making too many notes about an excerpt. When you search across the excerpts for similarities, the more notes you have made about each excerpt, the more likely you are to spot common elements.

As you work through a file of excerpts, you will probably notice that some elements (whether points of view, arguments, causal statements, word choices, or implications) occur many times. For example, Matt found that quite a few boys said that hostile talk, crude language, and a tough demeanor were ways of acting that garnered acceptance by other boys. Similarly, Eva found several instances in which the language that a couple used clearly implied that the responsibility for household work belonged to the wife.

You should take careful note of such similarities. Use the same terms or phrases every time you make note of them.

Note that your goal is to identify similar ideas in the set of excerpts. The goal is NOT to “divide up” all the material in the excerpts into clumps. The goal is to collect the portions of the interviews that are relevant to your sub-questions. You should expect that a good portion of an interview will not be relevant to any sub-question and therefore not excerpted.

Composing notes is easier if you are familiar with what other researchers have reported. Reviewing earlier work may provide you with some preliminary ideas about what is important in the interviews. Reading the literature may also provide you with some terms and expressions for your notes. However, using the work of other researchers for inspiration is only a first step. Do not stop there! If you did, it is likely that you would merely be reiterating what is already known. Furthermore, you would almost certainly overlook important, and perhaps unexpected, aspects of your participants’ meanings. You should be open to, and take note of, all meanings that your participants expressed, not just the meanings that have already been described by other researchers.

Being open to the unexpected is not easy. When participants have said something that is outside your frame of reference, you are in fact at a loss for words, that is, the terms, and categories needed to grasp the meaning of what was said. The participant has used a frame of reference different from yours, and another set of words. Your task is to apprehend the participant’s frame of reference. To accomplish this, you must try to understand what your participants said without relying on terms that are familiar to you.
In urging you to be open to the unexpected, we do not imply that it is possible to approach a piece of talk in a way that is completely free of your own ideas, experiences, and social location. Such a “view from nowhere” is impossible to attain. Nonetheless, in our view researchers can become somewhat aware of the preconceptions that constrain their understanding. Such awareness may enable them to sidestep those preconceptions, and by doing so become open to alternative meanings.

How might you be able to sidestep your preconceptions? You could begin by making notes about “odd” sentences or “out of place” expressions in an excerpt. Noticing, and then making a note about what you noticed, may be what is needed for an un-describable piece of talk to become describable. The note could say something like “This piece of talk doesn't fit with the rest of what is said.” Then you can think carefully about what it is that does not fit. Perhaps you will find that it is the substance of what is said that does not fit. Or perhaps you will find that the speaker’s angle of vision is very different from yours. You can then try to describe what it is that seems to make the excerpt relevant to the subquestion or issue. Another possibility is simply to make a note that quotes or paraphrases the participant’s words. Then you can think carefully about what the participant might have been using those words to mean at that point in the interview. As you continue to work through the excerpts, your growing familiarity may make apparently mystifying statements intelligible to you.

Finding repeating ideas and composing integrative summaries and labels

When your notes for all the sub-question files are complete, you are ready to look for the commonalities among the excerpts. This involves systematically comparing the excerpts in each sub-question file in order to make groups of those that are similar.

To begin with, you make a rough set of groups, using the notes you have just written. The notes serve as an index of the excerpted material. Like an index, the totality of the notes comprises a type of description of what you have decided that the excerpts tell about the sub-questions. However, as you can imagine, a statement in this form is difficult to comprehend. The statement needs to be condensed into a summary that can be readily understood. To create such a summary, you need to search through the notes for repeating ideas (that is, ideas that are similar) among the excerpts in a sub-question file. This involves systematically comparing the notes to one another. As you begin to find notes that are similar, you should copy the notes and the excerpts that they belong to into the same file, the repeating ideas file. There will be some excerpts that do not go into any repeating ideas file. Set them aside.

When you have two or three excerpts in a file, write a brief integrative summary that captures the repeating idea that unifies those excerpts. We give some examples below. Writing this summary gives you a record of your thinking, but that is not all this writing does. It also compels you to clarify your thoughts. As you continue to add more excerpts to the file of repeating ideas, you will need to revise the integrative summary.

Once you have read through the notes for all the sub-question files, sorted the excerpts into the repeating ideas files, and written integrative descriptions for the files, you are ready for the second step: verifying your work. This requires that you turn from your notes to the full excerpts. Read each excerpt against the integrative summary with two questions in mind: Does this piece of talk truly fit into the file in which I thought it did? and Does the integrative summary adequately capture the meaning of this excerpt? You are likely to find some instances in which the answer to one or both of these questions is “No.” The most common reason for this is that your note did not capture the full or exact meaning of the excerpt. When you scrutinize the excerpt in full, you will be able to see what adjustments you need to make. We next describe some of these adjustments.

One possibility is that on close reading and with hindsight, you see that an excerpt does not belong in the file in which you had placed it. In this case, you simply need to remove it. Another possibility is that an excerpt differs from the other excerpts in the file but contains an idea or
meaning that you see as important to the repeating idea. If you want to keep it in the file, you need to devise a more complex integrative summary, one that captures the heterogeneity you now are able to see. A third possibility is that upon reading the full set of excerpts in a file, you see many “misfits.” In that case you probably need to subdivide the file. How do you decide whether to expand and re-formulate the integrative summary or to split the file into two smaller files? The decision to expand or split the file rests on your judgment as to whether the distinction you identified in the excerpt file sheds light on your researchable question.

You should also decide upon a tentative descriptive label for the repeating ideas file. This label (which is often called a theme) should point to what unifies the excerpts in the file. The descriptive labels will come into use later when you start to synthesize the pieces of analysis. The labels ought to be full statements or short sentences; a single word or phrase is rarely sufficiently informative.

Below, we provide several examples of collections of excerpts that speak to a repeating idea, along with integrative summaries of the excerpts and tentative labels.

**Example 1:**
Karin’s research concerned being “out” or closeted as a non-heterosexual person in the workplace. One of Karin’s sub-questions was “What is it like to come out in the workplace?” As she read the notes for the excerpts in the sub-question file, she sorted four of the excerpts into a repeating ideas file:

*Excerpt 1:* “It [coming out] becomes pretty natural – such that they ask what you do and, yes, who you live with.”

*Excerpt 2:* “It isn’t that I introduce myself and then tell them what my sexual orientation is, it’s more that you have a conversation, just this everyday thing, like ‘My girlfriend Linnea and I are going away to do this or that.’ It sort of comes naturally.”

*Excerpt 3:* “I guess it was usually the case that I talked about him [his partner] in some way: ‘Peter and I are going away for the weekend’.”

*Excerpt 4:* “You get into it in a pretty natural way. If you’re in a relationship, and especially if you live with someone, then in everyday conversations...”

*Integrative summary:* For many of the participants, coming out to their workplace colleagues was most readily accomplished as part of a conversation in which they could “naturally” insert the information that they were in a steady relationship with a partner of the same sex.

*Descriptive label:* Mentioning your partner in everyday conversation is a natural way to reveal that you are gay or lesbian.

**Example 2:**
One of the researchable questions in Eva’s study about heterosexual couples (which you read about in Chapter 2) concerned how wives and husbands shared housework and childcare. The following excerpts show some participants’ talk about the way they decided upon the distribution of family responsibilities.

*Excerpt 1:*
Interviewer: *What is it that makes Bengt a good person to live with and have a family with?*
Britta: [* .. *]
Interviewer: *Yes, these are difficult questions.*
Britta: “Well, but it is as I say, that I think we complement each other. We sort of flow so well one into the other that [...] Bengt is good at being with the kids at their sports activities but I take care of the rest. And also he has been very tolerant about my working hours and such things. You know, it’s me who has been trying to get us to have as few childcare hours as possible. So, really, I just have to ask him. He has never objected. He is docile, you could say. [...] We never have any conflicts, as a matter of fact.”

Excerpt 2:
Interviewer: If you compare your situation with that of your female friends and their husbands...
Malin: There are, sort of, friends who have had less luck and more luck, perhaps. I don’t know. Of course one could sometimes wish that one got a little more help at home, and things like that, but it’s – because Mattias works so much more it has to be this way.

Excerpt 3:
Malin: And because I [...] my threshold is lower than his for what needs to be done [in the household] and such things [...] so I guess I have myself to blame if I think I get too little help.

Integrative summary: The words these women use to characterize their husband’s contribution to household work imply that housework and childcare are the wife’s responsibility. In these wives’ eyes, their husband’s contribution seems to be a matter of his choosing. Further, the women imply that there is no current negotiation about tasks. And if a woman’s standards of cleanliness are higher than her husband’s, the extra work falls on her.

Descriptive label: Housework and childcare are the wife’s responsibility and the husband’s contributions are contingent on the demands of his workplace or his desires.

Example 3:
Matt’s researchable question centered on boys’ friendships and on how boys’ practices of masculinity shaped their relationships with one another. One of his sub-questions concerned boys’ disclosure of hurt feelings and vulnerabilities to other boys. In the interviews, Matt asked boys directly what they had said (or would say) to a friend who was upset or who was facing a problem. Some of the responses to this question were as follows.

Excerpt 1: “Well, I wouldn’t really put my hand on his shoulder and say ‘It’s all right.’ I would just say, like, ‘C’mon let’s go eat a pizza or something’ or ‘C’mon, let’s go play a video game.’ And I always let him choose what he wants to do.”

Excerpt 2: “[I would say] ‘Why would you cry about that?’ You know, ‘It’s no big deal!’”

Excerpt 3: “Basically, I haven’t had anybody come to me with something REALLY wrong. They just have a problem and then we end up just joking about it or something. And it seems like they just forget about it or something like that.”

Excerpt 4: “Um, you know, like, ‘Just get over it.’ Like, ‘It’s over with.’ Like, ‘Just take it like a man.’ ‘Move on’.”

Integrative summary: Boys often reported downplaying or minimizing a (male) friend’s problems. This could be done directly. It could also be done indirectly by joking about a problem or making light of a friend’s fears or distracting an upset friend with pizza or a video game. Urging a boy to “take it like a man,” or “suck it up” implies that the manly way to deal with difficulties is to ignore the problems and not allow distress to be visible.
Descriptive label: “Just take it like a man:” Boys urge one another to disregard distressing problems and events.

Things to keep in mind while you select excerpts and make summaries

1. Focus on repeating ideas that are analytically useful. As you read through the interviews, you may see many repeating ideas in the interview material. Which are the ones that are important? A first principle is to keep the sub-question and the researchable question in mind. Does a particular repeating idea tell you something about the sub-question? Does it shed light on the researchable question? If it does not, then you should set it aside, at least provisionally.

2. Keep the participants’ talk at the center of attention. In interpretative research, the goal is to learn about the ways that the participants make sense of the phenomenon you are studying. The purpose of identifying repeating ideas is to capture the shared ways that participants see the world. The integrative summaries and labels should describe the meanings that the participants’ spoken accounts share. The summaries and labels should not put forward your guesses about unconscious motives or other causes of participants’ talk.

   An example of what to avoid might clarify this point. It comes from a project about the experiences of women in clandestine relationships with married men. Instead of identifying the repeating ideas in the participants’ own talk, the researcher put forward a number of speculations about the unconscious motivations behind such relationships and their possible origin in early childhood experiences. These explanations did not capture participants’ meanings or ways of understanding their experiences. No participant spoke of her childhood and, of course, no participant talked about her unconscious motives.

3. Do not use a priori constructs to sort your excerpts. Borrowing a construct directly from the literature to use as it a repeating idea is contrary to the goal of interpretative research, as well as to the principle of keeping participants’ talk at the center of attention. An example of such mistaken borrowing comes from a study of college students who had experienced serious athletic injuries. Before the researcher began to sort her interview material, she had settled on the construct “emotion-focused coping,” which was drawn from the literature on psychological stress. She then combed the interviews for examples of “emotion-focused coping.” Not surprisingly, she found many examples. Predictably, the construct she borrowed from the literature was too global and too generic to capture the specific ideas and experiences of the participants. Thus, this strategy produces little new and useful knowledge.

4. Avoid repeating ideas with more than one meaning. When you decide whether a repeating idea is specific enough to be meaningful, you should begin by making sure that the repeating idea has only a single meaning. Again, an example of what to avoid may be helpful. The example comes from a project concerned with the experiences of late adolescent men who were engaged in commercial sex. In the interviews, the men described aspects of their lifestyle, which the researcher subsequently grouped into repeating idea files and labeled. One repeating idea files was labeled “Independence.” Items in the file included the following: Selling sex is a way to earn money for living expenses; The earnings from sex work can be used for luxury items, like expensive watches and jewelry; A young man freely engages in drug use and drinking alcohol on the job; A young man steals money and valuable items from his clients and feels no remorse. The researcher viewed all these statements as indications of the participants’ independence. In our view, these do not cannot be unified into a single repeating idea. The four statements refer to two quite different ideas. One idea was economic self-sufficiency. The other was the willful flouting of laws and societal norms.
5. Be prepared to move back and forth among the different stages of analysis. For instance, you can expect to read through, and perhaps also re-interpret, the excerpted material several times. As you think more deeply about what the participants have said, you are likely to refine the sub-questions, the repeating ideas, the integrative summaries, and labels. The participants’ talk should always be at the center of your thinking and writing, for your task is to learn about the ways they give meaning to the phenomenon you are studying.

Exploring differences between people

Your participants were purposively chosen to embody key similarities. Perhaps these similarities involved a combination of demographic characteristics such as age, sex category, sexual orientation, or nationality. Or you may have purposively selected participants who shared a specific life experience, such as an illness condition, an unintended out-of-wedlock pregnancy, or forced migration. But although you found some commonalities in the repeating ideas in your group, it is likely that these ideas were not universal in the group. There will usually be one repeating idea that is brought forward by a large proportion of the group, and others that are brought forward by one or more smaller sub-groups. It could be that these other repeating ideas are based in some important variations among the participants in your group.

You might therefore consider whether there are any characteristics or experiences that are common to participants in the sub-groups you identified. For example, in his project, Matt found three boys who were highly critical of the masculinity standards put forward by the majority of boys. Exploring these three boys’ backgrounds and interests enabled Matt to identify certain experiences that they had in common. The point was not, of course, to make causal claims. Instead, this examination provided a fuller picture of the range of available meanings and of the way that individual meaning-making may be tied to social identities, relational contexts, and cultural locations.

Researchers often have researchable questions that involve comparing different groups of people. For example, they ask whether people from different cultural groups or social backgrounds “make sense” of particular phenomena in the same or different ways. Recall the research examples you read about in Chapter 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, you read about the project by Andrea Dottolo and Abigail Stewart, which compared the recollections of Black Americans and White Americans regarding experiences when racial identity and race relations were made salient. In Chapter 2, you read about research by Peggy Miller and her colleagues that drew comparisons between mothers in the USA and mothers (or grandmothers) in Taiwan regarding their ideas about raising young children.

Another kind of difference between people focuses on different experiences. Sharon Gold-Steinberg (1994), for example, interviewed women in the US about their recollections of having an abortion. Gold-Steinberg gathered a group of women who had had an abortion during the time when abortion was being legalized (a process that happened unevenly across the fifty states of the US). Even though all the procedures had been carried out within a very narrow time frame, some women’s abortions were legal and carried out in bona fide medical settings, while other women’s abortions were illegal and clandestine. Gold-Steinberg’s analysis contrasted the stories, memories, and residual emotions of the two groups of women.

To compare different groups of people, you need to make separate excerpt files for each group and analyze them separately. This enables you to see how the two groups differ, as well as what is similar among participants in each category.

A word of warning. Comparing participants who are members of categories that you have decided on a priori might distract your attention from other ways of grouping participants that may be relevant to your researchable questions. A priori categories may also focus your analytic attention on differences between people in the different categories, and unduly focus it away from possible (perhaps unexpected) similarities among the different categories. Eva’s couples...
study affords an example. The research literature claimed that couples from middle-class and professional backgrounds would share housework and childcare more equally than working-class couples. Such findings have been long established in family research. However, when Eva divided the couples in her study into groups based on socioeconomic/class status, she found no differences between these groups in their sharing of housework. This led Eva to ask whether some other differences might be implicated in patterns of housework sharing. She went on to explore such questions in later parts of her study.

**Drawing your analyses together**

When you have completed your integrative summaries for all your excerpt files, it is time to draw together what you have learned and organize it into a coherent whole. This calls for a synthesis of the integrative summaries you have assembled, one that orders them and examines the inter-relationships among them. There is no single formula for how to do this. We give some suggestions below.

When you begin to synthesize, you can use your integrative summaries as your materials and the researchable questions and sub-questions as your anchors. The set of sub-questions can serve as an initial organizing framework for your synthesis. For each sub-question, look at each integrative summary that has been associated with it and ask: “Does this integrative summary help me address this particular sub-question?” If you conclude that it does, you should describe in what way or ways it does this. After scrutinizing all the integrative summaries in this way, you may see similarities and differences between the descriptions of them that will help you to further synthesize your findings.

The initial organizing framework that your sub-questions provide is likely to take into account most of the integrative summaries. However, there will probably be some that do not fit into that initial framework. Such summaries should be set to the side. But do not discard them! What should you do with them? First, you should see them as indications that your initial framework may not in fact have “caught” everything of importance that your participants were telling you about your knowledge interest. Second, you should see these “odd” summaries as potential pointers to unexpected patterns in your material. Remember that one of the strengths of interpretative research is that you can take the participants’ words and meanings as the starting point of the analysis.

In order to synthesize your findings further, you should also search for ways that the integrative summaries link with one another. Is there a bridging idea or unifying construct that ties some of them together? Matt’s project offers an example. Matt saw a thread running through three summaries. The summaries concerned: 1) boys’ concerns about appearing weak or vulnerable; 2) boys’ reports of urging one another to “suck it up and take it like a man”; and 3) boys’ fears that “breaking down” would earn them jeers like “pussy” or “fag.” All of them, Matt saw, were linked by the bridging idea that masculinity is joint project that demands continual upkeep. Karin’s project offers another example. She drew a link between these integrative summaries: 1) non-heterosexual people shoulder the task of furnishing information about gay and lesbian life to their co-workers; 2) non-heterosexual people strive to “come out” in ways that do not disturb their co-workers’ equanimity. Karin conceived a bridging idea that united these two summaries: the idea that nonheterosexual people shoulder the responsibility for smoothing relations with their heterosexual colleagues [and for maintaining their comfort].

Before we leave this discussion, we issue a caveat. Oftentimes, interpretative researchers are instructed by reviewers or editors to report the percentages of participants who have given each kind of response. As a rule, however, this is not appropriate. There are two compelling reasons not to report such percentages. First, the groups that interpretative researchers study are typically quite small. This makes percentages largely meaningless. Second and more important, reporting percentages readily leads readers to misinterpret the results as claims about a general population.
(such as all American adolescent boys). As you know, such claims are not the goal of interpretative research, nor could they be substantiated in such research.

As you are drawing your analyses together, it is a good idea to focus your attention on the aspects of your work that speak to current issues in the research literature, and especially those that amend or take issue with existing research findings or conventional wisdom. The goal of research is to add new knowledge, not to reiterate what is already known or self-evident.
Chapter 9

Analyzing stories in interviews

Stories are a means by which people impose order on their experiences. Therefore, stories are a key element of how people make sense of themselves and their worlds. The narrative theorist David Herman (2009) offered a succinct definition: “...stories are accounts of what happened to particular people and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change” (p. 2).

By looking closely at the way that people make stories out of their experiences, researchers can glimpse the world views and understandings that are building blocks of their stories. Although people’s stories about their experiences are personal, their meanings are put in place through joint action, that is, in transactions with others. The meanings are both local (that is, negotiated within local interpretive communities such as family and friends) and cultural (that is, shared by broader interpretive communities). As they tell their stories, people may make many kinds of meanings. For example, they may attribute motives to themselves and others, they may ascribe or imply causality, and they may convey, directly or indirectly, their evaluative perspective regarding the events in the story.

The analyses we describe in this chapter have goals similar to the goals of the analyses you learned about in Chapter 8. As in Chapters 8, the analyses aim to identify regularities or shared features in a set of interviews. Such analyses can help you answer researchable questions about your participants’ meaning-making in relation to the interpretive communities of which they are part. Although different persons do not tell the “same” story, people who are members of the same interpretive community build their personal stories from similar sets of building blocks.

How can analyzing stories told by your research participants help you address your researchable questions? It is unlikely that your initial researchable questions would ask directly “What stories about the phenomenon did the participants tell in the interviews?” However, it is likely that a close look at the stories that participants tell in interviews will tell you things that would be difficult to find out in other ways. Stories also open a window onto people’s evaluative perspectives. What you learn by analyzing stories can add to the body of knowledge that you are accumulating about the researchable questions.

The analyses that you will learn about in this chapter are part of the field of narrative study. This is a broad and multi-disciplinary field, which engages sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, literary critics, oral historians, and psychologists. As you might expect, researchers in these different fields ask different questions about stories, story-telling, and storytellers. For example, some researchers are interested in how children develop the capacity to tell stories and to understand the stories of others. Other researchers study the role of narratives in forming personal identities. Others may be interested in the aesthetic qualities of literary narratives. Others study everyday stories for their rhetorical qualities. Life history researchers may gather stories to gain a deep understanding of an individual, perhaps a notable figure. Oral historians may gather a collection of personal stories for an in-depth study of a historical period or an particular event. The stories we are concerned with here are stories that are about personal experiences and that are told in interviews.

In what follows, we first present a brief overview of our assumptions concerning the nature of personal stories and we give some brief definitions of four broad dimensions on which you can analyze stories. Then we describe a set of procedures that enable you to examine those dimensions.
Analytical framework

The analytical framework that we present does not presume an extensive theoretical background. Its main theoretical premise is that the stories that a person tells are always shaped by that person’s context; at the same time, those stories shape what tellers and listeners take as reality. We begin with a brief overview of the main assumptions of the analytical framework.

One assumption is that people tell stories to give order to the flow of events in their lives (Bruner, 1986). In telling stories, people create plots from unordered experiences. Such plots give reality “a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly” (Cronon, 1992, p. 1349, as cited in Riessman, 1993). Tellers make stories by pruning away what does not make sense to them from the totality of what could be said. Further, stories link events to antecedent conditions and consequences. Stories usually impute reasons, intentions, motives, and feelings to the actors, including the teller. In making stories, tellers are also making what they take to be reality.

A second assumption is that stories are re-presentations. They are not (and cannot be) copies of reality. Rather, they are “edited versions” of reality. When stories concern past events, tellers rely on memories, which are inevitably colored by the teller’s present understanding of the events. Such understandings change as time passes and as new events and experiences lead the teller to adopt new perspectives. Stories are embedded in language and the language of the teller alters the meanings in the story. Furthermore, stories are told with an audience and a purpose in mind.

A third assumption is that story-telling is always selective. This is true whether one is composing an autobiography, writing history, gossiping, recounting one’s life to a therapist, or responding to a query from an interviewer. That is, only some elements of the total are included in the story; other elements are excluded. To a great extent, the meanings of the story are determined by what is included in its telling and what is not. These meanings include, for example, the putative explanation for the events that take place, the locus of responsibility for those events, the teller’s evaluation of those events, and the moral to be drawn from the story.

The fourth assumption is that stories are cultural products. Stories are situated in a time and place. Tellers draw on existing meanings, assumptions, and formulations that are specific to their time and place when they make stories about their experiences. If they did not, their stories would be neither plausible nor persuasive to their listeners. Tellers also make use of the reigning conventions of story-telling; otherwise, their stories would not make sense (that is, they would not get the point across) to listeners. The store of meanings and conventions could be thought of as a communal toolkit (Bruner, 1990). It is a product not only of the culture at large, but also of the groups of which people are members – families, peer groups, workmates, religious congregations, political organizations, and so on.

The analytical framework is based mainly on the ideas of two central theorists of narrative and story-telling: The narrative psychologist Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1990; Bruner, 1991), and the linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs (Capps & Ochs, 1995a; Capps & Ochs, 1995b; Ochs, 2005). We look at two broad and overlapping aspects of stories:

- **What is told** and **How it is told**. The former includes the depiction of events. For instance, the tellers convey their view of what caused what by imposing a sequential organization or temporal ordering on the events. Moreover, the depiction of events is always selective; the events that a teller leaves out of a story are made irrelevant. In addition, stories convey an evaluative perspective; stories are shot through with indications of the teller’s evaluations of events and actions, as well as of the actors who people the story.

- **How a story is told** concerns the teller’s use of language. Tellers have available a wide variety of lexical, grammatical, and paralinguistic means of expressing themselves. They insert into their stories maxims, similes, bromides, and allusions, which are resonant with images, associations, and memories. *What and How* – that is, content and form – are not neatly separable. We
distinguish between them mainly to underscore that how a story is told carries as much import as what is told.

We have selected four dimensions of stories and story-telling from among the many that narrative researchers have studied. We give a brief overview of each of these dimensions of analysis and, in a later section, we demonstrate procedures for studying each of them.

Dimensions of stories

“Trouble”: The instigation to make a story
“Trouble” is the term that Jerome Bruner (1990) uses in describing what motivates people to make stories. People engage in making stories, Bruner says, when they experience a breach in their routine or a departure from the expected. That is, people do not make stories about the seemingly automatic flow of their everyday lives. A story in which “nothing happened” would not seem like a story at all. It is when something out of the ordinary happens (or when people are in a situation in which they need to “explain” themselves) that they are prompted to formulate a story that accounts for what has occurred. Trouble in Bruner’s sense need not be a troublesome or negative event. Indeed, unexpected happiness or unwarranted good fortune constitute Trouble just as much as a setback. Trouble is something that must be reckoned with or accounted for. Trouble, in other words, demands explanation; it calls forth a story.

The analysis of the Trouble that sets the story in motion is a good starting point for analyzing stories told in interviews. You may wonder what can be gleaned from an analysis of Trouble in cases in which the interviewer has already directed participants to tell a story about a specific topic or incident. Hasn’t the interviewer already specified what the Trouble is? Analyzing stories to ascertain Trouble from the participant’s point of view, however, often uncovers significant departures from what the interviewer had in mind. That is, participants often respond to the interviewer’s query in ways that take the query in unforeseen directions, as you will see in the two research examples given below.

The teller’s “Theory of the Event”
In telling a story, the teller puts forward at least one “Theory of the Event.” As Capps and Ochs (1995, pp.15-16) put it, “a theory of the event is the author’s attempt to provide an explanation of what happened.” A teller’s “Theory of the Event” involves a plot, that is, a sequential organization of events and circumstances. To make a collection of events into a story, tellers impose an order in which some events are antecedent to other events; some events precipitate other events, some events are consequences, and so on. In telling a story, the teller leaves out a multitude of events, circumstances, and responses; doing so shapes the meaning of the story in a certain way. In telling stories about events, tellers intertwine content and form to convey a Theory of the Event and make it credible.

A study carried out by Kristen Anderson and Debra Umberson (2001), two American sociologists, provides an illustration. They interviewed men who had been court-mandated to participate in a domestic violence educational program. In the interviews, each man was asked to tell about a time when “an argument with your partner became physical.” Men’s stories in response to that request often omitted or minimized their own violent acts. In short, the way men told their stories served to divert fault and blame from themselves. Anderson and Umberson also contrasted expressive details in men’s descriptions of their own violence versus their female partner’s violence. Many men belittled and even ridiculed their partner’s violence and described themselves as unafraid of it. Some portrayed their own violent acts as rational steps undertaken in order to control a woman who had become irrational and “hysterical.”

The teller’s Evaluative Perspective
Stories also tell about the moral stance of the teller. Stories convey judgments about the goodness of the events they depict (or perhaps raise questions about the moral status of the
events). Stories may confer opprobrium on certain actors in the story or absolve others. When the teller is the protagonist in a story, it is likely (though not certain) that the protagonist is granted the moral high ground. In addition, a story may include an explicit didactic component, such as a “take home” message or a “moral of the story.” (Think of the moral that concludes each tale in *Aesop's Fables*, for instance.) Whether or not a story has such a pointed moral message, both the *what* and the *how* of the story convey information about the evaluative perspective of the teller.

**Canonical narratives**

Canonical narratives are socially accepted, common, and routine accounts of an occurrence. They are cultural templates that furnish established understandings of sequence or consequence (Bruner, 1991). Some theorists have used the term “master narrative” to capture the idea that some narratives have a hegemonic status in a cultural setting. An example is the assertion that a so-called chemical imbalance in the brain is the cause of clinical depression. This claim has acquired that status of a canonical narrative in the USA, owing to vigorous pharmaceutical advertising campaigns.

Canonical narratives serve as templates for understanding people’s own experiences and as guides for their own actions. Recalling the work of Peggy Miller and her colleagues, which you read about in Chapter 2, you will remember that US mothers gave pride of place to high self-esteem as a condition necessary for their child’s future happiness, achievement, social success, and wellbeing. In the US context, this could be seen a canonical narrative, at least among middle-class parents. Among the US mothers that Miller and her colleagues studies, bolstering their child’s self-esteem was a prominent aspect of their child-rearing practices.

**How to interpret stories: Reading content and form together**

Tellers recruit content and form together to make meaning. As you analyze stories for the dimensions we have just described, you need to keep focusing on both. Stories give information about occurrences, temporal settings, actions and the like, as well as about the people involved in them. This information is what we have called the “what.” But how people tell stories, that is, the elements of style and language, also gives information. Poets, fiction writers, and essayists consciously choose elements of language to vivify what they say and add emotional resonance. Debaters deliberately choose styles of speech and structured sequences to underscore a certain point. Orators and political leaders deliberately choose certain registers of speech and styles of delivery that convey authority and trustworthiness.

In everyday talk also, speakers use elements of style and language to project layers of meanings, emotional resonance, and moral stance. In the case of professional writers and speakers, these elements are deliberately and painstakingly chosen. In the case of ordinary speakers and everyday talk, such features are not chosen with so much care. However, whether the choices of style and language are wholly deliberate, wholly spontaneous, or somewhere in between, elements of style and language are key to the meanings that are conveyed.

Note that people often do not tell stories in a logical or chronological sequence. They may begin with the conclusion or the “moral of the story” or anywhere else in the sequence of events and reactions. Much of the time, you will find that you cannot “tick off” antecedents and consequences in a single reading of a story; oral story-telling in particular often involves convoluted sequences of events.

When you are analyzing stories, you need to attend both to *what* a participant tells you and to *how* a participant tells it. You are probably quite used to attending to *what* is being said; in everyday life, that is usually the focus of attention. Therefore, let us consider some aspects of the
The *how* of talk includes lexical features such as word choices; grammatical features such as the use of transitive versus intransitive verbs or active versus passive voice; paralinguistic features like laughter, a falsetto voice, or emphasis; stylistic features, such as repetitions. In talk, such features may, for instance, intensify the meaning of what was said or indicate the speaker's evaluative stance or obfuscate questions of responsibility. Consider, for example, the grammatical form of sentences like “There will be firings” or “Rapes happen” or “It was thought that...” Statements that take this form linguistically eliminate the doer of the action. Or consider a word choice like “glory-hogging jerks” (see below), which conveys an unmistakable evaluative judgment. It is easy to see that how a speaker says what he or she has to say builds up certain meanings. To interpret the meanings in a specific story, you must rely on your competence as a speaker of the language in which the story was told, as well as on multiple readings of the story.

### Analytical procedures

For ease of presentation, we have chosen as examples stories that are brief, that were clearly demarcated as stories, and that could be readily identified in the stream of talk. Interview participants often tell brief stories spontaneously. Furthermore, interviewers often elicit them directly. For example, in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, you learned to ask follow-up questions in order to obtain specific instances of a generalization or to direct an interview participant to elaborate on a reference to an incident by telling a story about it.

### Creating a file of excerpts

To begin your work, you need to create a file that contains the excerpts that you will work with. For the type of analysis we describe here, that file will contain stories that you have identified in your transcripts. The stories will be ones that pertain in some way to a specific topic in the interview or to researchable question in your study. As in all the interpretative approaches that you learn in this book, the purpose of creating a file of excerpts is to enable you to narrow your focus to those particular excerpts, so that you can examine them in close detail.

If you have asked specific questions in the interview that invited story-telling, it is usually quite straightforward to select stories to excerpt. Some examples of such prompts or questions are:

- “Can you give me a specific example of that?”
- “Can you tell me about a time when [a particular thing happened]?”
- “Tell me about the last time this happened.”
- “Can you walk me through that?”

Sometimes participants spontaneously tell stories that are relevant to the your topic or your researchable question. You should add such stories to your excerpt file.

### Becoming familiar with the contents of the file

Once you have a file of stories that pertain to a topic or a researchable question, the next step is to familiarize yourself thoroughly with the contents of the file. As you read and re-read the stories, you should make notes in your research journal about stories that particularly capture your attention, about distinctive expressions or uses of language, or about what might be possible similarities across the stories. At this point, the notes you take are just meant as signposts pointing toward things you might later explore; they can therefore be broad-ranging and fairly informal. Your notes might concern commonalities in the content of the stories or in the plot sequences or cliches or maxims that are frequently repeated. The notes could also concern variations among the stories, for instance, differing ascriptions of causality, as well as your sense
of how blame and opprobrium are distributed. Not all the notes will ultimately serve as seeds for your analysis, but some will. At this point, it is better to make too many notes than to omit observations because they seem tangential.

Selecting dimensions of stories for analysis

In Chapter 8, you learned to compose sub-questions by reading and re-reading the interview material, with an eye to your researchable questions. The process that you use here is parallel, though not identical.

To begin with, it is unlikely that your original researchable questions pertain directly to the dimensions of stories that we described earlier. Therefore you need to read the file of stories once again, this time keeping in mind both the set of possible dimensions to analyze and the researchable questions. That is, as you read the stories that your participants told, consider whether a particular dimension of analysis (such as Trouble or Theory of the Event) might bear on the researchable questions. Would considering that dimension of the story tell you something important about your researchable question? Would considering that dimension corroborate or add to the results of other analyses of the interview material? If the tentative answer to questions like these is yes, then you should proceed to systematically analyze that dimension.

We illustrate the selection of the dimensions for analysis by describing one of our research projects. The project, which was carried out by Jeanne along with Jessica Salvatore, concerned young women's experiences in their college's gyms and fitness centers. In the USA, federal legislation specifically prohibits educational institutions from discriminating against individuals on the basis of their sex category. Among other things, this legislation requires colleges and universities to provide for equal access to athletic and recreational facilities. Yet Jeanne and Jessica, as gym users, were well aware that campus fitness facilities retained distinct (though not formally designated or enforced) “men's” and “women's” sections and that female students avoided the gym at certain times of the day.

The main participants in the study were young women in college. They were asked several questions about their gym use and athletic participation, and so on. One item was designed specifically to elicit a story about a specific incident in a gym:

_Have you ever felt uncomfortable at [the college fitness center] or at your high school gym?_  
 _If you have, can you describe the situation --- what happened, who was involved, who else was there, how the situation was resolved._

Jeanne assumed responsibility for analyzing the stories that the participants recounted in response to this question. Her initial researchable questions were:

1. What did participants report about their experiences in gyms/fitness centers? Did participants experience barriers to using the facilities?

2. Did the participants perceive gyms (or parts of gyms) to be male preserves? If so, what experiences brought about and sustained that perception?

3. What did participants say about their negative experiences? What/whom did they hold accountable for those experiences?

Jeanne placed the stories that were elicited in response to these questions in an excerpt file. She read and re-read the stories in the excerpt file and on the basis of that reading decided on a subset of the dimensions of the stories that seemed to bear on the researchable questions:

1) Trouble as construed by the participant;  
2) The participant’s “Theory of the Event,” with particular attention to the following:  
a. The events or circumstances that led to the Trouble;
b. Complicating factors and additional events;
c. The participant’s report of her feelings and thoughts in relation to (a) and (b);
d. Ascriptions of causation, responsibility, and blame for the problematic events;
e. The outcome of the incident.

3) The participant’s evaluative perspective and moral stance.

Making notes about the participants’ stories

In Chapter 8, you learned to compose brief notes about the material that was pertinent to your research questions. Those notes provided you with a way to scan across the excerpts in search of similarities and differences. Here, you need to compose notes about the stories in the file, which you can use the same way. As in Chapter 8, these notes are not the product of a mechanical search through the stories for particular words or phrases. The notes are interpretations that draw on your background knowledge about the phenomenon you are studying and your competence and experience as a speaker of the language that you and the participant share. Further, the notes are based on your judgment of how what the participant said is related to the researchable questions.

To write the notes, you need to read each story in the file of stories that you have created. Write down your notes alongside the story. These notes should contain your observations about both the content (the “what”) and the form (the “how”) of what the participant has said. In addition, you should make sure to include specific information about what the participant has said about each dimension. For instance, note down what the story seems to indicate as Trouble. The notes might also include questions to yourself about possible larger patterns of meaning that you might explore.

To illustrate what a set of notes might look like, we present four stories that were told by participants and the notes Jeanne made about each.

**Example 1: Katie’s story**

I always feel out of place at athletic activities. Back in elementary school I’d miss simple catches in kickball or tray and shoot a basket and have the ball bounce back and slam into my face. Middle school was much worse. I was always among the slowest, clumsiest people in class. In high school I thankfully only had to take PE [Physical Education] once. When I displayed my utter clumsiness and poor shape, people would fall silent for a minute, then say something like “Good try!” What they meant was “I sure am glad I’m not that idiotic! Poor Katie; it must be an evolutionary mistake.” My friends tried to be helpful, but there really isn’t a solution. Then there’s swimming, a sport worse than basketball. The shame of going to pool parties and showing my ugly thighs and fear of water to the world is equalled only by the bother of 8:30 am Aquatics 1 [a mandatory class for students who cannot swim] this semester. At least that’s over, but I’ll always be clumsy and slow and bitter.

**Notes**

* Katie moves immediately from speaking about a “situation in a gym” to recounting a life history of lack of ability and athletic failure.
* She uses reported speech to denigrate herself.
* Athletic incompetence, being in poor shape, and having an “ugly” body run together as if they were one thing.
* Her description of her shortcomings is full of hyperbole. Does this exaggeration excuse others for ridiculing and shaming her?
* Her reference to evolution and the repetition of the word “always” imply that her condition is unchangeable.

*Trouble:* She always feels out of place at athletic activities.
Theory of the Event: As a child, she was athletically incompetent; As a preteen, she was clumsy, slow, and out of shape; As a teenager, she had ugly thighs and a fear of water. Showing her body at pool parties led to shame. [Therefore] she will always be clumsy and slow. And bitter.

**Example 2: Jennifer's story**

When it is about 4:00 and all the sports players arrive – I am not an athlete [i.e., a member of an athletic team] –, it can be very uncomfortable to begin with. They talk loudly to each other, sometimes about the way that girls look. On one day, a friend of mine and I were getting a drink of water from the back of [the fitness center, an area dominated by male users] and a guy talked about how flabby a girl’s legs were at the exercise bike. She didn't seem so flabby to me. It's hard to already feel uncomfortable, like it isn’t your place to use. That is, only the athletes can. And also to know that people criticize the bodies of people in there when they are so vulnerable.

**Notes**

* What is signaled by Jennifer’s expression “it’s not your place to use”?
* Jennifer makes no direct statements that condemn the men’s practice of evaluating women, though she says three times that she finds it distressing. Does Jennifer regard men’s behavior as out of line or not? Does she regard it as something men are entitled to do?
* Jennifer often uses pronouns and nouns that are not gender-specific. Does this work to suspend a moral judgment of men?
* The girl whom the men judged to be “flabby” didn’t seem “so flabby” to Jennifer. Could this suggest that men could judge any girl negatively? Or could it suggest that (in Jennifer's eyes) it is OK for men to criticize girls’ bodies as long as their bodies are flabby?
* The story ends with no indication that change is possible and no mention of a strategy for change.

**Trouble:** It can be very uncomfortable to begin with.
It feels like it isn’t your place to use.
It's hard to know that people criticize people’s bodies.
Girls are already so vulnerable in the gym.

Theory of the Event: Men’s sports teams arrive in the gym *en masse* and talk loudly to one another. They sometimes talk about how girls look and and criticize their bodies; This makes her feel out of place, as if the gym were only for [male] athletes.
Knowing that men criticize women’s bodies makes her feel vulnerable.
Evaluative perspective: The men's practices make Jennifer feel bad.
But she does not overtly register a moral judgment of the men who engage in them.

**Example 3: Lucy’s story**

I don’t really go into gyms very often – it’s not really one of my interests. I don’t want to put on lots of muscle and I don’t like treadmills. However, on the very rare occasion that I do enter a gym, I feel slightly less than comfortable, merely because it’s sweaty and gross. Germs don't seem to be the only contagion present. Most guys who spend a lot of time in gyms tend to act like glory-hogging jerks. I can’t really remember any specific incidents of uncomfortableness, however, it’s sometimes awkward when a large group of people, especially the lacrosse team, commandeers the gym for themselves. I'm not a huge fan of meathead culture and these large teams generally produce quite a bit of that.

**Notes**

* Lucy’s words to describe gyms are visceral and very negative: sweaty, gross, germ-ridden.
* Her words for male gym-users are intensely negative: glory-hogging jerks, meathead culture.
* The verb “commandeer” implies that the men’s behavior is out of line.
* The germs/contagion simile for the meathead culture of men’s athletic teams. Suggests that that culture is akin to a disease.

**Problem:** She is slightly less than comfortable.
It is sometimes awkward.

**Theory of the Event:** Gyms are sweaty and gross and unsanitary.
Guys who are regular gym-goers are glory-hogging jerks.
Men’s teams “commandeer” the gym for themselves.
Men’s athletic teams generate quite a bit of meathead culture.

**Outcome:** She really doesn’t go to gyms very often. It is not her interest.

**Evaluative perspective:** Lucy offers a clear and strong criticism of male gym users and especially men’s athletic teams

**Example 4: Maribeth**

I only feel uncomfortable when I start to notice how much I’m sweating in comparison to other people working out. Sweating does not feel attractive, especially when you can tell that others notice you sweating. I also get a bit uncomfortable when I look at what I’m wearing in comparison to other girls at the gym. I wear baggy clothing sometimes that isn’t that flattering, so combine that with a really sweaty appearance, and I become very self-conscious. Mostly because I don’t feel that the guys think I’m attractive, especially when compared to the other girls who are hardly sweating and are wearing form-fitting clothing.

**Notes**
* Most of what Maribeth says is couched in terms of what she notices, judges and believes about herself.
* She compares her appearance to other girls, and the comparisons are always negative.
* She uses her beliefs about what guys think about her to exacerbate her negative views of herself.
* She makes many references to excessive sweating and she views excessive sweating as peculiar to herself.

**Problem:** She feels uncomfortable because she feels unattractive (to guys).
She becomes very self-conscious.

**Theory of the Event:** Compared to other girls, she sweats a lot.
She sees that others notice that she is sweating and that makes her feel unattractive.
She compares her baggy clothes to what other girls are wearing and feels uncomfortable.
Her unflattering clothing choices and sweaty appearance make her very self-conscious.
Guys find her unattractive compared to girls who don’t sweat and wear tight clothes.
She does not include any solution or resolution.

**Finding similar meanings and composing integrative summaries of them**

When you have completed notes for all the stories in the file, what is the next step? Now you need to examine the meanings that your participants brought forward in relation to each dimension of the story. To do this, you consider one dimension at a time, looking for similar meanings in the notes about your participants’ stories. You therefore read the notes you made for each story, focusing especially on the notes pertaining to the dimension under consideration. Compare the notes about one story to the notes about the other stories. When you find similarities between notes about two or more stories, copy the excerpt along with the notes into a new file.
When you have finished making these comparisons for a dimension, you will have a number of files related to that dimension, each of which contains stories that offer a similar idea (that is, a meaning) related to that dimension. Give each file a label that summarizes what the stories have in common. Put to the side stories that do not fit into any of the files.

The next step is to write an integrative summary that states what the stories in the file have in common. Below we give an example of a portion of an analysis from Jeanne’s project, including the integrative summary. (To save space, we do not include the notes Jeanne had written about each story.) The dimension of the stories that was under consideration was the Theory of the Event. Following the procedures described above, Jeanne had placed four stories together into a file because they put forward similar meanings related to the dimension Theory of the Event.

Participants’ stories:
(a) In my high school gym, I used to feel quite uncomfortable. In a fitness class, a certain gym teacher would consistently require us to do a pretty intense ab [that is, abdominal] workout, some portions of which my friend and I couldn’t do. We tended to laugh about it, but in reality I always felt fat, uncoordinated and stupid for not being athletic enough to complete the workout. As a result, unless I had to be there for a class, I never went to the gym on my own time. I have never felt that out of place at [the college gym], though I do sometimes feel overly conscious of my weight and lack of stamina.

(b) I have only been in the fitness center when required by classes. As one of the overweight, awkward, un-athletic girls, everything made me uncomfortable, but especially being there with people in much better shape than me, as some of my classmates invariably were. I was intimidated by their skill and embarrassed by the knowledge that they could be watching me or see how bad I am. This situation probably has something to do with the reason I don’t go to the gym. I hate feeling fat and awkward.

(c) I can’t think of a particular situation but often times I feel very fat at the gym and I hate how my face gets really red from working out. I also don’t like how sweaty I get but then I think “Whatever. At least I’m getting a good work-out.”

(d) I always feel out of place at athletic activities. Back in elementary school I’d miss simple catches in kickball or tray and shoot a basket and have the ball bounce back and slam into my face. Middle school was much worse. I was always among the slowest, clumsiest people in class. In high school I thankfully only had to take PE [Physical Education] once. When I displayed my utter clumsiness and poor shape, people would fall silent for a minute, then say something like “Good try!” What they meant was “I sure am glad I’m not that idiotic! Poor Katie; it must be hard being an evolutionary mistake.” My friends tried to be helpful, but there really isn’t a solution. Then there’s swimming, a sport worse than basketball. The shame of going to pool parties and showing my ugly thighs and fear of water to the world is equalled only by the bother of 8:30 am Aquatics 1 [a mandatory class for students who cannot swim] this semester. At least that’s over, but I’ll always be clumsy and slow and bitter.

Integrative Summary:
The participants describe their physical attributes as the origin of their discomfort in the gym. All four of them seem to blur together being overweight, being out of shape (lacking stamina or strength), and being clumsy, awkward or uncoordinated (even though these are independent and separable). The possibility that their bodily shortcomings are on display to peers (of any gender?) is a source of embarrassment, shame, and heightened self-consciousness. All the tellers seem to imply that their body size and/or lack of agility are enduring and unchangeable attributes. None of the tellers seem to hold themselves accountable for these attributes. At the same time (paradoxically?) none of the tellers hold onlookers morally accountable for disparaging women
who are fat or unfit or for shaming them. For three of the four participants, the solution has been to avoid the gym (and athletic activities).

* You need to repeat the steps we have just described for every dimension under consideration. This will yield at least one and perhaps several files of stories pertaining to each of the dimensions. Each files will contain a group of related stories, along with an integrative summary describing what unites that group.

**Verifying the analyses**

Now you need to verify your work. This requires that you turn back to the full stories. For each integrative summary, you now focus on the group of stories that it summarizes. Read each story against the integrative summary with two questions in mind: Does this story fit with the other stories that are summarized? and Does the integrative summary adequately capture the story? It is likely that you will need to make some adjustments to your integrative summaries. For example, when you re-read a story, you may find that the notes overlooked an element that you now see as crucial. Having read many stories, you now bring a more discerning eye to the stories you read earlier.

**What to do if you are stuck**

If you have read a set of notes and stories several times but you do not see any patterns, what can you do? One strategy is to pay attention to an extreme or dramatic story or one that is laced with hyperbole or blunt language. Trace out what this story tells you about your researchable question. This story may serve as a sensitizing device; that is, it may alert you to similar but less dramatic instances. You might ask yourself, “What is the instance an example of?” Answering this question moves your thinking toward a more abstract description. Then you can see whether there are other instances that fit the abstract description. For example, Katie’s claim that onlookers think of her as an “evolutionary mistake” combines hyperbole and projection (that is, her assertion about what others are thinking). It is an example of the speaker ascribing to herself a set of qualities – clumsy, un-athletic, ugly, and ungainly – that render her monstrous and that they are inherited and unchangeable. Imputing this judgment to others inflates its credibility and make it less refutable. With this description in mind, Jeanne was able to see similar but less hyperbolic instances in other interviews.

Another strategy is to pick out a pair of strongly contrasting stories, for example, stories with distinctly different emotional registers or very different evaluative perspectives. Look closely at the whole stories to see if there are other differences between them. In analyzing young women’s stories about their gym experiences, for example, Jeanne juxtaposed Jennifer, who used morally-neutral language when describing the objectionable behavior of members of athletic teams, against Lucy who offered a scathing indictment of team members.

A third strategy is more labor-intensive because it involves looking beyond the group you have chosen for study. You can identify people whose experiences are likely to differ from those of your study group and interview a few of them to serve as contrastive cases. (These might be drawn from a different social category (such as middle-aged people, if you are studying youth). Or the contrastive cases might be people in a different social location relevant to the phenomenon (such as patients, if you are studying doctors). Jeanne used stories from a small group of young men as contrastive cases. Contrasting the women’s stories with the men’s stories helped Jeanne to sharpen her vision, enabling her to see things that she had overlooked in the women’s stories.

**Drawing the analyses together**
Once you have completed analyzing the dimensions of the stories, you need to draw together what you have learned into a coherent whole. At this point, you have a set of integrative summaries that describe the main meanings that participants brought forward about each of the dimensions of a story that you have chosen to study. One way to bring the summaries together is to draw out their implications for the researchable questions. Let us give you two examples from Jeanne’s analysis of gym stories. The first example concerns the Trouble and the second example concerns participants’ Theory of the Event.

**Example 1**

What did the analysis of Trouble say about the researchable questions?

When Jeanne sorted the stories, four files resulted, which reflected four different meanings that the participants typically made in relation to Trouble. The integrative summaries for these four files made the following points:

1. In every story, Trouble concerned emotional or psychological states; no participant parsed the word “uncomfortable” to mean physical discomfort. Even when stories involved a physical injury or impairment (e.g., falling on a treadmill and requiring medical treatment; a severe bronchitis attack that halted a workout), the discomfort that the participants talked about concerned their feelings (such as embarrassment, self-consciousness, or shame).

2. Although the participants had been asked to tell about “a situation,” many stories (like nearly all the ones that you read above) instead told about ongoing or enduring negative feelings and habitual practices. Some stories (like Katie’s) told about experiences that extended beyond gyms into athletic situations more generally.

3. Most participants substituted more specific emotion words in place of the term uncomfortable. For the most part, the words that identified the Trouble conveyed intense negative feelings -- feeling vulnerable, exposed, self-conscious, judged, out of place, stupid, intimidated, lonely, or even unsafe. For one woman, being observed while she exercised was “scary.” For another, “[Having] guys staring you down ... feels predatory.”

4. A small minority of female participants used words that minimized the level of discomfort they felt. For example, they described themselves as “slightly” or “only a little” uncomfortable, or uncomfortable only “at first.” Noting these exceptions allowed Jeanne to describe the full range of variation among the participants.

Now Jeanne asked what light these meanings of Trouble shed on the researchable questions. First, most of the women reframed the relatively innocuous term “uncomfortable” by using terms indicating intense negative feelings and thoughts. This speaks to the researchable question *Did participants experience barriers to using the facilities?* It suggests that uncomfortable experiences likely constituted a barrier to participants’ use of the gym. Second, the negative feelings that the participants reported were interpersonal in origin – feeling exposed, self-conscious, intimidated, judged, and so on. This speaks to the researchable question *What did participants say about their negative experiences?* Third, most of the women responded to the request for “an incident” by telling about a persisting state of affairs, a habitual practice, or a succession of negative events. This also speaks to the researchable question *What did participants say about their negative experiences?*

Taken together, the ways that participants told about Trouble suggested that the matter of unpleasant emotions and cognitions in relation to athletic settings or activities was highly salient for them. Furthermore, the Trouble involved heightened self-consciousness, feeling out of place, and feeling or being scrutinized and judged. The participants’ feelings and thoughts largely concerned scrutiny or evaluation of their bodies by their peers, especially though not exclusively, their male peers. This speaks to the researchable question *What or whom did they hold accountable for those experiences?*

**Example 2**

What did the analysis of the participants’ Theory of the Event say about the researchable questions?

Examining aspects of the Theory of the Event also shed light on some of the researchable
questions. One part of the analysis involved searching for similarities in plot. The plots of the stories varied in many ways, but Jeanne focused on elements that were relevant to the researchable questions: What were the event or circumstances that instigated the Trouble? Who or what was responsible for them? Were there indications that participants held anyone morally accountable for the events in the story?

Jeanne had already learned that Trouble nearly always concerned social relations, specifically others’ scrutiny, judgement, or actions, whether actual, anticipated, or imagined. As she examined the notes and stories, she found two main sequences. In one plot sequence, it was the actions or manner of men that instigated the Trouble. Jennifer and Lucy, for example, both told how the presence (and collective behavior) of male athletic teams made them feel out of place, self-conscious, and so on. In the second plot sequence, the participant’s physical deficiencies were the origin of the Trouble. That is, the teller described her body in derogatory terms – as fat, clumsy, awkward, inept, out of shape, sweaty, and so on. These shortcomings, which were on open display in athletic settings, invited negative judgments or possible ridicule. The Trouble – problematic feelings of self-consciousness, humiliation, or vulnerability – was a consequence. Katie and Maribeth, for example told stories with plots of this kind.

The first of the two plot sequences speaks to the researchable question Did the participants perceive gyms (or parts of gyms) to be male preserves? If so, what experiences brought about and sustained that perception? The stories name certain actions and practices of men (and male athletic teams) that led participants to feel out of place. But these stories were not all the same. Jennifer, for example, described a high degree of emotional distress in response to men’s actions. Lucy, by contrast, portrayed herself as only slightly discomfited and mainly annoyed. Furthermore, Jennifer did not register explicit criticism or disapproval of men’s behavior. In contrast, Lucy offered relentless, blistering criticisms of male gym-users, gym culture, and male athletic teams. This analysis helped Jeanne to answer the researchable question What/whom did they hold accountable for those experiences?

In the other plot sequence, participants figured themselves as fat, ungainly, awkward, and/or inept. It was their flawed bodies that led to self-consciousness, shame, and sense of inferiority. In this plot sequence, participants represented these feelings as inevitable, given their flawed bodies. The part played by onlookers’ critical scrutiny or derision was underplayed; such negative commentary from onlookers was simply a matter of course and perhaps even deserved. This speaks to the researchable question What/whom did they hold accountable for those experiences? Further, some participants framed their bodily inadequacies as permanent and even congenital (as Katie seemed to). This pattern of talk sheds further light on the question of accountability.

Although this is just a small portion of the analyses, it opens a window onto participants’ negative experiences in the gym. For most of the participants, the gym was a place where women’s body were on display. For many, it seemed to be beyond question that their bodies were flawed and thus deserved to be judged by others as wanting. Although some participants raised objections to men who overtly ogled women or offered critical commentary, many seemed to regard men’s evaluative scrutiny of women’s bodies as an inevitable – albeit unpleasant – feature of the gym. Further, the stories suggested that participants accepted tacit “ownership” of the gym by men (especially male athletic teams) as a natural state of affairs.

In this example, we have focused on brief and narrowly-focused stories – essentially, critical incidents. You may, however, make use of similar analytical procedures to examine larger and more complex stories. For example, in the discussion below, we consider lengthier stories about a complex and more ambiguous life event, an episode of suicide-like behavior.

Exploring differences between groups of people

Tellers’ perspectives shape their stories. Individuals at different social locations recount events differently. Comparing such differing accounts can tell researchers any number of things about, for example, social hierarchy and intergroup conflict or about mundane differences in the ways
that people construe their life experiences. Consider the work carried out by Don Foster and his colleagues, who are social psychologists in South Africa (Foster, Haupt, & De Beer, 2005). Working in the post-Apartheid period, the researchers gathered lengthy narratives from individuals who were perpetrators of violence during the intense armed struggle to overthrow Apartheid, a struggle that persisted for nearly 35 years. The team gathered narratives from police officers, members of government intelligence services, members of liberation movements, and people involved in township conflicts. The researchers contrasted the accounts provided by members of the different groups on such matters as the reasons for engaging in violence, the tellers’ narrative strategies for accounting for violent acts, and the narrative strategies by which tellers deflected responsibility. The researchers also examined common elements such as the significance of masculinity and the power that groups wielded over their members’ behavior.

As Foster and his colleagues did, you may design a project specifically to compare people drawn from different social groups. Or, as your analysis proceeds, you may discern a striking difference in the stories that lead you to divide the participants into groups in accord with the stories they told. You can then do additional analyses to examine whether the groups differ on other dimensions as well. Such analyses may enable you to paint a fuller picture of the participants you have chosen for study.

If you want to compare groups of participants, you should select a subset of dimensions that will help you to answer the researchable questions. Then analyze each set of stories separately for each dimension. When you have completed the analyses for a dimension, you will have separate sets of integrative summaries for each group of stories. Comparing the integrative summaries enables you to examine differences between the groups.

To give you a flavor of what such group comparisons might yield, we give a few examples from a project that Jeanne and Chandanie Senadheera carried out involving teenagers in rural Sri Lanka. As you read in Chapter 2, Jeanne and Chandanie studied what they have called suicide-like acts—acts that involve deliberately swallowing poisons or overdoses without the intention to die. In the context of Sri Lanka, such acts are impetuous responses to acute interpersonal conflicts; they seldom arise out of depression or mental illness. Although people of all ages engage in such suicide-like acts, they are particularly frequent among teenagers. Among teenagers, very few of these suicide-like acts (only about 3%) end in death. Nonetheless, Jeanne and Chandanie were troubled that the previous decade had seen dramatic increases in the numbers of teenagers who engaged in such acts and they were also concerned that three-quarters of the victims were girls.

Chandanie, who is a native Sinhala speaker, interviewed girls who had been admitted to a medical ward following a suicide-like episode. With the girls’ agreement, Chandanie interviewed their mother as well. By custom, it is female family members who attend to patients in hospital, providing personal care, meals, laundry, and otherwise managing their care. Furthermore, it is mothers (not fathers) who have the responsibility for nurturing and caring for their children. Mothers also have the crucial task of guarding the social reputations of their daughters once they reach puberty. Consequently, mothers would be deeply engaged in coming to terms with what had happened and with figuring out the near-term arrangements following their daughters’ discharge.

Chandanie began the interviews with the question “What happened?” This question signaled a request for a story but left it to the teller to decide where the story should begin, what should be told, and how it should be told. When necessary, Chandanie prompted participants to continue the story and, as the interview drew to a close, to project what was likely to happen after the girl left the hospital.

As Jeanne and Chandanie read mothers’ and daughters’ stories, they saw a number of differences between the two sets of stories. We briefly describe two of the dimensions on which they compared the stories. One of the dimensions is Trouble, as it was perceived by mothers and daughters respectively.

Comparing daughters and mothers: What is the Trouble or problematic event?
For girls, the opening question “What happened?” called forth an elaborate story about the events that led up to their suicide-like behavior. These events constituted the Trouble in the narratives. For most girls, the Trouble involved harsh scolding (not infrequently accompanied by beatings) by their elders (usually their mother). The scolding was often precipitated by a violation of the standards of modesty and sexual respectability to which post-pubertal girls in rural Sri Lanka were held. (Such violations included coming home late from school, loitering with girlfriends, being seen in the company of a boy, or receiving cell phone calls from a number that the parents did not recognize.) For other girls, Trouble involved other relational impasses in the family. One such frequent impasse concerned a father or elder brother whose drinking habits caused scandal in the community, thus jeopardizing the girl’s future prospects for marriage. As the girls recounted it, being harshly scolded and father’s drinking led them to be disappointed, upset, saddened, and angry. In short, it was this set of occurrences, which led to the suicidal act, that girls’ stories identified as the Trouble.

Mother’s stories in response to the same question (“What happened?”) shifted the focal point of the story. Although their stories referred to the difficulties (e.g., infractions of the rules and scoldings) that preceded their daughters’ suicide-like acts, mothers pinpointed the suicidal-like act itself as the Trouble. Mothers’ stories emphasized how their daughters’ suicide-like act had set off a cascade of difficulties that they would now have to contend with. These difficulties did not concern the daughter’s emotional condition, her psychological wellbeing, or even her physical health. Rather, the difficulties lay in the family network and in the local community. For example, mothers anticipated that they would have to quell the anger of other family members toward the girl and find a way to squelch rumors about the girl that would jeopardize the family’s good name and the girl’s sexual reputation. At the time of the interview, many mothers were entertaining drastic measures to mitigate the family’s loss of face. These included sending their daughter to live with a distant relative, forcing her into a hasty arranged marriage, or taking her out of school and keeping her at home. In this aspect, mothers’ stories diverged sharply from girls’ stories. Many, if not most, girls predicted that the suicidal act would have positive consequences. For example, they expected that their mothers would desist from harsh scolding and that their fathers would have “learned a lesson” and quit drinking.

Comparing mothers and daughters: taking a Canonical Narrative into use

In Sri Lanka, the routine and commonplace way of understanding suicide is that suicidal acts are fueled by anger and a desire to “take revenge” or lash out at a wrongdoer or by the desire to force another person to bow to one’s will. This way of understanding suicide is pervasive and routine in Sri Lanka: it circulates through the mass media, the professional medical literature, the lessons taught to children in school health classes, and the training curriculum for lay counselors. Jeanne and Chandanie deemed this to be a Canonical Narrative of suicide.

The researchable question that Jeanne and Chandanie asked was “How does this Canonical Narrative take shape in the stories that mothers and daughters tell about the daughter’s suicide-like act? In mothers’ stories about their daughters’ suicide-like acts, the Canonical Narrative seemed to serve as a template. One mother, for example, explained, “She became friendly with a boy and she is too young. I shouted at her over that and she became angry and drank kerosene.” Another mother said, “She was annoyed [by her father’s embarrassing drunken behavior] and so she crushed mosquito coils in kerosene and drank it.” Another mother explained that her daughter drank insecticide because she was “in an angry mood” and “wanted to hurt me.”

The daughters’ stories of their behavior consistently offered a sharp contrast to the mothers’ stories. Girls’ accounts of the events that led up to the suicidal act were vivid, highly elaborated, and laced with references to feelings of hurt, outrage, and disappointment. However, there was an abrupt shift in tone and content when they came to describing the act itself. These descriptions were laced with vague, passive-voice, agent-less expressions. (“The poison got swallowed.” “Pills got bought.”) Many girls denied having any feelings at the time and denied even knowing what had happened (“I myself do not know what really happened. It is as if...
someone else forced me to do it” “I can’t remember how it happened.” “I didn’t think.”). They used adverbs of time that denoted impulsive behavior or a snap decision (“instantly,” “immediately,” “without giving any thought”); These descriptions avoided mention of all feelings, including angry ones, as well as any motives, including vengeful ones.

These two comparisons helped Jeanne and Chandanie to answer two of their researchable questions. Let us turn first to the differences in the mother’s and daughter’s “take up” of the Canonical Narrative regarding suicide. This comparison cast the silences, denials, and vagueness in girls’ accounts in bold relief. Ultimately, Jeanne and Chandanie related the silences to gendered norms governing girls’ comportment and to societal prescriptions regarding deference to and respect for one’s parents (Marecek & Senadheera, 2012). In short, avoiding direct mention of anger and vengeance helped girls to shore up a portrait of themselves as good girls.

Despite the frequency of suicide-like acts in Sri Lanka, no researcher had ever attempted to trace out the aftermath of such acts beyond possible physical health consequences. This topic was one of the knowledge interests that Jeanne and Chandanie had. The interviews during the girls’ hospitalization could only reveal what difficulties the mothers anticipated. Nonetheless, the analysis of the mothers’ stories pointed out an array of concerns about the social repercussions for the girls, their siblings, and the family’s standing in the community. These possible repercussions featured far more heavily in the mothers’ interviews – in fact, far more heavily than worries about their daughters’ mental health or emotional well-being.

**Synthesizing the analyses**

As you move forward to synthesize the results, the researchable questions can serve as the organizing framework. That is, considering how the results of specific analyses speak to the researchable questions should afford a means to tie those results into a coherent whole. Chapter 12 offers more specific information about how to organize and write a written report.
Chapter 10
Analyzing talk as action

Interviews are conversations, as you already know. That is, research interviews are occasions for gathering material pertinent to your researchable questions, but they are also occasions in which two or more persons are interacting. The people interacting in the interview are always doing more with their talk than asking questions and giving answers to them. For instance, through their talk, people also are continually creating their relationship with their conversation partners, and often also with people who are not present. Researchers have used several different terms to refer to these and other interactive functions of talk. Examples are “the action orientation of talk;” “what people do with their talk;” “talk-in-interaction;” “texts and talk in action;” and “talk-as-action” (REF). These different expressions do not have quite identical meanings; they have their origins in different theoretical traditions. We have settled on the expression “talk-as-action” (Edwards, 1997). Talk-as-action and its analytical possibilities are in focus in this chapter. We describe how the study of talk-as-action can help you address your researchable questions and sometimes develop them further.

The analytical framework and procedures that we describe in this chapter bring into focus the interaction work that people’s talk does beyond communicating a certain fact, meaning, or opinion to their listeners. For instance, if speakers want to persuade listeners of their own opinion, they usually use explicit arguments in favor of their own opinion. But they also tend to mold the form of their talk in ways that are more implicitly persuasive though these ways may not seem to have anything directly to do with the topic.

The analyses we describe in this chapter concern what talk achieves in conversation, and how those achievements are conditioned by the context. Some of the analyses look at the immediate interpersonal context of the talk, and other analyses focus on the socio-cultural context of the talk. The chapter begins with an example that illustrates talk-as-action. We then present the analytical framework for the chapter. Next we present a compendium of conversational features that are useful as entry points for analyses of talk-as-action. We illustrate each with examples from our own research.

What is talk-as-action?

The expression talk-as-action refers to the fact that people are always doing more with their talk than communicating information. For instance, talk brings across that communicated information to the listener in a certain way. Talk also presents the speaker in a particular light. And talk may make a certain activity seem worthwhile or not to the listener. To illustrate talk-as-action, we have selected an excerpt from an interview in Eva’s study of Nordic couples that you read about in Chapter 2. In the couple who were being interviewed, the wife Stina did most of the housework and childcare. She told the interviewer that she was quite content with this situation, and that she and her husband Stephen never quarreled about housework sharing. She then continued:

Stina: That’s something I think many other people perhaps squabble a lot [,] too much [,] about. You know: “Now it’s your turn to do the cleaning!” We have friends who do [,]
Interviewer: Things have to be the same?
Stina: They have to be as similar as possible.
Stephen: Because, “If you do this, then I get to do that. If you go there, then...”.
Stina: We have never, ever talked like that!
Stephen: No!
If we look at the content of this brief conversation, we see that Stina and Stephen were telling the interviewer: (a) that many people disagreed about housework sharing; (b) that these people, including some of their friends, squabbled too much about housework sharing; and (c) that they themselves never resorted to bickering about petty issues in housework.

Let us consider this interaction in its context. This Swedish couple lived in a time and place in which the cultural ideal was for couples to share housework and childcare equally. That was the larger political context. The interviewer was a young woman, and she had been asking them several questions about the way they organized their everyday life – from who did the dishes to who did most of the childcare, etc. Many of these questions are connected to gender equality issues. That was the local context, also distinctly related to the larger context. Stina and Stephen could not have been unaware of these larger and local speaking contexts. Moreover, by this point in the interview, they may well have realized that they had presented numerous examples of their own unequal sharing patterns. This may have made Stephen and Stina apprehensive about appearing in a bad light before the interviewer.

Let us now consider what this couple’s talk may have been doing in the excerpted interaction. Stina’s initial depiction of strivings for equal sharing as “squabbling” connected gender equality with disagreements and possibly quarrels. In the original Swedish, the later descriptions of their friends’ squabbles (“Now it’s your turn to do the cleaning!”, “If you do this, then I get to do that”), made their friends’ discussions seem like bickerings about millimeter justice in the nursery. Further, Stephen and Stina’s insistence that they never squabbled about equal sharing (“We have never, ever talked like that!”) effectively set them apart from the friends who “squabbled.” To summarize, their talk performed the following actions: it connected gender-equality strivings with quarrels; it made debates about gender-equality seem childish; and it positioned the speakers as different from (and better than?) couples who squabble about gender-equality.

What can a researcher learn by taking into account interactional aspects in conversations? In the case above, did a focus on such aspects in this particular couple’s conversation help Eva address her researchable questions – which of course go beyond this couple – in useful ways? Eva’s answer is yes. In our description of the study of Nordic couples in Chapter 2, we listed three of its researchable questions. The first asked about the cultural understandings and ideologies about issues such as femininity, masculinity, and parenthood that could be discerned in the talk of the men and women. The second asked about variations among the couples in how they related to dominant cultural understandings. The third question developed out of the analyses of the first two questions. Those analyses had led her to an increased interest in what different forms of talk achieved in the interview conversations. Therefore his question asked about how the partners in each couple “used” talk in specific interactions in the interviews. Insight into these usages helped in addressing the content-oriented researchable questions (including several beyond the ones mentioned in Chapter 2).

In Stina and Stephen’s conversation, one focus for analysis was what relational goals their talk may have accomplished. Another focus was the image of themselves as a couple that they communicated to the interviewer through their talk. In order to take what went on in this piece of interaction and make it useful for the further analysis of her researchable questions, Eva entertained questions such as these:

- What might the local speaking situation in the interview have meant for this conversation?
- What might the contemporary gender politics of Swedish society have meant for the conversation?
- Were there other couples in the study who talked in similar ways about gender equality? If there were, could some conclusions about this kind of talk-as-action be drawn across the couples?
- If there were other couples who talked in similar ways, did these couples have anything else in common with Stina and Stephen, such as demographics or some features of their housework or childcare arrangements?
- Further, did these couples talk in this way only when they talked about gender equality and housework, or were there other topics for which similar instances of talk-as-action were prevalent?
- Finally, what could it have meant that the [members of the] couples were interviewed together, rather than separately: would their accounts have been different if they were interviewed separately?

This example gives you a flavor of the analytical procedures we will describing in this chapter. Before we move to analytical procedures, you need to be familiar with the analytical framework for them.

**Analytical framework**

Context always matters. This claim is at the foundation of the general framework for this book. When analyzing interviews, context has to be taken into account, whether it be the interpersonal context of a conversation, or the larger socio-cultural context of a country. In this section, we consider what the centrality of context implies for how to conceive of individual thinking, reasoning, and talking. In what follows, we draw on the work of Michael Billig, a British critical social psychologist. What we write here is based upon Billig's ideas in conjunction with the ideas of other researchers. Our purpose is not to give a full representation of these ideas, but to acquaint you those aspects that we have found especially helpful.

**Rhetoric**

The word *rhetoric* is always used in reference to persuading or convincing others. You have probably heard the label “empty rhetoric” applied to an utterance made up mainly of tricks meant to sway the listener's opinions in the speaker's direction. It is not surprising, therefore, that rhetoric has been called “the art of persuasion.” Much has been written about this art. Writers on rhetoric in classical and early modern times divided the rhetorical knowledge necessary for good speakers into esthetic and pragmatic dimensions. The esthetic dimensions concern rules for elegance and eloquence. The pragmatic dimensions concern how speakers might best succeed in persuading their listeners. For the purpose of this chapter – studying talk as action – it is the pragmatic aspects of rhetoric that are of interest.

The pragmatic aspects of rhetoric concern the listeners’ psychology: a speaker who wants to influence listeners needs to know what is most likely to change opinions in the type of audience he or she is addressing. To be effective persuaders, speakers therefore study their audiences and note what effect their words have on them, and what turns of speech seem most effective. On formal occasions such as political speech-making, such scrutiny is expected of the speaker. But rhetorical scrutiny is also a feature of everyday conversations; for instance, most people plan ahead before a difficult conversation. Also, most people have found themselves thinking back on a conversation, wondering what went wrong, what it was in what they said that made a persuasion attempt fail.

The term “rhetoric” is most often used about interactions when a speaker is deliberately setting out to persuade somebody else. However, many other types of interaction have a rhetorical character. It is, for instance, a pervasive characteristic of talk that it is tailored to a specific audience and takes the speaker’s knowledge about that audience into account. In the next subsection, we follow Michael Billig in considering speaking, and by implication also thinking, as fundamentally social and therefore rhetorical.

**Talking, thinking, and rhetoric**
That *speaking* is rhetorical – that it takes characteristics of its audience and that audience’s possible reactions into account – is easy to see. Speaking, after all, is directed to others, often in immediate give-and-take with them. It may take a bit more reflection to accept that *thinking* is also rhetorical; in other words, that people usually think in ways analogous to speaking to others. But consider how children learn to think. They learn through interactions in which they are spoken to by others. Eventually children learn not only to speak but also to think within the framework that the speakers’ words and categories provided. Therefore both thinking and talking are fundamentally social activities: they both began, after all, in interactions with others. The rhetorical aspect of talking and thinking does not vanish when children grow up, though it may be less overt as people grow older and are better able to keep their thoughts to themselves. As you read the rest of the chapter, we therefore urge you to keep in mind what Michael Billig calls “...the irreducibly argumentative aspects of thinking” (1995, p. 113).

**Language, categorization, and argumentation**

All languages provide their users with more than one way to talk about, and think about, the world and what happens to them in that world. In fact, a person’s language usually provides a wide variety of ways to talk about any specific situation or event. We all know from personal experience that two observers of the same event describe it differently. They may use different words to describe the same phenomenon, and in so doing categorize that phenomenon in different ways. Think of Stina and Stephen who talked about sharing housework as something that causes disagreement and conflict in everyday life. Their talk placed sharing in a negatively charged category – a category of marital “risk factors,” perhaps? In Eva’s study there were also a number of couples who talked about the sharing of housework as what really helped them to avoid disagreement and conflict in their everyday life. Their talk placed sharing in a positively charged category – a category of marital “peace factors,” perhaps?

People are generally aware that several ways of categorizing a phenomenon are possible. In the case of the couples in the study, they had access to the same language, and that language enabled them to place the phenomenon of sharing housework in different categories. People also generally know the arguments of more than one side: they know the arguments for their own chosen categorization but also, though perhaps in less detail, the arguments for other categorizations. In the case of the couples, they all knew the range of views about sharing housework, because such issues were widely debated in the Nordic countries.

If we had brought together Stina and Stephen with Kalle and Kristina (a couple who had emphasized the great merits of sharing housework equally), each couple could have argued for their own position. But they would also have been able to argue against the other couple’s position. That is, both couples likely would know enough about the arguments for the other position to find ways of arguing against those arguments. Without knowledge of the other side, no argumentation would be possible; people would be able only to announce their own position, but not to engage with the arguments for the other position. It is knowing the arguments of the other side that makes people able to oppose other people’s arguments effectively, that is, to negate. People’s ability to negate is what makes rhetoric both possible and inevitable in human interaction (Billig, 1995).

The words “arguments” and “argumentative” as used here should not be taken as only referring to situations where there is disagreement or where speakers are angry with one another. We use these words to focus attention on the argumentative character of much ordinary conversation where there is no disagreement or ill will. Consider the interaction between Stina, Stephen, and the interviewer that you read at the beginning of the chapter. No criticism of Stina and Stephen’s position had been broached in that situation, yet something “argumentative” certainly occurred in their talk. What happened was that, even though no criticism of their own position had been voiced, they nonetheless justified their own position. They did this by criticizing
other people’s position. In conversation, people often justify their own position even when it has not explicitly been called into question and even when they do not expect any counterargument.

Writers on rhetoric suggest that criticism (of others) and justification (of one’s own position) are central to all kinds of argumentation, and also that they are closely connected. As the philosopher Chaïm Perelman put it: “Every justification presupposes the existence or eventuality of an unfavourable evaluation of what we justify” (1979, p. 138). We can put it more starkly: people do not justify their actions and opinions unless they hear, or expect to hear, some criticism of those actions or opinions. What they expect the criticism to be depends on the context in which the argumentation occurs.

**Rhetorical contexts**

Words and phrases do not have fixed meanings; therefore, what a particular utterance means cannot be fully understood without taking its *rhetorical context* into account. “Rhetorical context” is a term we have adapted from Billig (1991; 1996). There are two ways in which the rhetorical context is fundamentally social, both of which are of interest to the interpretative researcher. To begin with, the topic of a discussion often relates to societal issues, making larger social values and norms at least indirectly part of the discussion. Therefore, by arguing in favor of one position on the issue that is discussed, a speaker may be put in a morally compromised position in the eyes of the other speakers. This first dimension of the rhetorical context, then, will include the social relations between the speakers and the listeners.

Let us look again at the brief interaction between Stina, Stephen, and the interviewer with the first dimension of the rhetorical context in mind. We can see that they were talking about a topic that was potentially highly charged in their cultural setting and explicitly related to social values and norms: gender equality in the home. The social values that will be brought into such a conversation are not necessarily determined beforehand, though. There is the value of equality, of course. Stina and Stephen, if you recall, also brought in the values of harmony and freedom from conflict and strife. In the interview, Stina and Stephen were in an unusual social situation, having promised to tell a stranger about their daily life. The interviewer, being an interviewer, did not interject an opinion about the competing merits of peace at home versus equal sharing. However, considering many of the topics in the interview, it would not be surprising if Stina and Stephen thought that the interviewer was in favor of gender equality in the home. This may have made them apprehensive about being placed in a morally compromised position. Or not: they may have felt that it was the presumed position of the interviewer that was compromised.

Now we turn to the second way in which the rhetorical context is social. This concerns the opinions that the speaker is arguing for, and the counter-opinions that the speaker is explicitly or implicitly criticizing. Note that this is the case even if the listeners that are present do not hold the counter-opinions or, if they do hold them, have not expressed them. The counter-opinions will nevertheless be part of the rhetorical context within which the speaker is speaking.

If we look at Stina and Stephen’s interaction with this second dimension of the rhetorical context in mind, we see that their talk can be read as an argument for the value of keeping the peace and avoiding quarrels. But it can also be read as an argument against sharing housework equally. (It was their friends’ desire to share equally that led to squabbles.) Reading their conversation from this perspective allows the researcher to draw some inferences about the argumentative landscape within which this couple operated.

**The rhetorical context of interview interactions**

From a rhetorical perspective, participants’ talk in interviews does more than answer questions. When participants are answering the interview questions, they are also continually creating their relationship to the other people taking part in the interview (such as the interviewer). Often they are also creating a relationship to absent people who are mentioned in the interview conversation.
(such as “other couples” in the example above). And the participants will through their talk be enacting what it means to them to be members of categories that are made salient in the interview (such as “couples who do not share housework equally”). Finally, the participants will be enacting what the topic of the conversation means to them (such as “the value of sharing housework”). How can researchers study such a complicated melee of relations? This is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

**Analytical procedures**

Here we present a selection of features of talk-as-action, and what you can learn from studying them. Researchers have come to the study of talk-as-action from different theoretical perspectives and with different analytical goals, which direct them to focus on different features of talk. There exists a substantial literature about the action-properties of talk, including the different perspectives. We do not enter into the existing debates and contentions among researchers. For interested readers we give a list of further readings at the end of the chapter.

**Talk-as-action and the researchable questions in a study**

First, let us set the stage for our presentation: the analyses of talk-as-action that we describe are set within the larger framework of the researchable questions of a project. This means that the purpose of these analyses is not to study specific instances of talk-as-action for their own sake. They may indeed, for certain research purposes, be interesting for their own sake. Here, however, the focus is on how analysis of talk-as-action does can help address the researchable questions that a researcher brought to a study. As a rule, therefore, the researcher will not choose beforehand to analyze one specific type of talk-as-action rather than another.

**Identifying pieces of talk to study**

Identifying the pieces of talk to analyze is not always easy, but the work of previous researchers can serve as your guide. They have found that certain forms of talk often signal that some conversational work of interest to the researchable questions in the project may be ongoing. We refer to these forms of talk as *conversational features.* You can use these conversational features to guide you to the pieces of talk to excerpt. Note that there is no one-to-one relationship between a certain conversational feature and a certain type of conversational work. We therefore reiterate the advice of pioneer researchers that researchers should learn to recognize as many conversational features as possible. Familiarity with these features enables the researcher to identify them when they occur and use these occurrences as starting points for their analysis (Antaki, Billig, Edwards & Potter, 2003).

In what follows, we describe a selection of conversational features that researchers have identified as indicators that some significant conversational work may be performed. We also describe the types of conversational work to which the features contribute. At the end of the chapter, we suggest further reading for those interested in learning more about the conversational features we describe, about other features than the ones we describe, and about other ways of analyzing than the ones we describe.

As always in interpretative research, your excerpts of talk to analyze should be generous. You should include enough to indicate the immediate rhetorical context.

**The phases of the analysis**

The analytical procedure we describe has three phases. The first phase consists of identifying and excerpting instances of conversational features to study. The second phase consists of
investigating the work that a particular occurrence of a feature performs within the rhetorical context of the excerpted text. The third phase consists of relating these analyses to the researchable questions in one’s study.

In each of the subsections that follow, we describe what the second phase of analysis can encompass by using examples from our research interviews. These excerpts had already been identified in the first phase of the analysis in our studies. How the researcher proceeds in this phase varies depending on the type of interaction, the type of conversational feature, the researchable question that is being addressed, and the overall purpose of the study. It is also typical to find variations in procedures between researchers in the third phase of analysis, when the task is to relate the “local” action in a specific interaction to the larger issues in a study. Consequently, analyses of talk-as-action do not follow detailed, universal, or routine steps that can be laid out beforehand. The examples we provide are meant to give substance enough for beginners to start the second phase of analysis of their own material. We have chosen this strategy for presentation, because the best way to learn how to do these kinds of analyses is by reading other researchers’ analyses, and by doing analyses of their own material. As in all interpretative analyses, it is quite common for researchers to move back and forth among the phases of analysis.

A note about transcription and listening. The transcription procedures and the notation system that we recommended in Chapter 7 is likely to be detailed enough for much analysis of talk-as-action. However, sometimes you may be helped by information about simultaneous talk, interruptions, or voice inflection, etc., which is not recorded in that type of transcription. In such cases, once you have identified a piece of interaction to study, a good strategy is to listen to again that section of the interview. You can either make notes of any specific characteristics that may be of relevance, or you can amend the original transcription by adding more detail (Taylor, 2001).

Analyzing conversational features

“Witcraft” – statements plus justifications

When a speaker makes a statement and immediately follows it by a justification of that statement, this is an indication that something of analytical interest may be going on. Perhaps an opinion has been questioned or doubted by somebody else and the speaker is making a counter argument for his or her own position. However, it also frequently happens that speakers fortify their statements with justifications even when no disagreement is present or seems forthcoming. Such instances are examples of what Michael Billig has called witcraft. To quote him: “…witcraft involves reasons being framed cunningly to answer, and thereby contradict, other reasons” (1996, p. 115). That is, speakers give reasons for their own standpoints, they often smuggle in arguments against other contradictory standpoints that they may not ever even mention.

For the researcher who is analyzing talk-as-action, locating such instances of witcraft can help to identify issues that are controversial in a particular social setting or personally troublesome for a speaker, and that therefore merit closer analysis. Let us give an example from one of Eva’s studies in which she did one-on-one interviews with women about daily life at work and at home (Magnusson, 1998). Barbara, one of the participants, told Eva that she demanded a lot of herself in the household; she had to have everything “just so.” Eva then asked if this meant that she saw herself as a “conscientious housekeeper.”1 Barbara answered: “Yes! I mangle our clothes [.]. I don’t clean house a lot. I mangle and iron everything except underwear! [laughs] And some have stopped doing all such things. But it [.]. I do it for my own pleasure, because I want it that way!”

1 The Swedish expression was “noggrann husmor,” which does not have direct translation into English. “Husmor” denotes a woman who is in charge of the household, but is not necessarily a full-time housewife. Such was Barbara’s situation: she worked full-time in an office job.
After her initial “Yes!” in this excerpt, we see that Barbara mentioned a few of her many time-consuming housework practices as illustrations. At the end of the extract, she gave her reason for doing these tasks: her own pleasure in the results. These two utterances combine a statement (“I mangle and iron everything except underwear”) with a justification (“But it [...] I do it for my own pleasure, because I want it that way”).

When the researcher has identified such a combination during the first phase of the analysis, the second phase consists of considering it in the rhetorical context within which the participant is speaking. In this case, there was first the interview context: Eva had not asked Barbara about her reasons for wanting to be a “conscientious housekeeper” nor expressed any opinions or arguments to do with housework. However, it is likely that the topics of the interview would have led Barbara to see Eva as someone in favor of equality measures.

The second context was the larger society, including norms and values. The time when the interview was done was a period of intense political debate in Sweden about many kinds of gender-equality issues, including sharing housework in the family. A hint about how Barbara saw herself in relation to this larger context can be found in her observation, “And some have stopped doing all such things.” This observation indicates that she was aware that housework chores such as mangle and ironing all clothes had become obsolete for an undefined number of women captured by her word “some.” Perhaps she, then, could be seen as old-fashioned compared to them.

The third rhetorical context consists of the opinions that the speaker is arguing for, and the counter-opinions that the speaker is explicitly or implicitly criticizing. In the excerpt, Barbara argued for the opinion that “mangle and ironing everything except underwear” is a valuable pursuit. She ended her account, after all, by saying, “...I do it for my own pleasure, because I want it that way.” Words such as “pleasure” and “want it” certainly give the impression that these chores were of value to her. What, if any, counter opinions was she criticizing? As we can see, her account contained no explicit arguments against counter opinions, but maybe there were implicit ones? As a Swedish woman in her mid-forties, she was certainly aware of existing counter opinions, such as that women who did these chores were trapped in outmoded traditions and conventions, or were even “oppressed.” It is possible that some of these counter opinions were on her mind when she mentioned women who had stopped doing these chores. If so, the immediately following “But it...” that began her final sentence, followed by her emphasis on “my own pleasure” and “wanting it that way,” may have been her implicit way of criticizing those counter opinions. She was saying that they did not apply to her: she did these things because she wanted to.

**What can you learn about analysis from this example?**

1. Spontaneous justifications may signal that participants feel that something they said could provoke counterarguments. (2) By providing immediate justifications – for example, in the form of reasons for an action – participants may be pre-empting counterarguments. (3) Instances of statements-plus-justifications in interviews probably indicate points of controversy or conflict for participants. (4) Such instances may be especially informative for researchers who are interested in the ideals, cultural meanings, or opinions in their participant’s surroundings.

Expressions of disagreement

Expressions of disagreement in interviews are likely to signal issues that are important for the participants. These may be disagreements between the people in the interview room, but it may also be the case that a participant expresses disagreement with someone who is not present. In an example from Eva’s couples study, one of the men, Lars, told the interviewer that he picked up the children from daycare once a week or so. His wife, Lene, immediately contradicted his statement by exclaiming, “You don’t pick up the kids once a week!” She went on to claim that, in fact, he never did. There followed what sounded like a brief negotiation that ended in a joint recollection of a short period during which Lars had picked up the children from daycare fairly regularly. Today, however, he did not. Through this negotiation, their initial disagreement was
resolved into a new, joint version of Lars’s record of daycare duties. The new version agreed better with the initial description that Lene had presented than his original statement had.

How might you analyze disagreements such as this in an interview? After the researcher in the first phase of analysis has identified and described an instance of disagreement, the second phase may begin with a focus on content. What important issues might the disagreement (and in the case of Lars and Lene its resolution) be signaling? For instance, are there indications in other parts of the interview that picking up the children from daycare was an inflamed issue for this couple? And are there indications that the husband and wife in this couple lived with discordant versions of how several daily responsibilities were distributed between them? In that case, what were the other areas of daily life about which their versions diverged?

The next thing to do in the second phase of the analysis is to explore how the disagreement “works” in its local rhetorical context. For Lars and Lene above, the context was the interview. The researcher can learn more about the meaning of this particular disagreement for Lars and Lene by studying it in relation to what else took place during the interview. For instance, if the researcher were to find that this was the only instance of disagreement in the interview, it is likely that the issue that they disagreed about had some significance that was worth pursuing further. Alternatively, if Lars and Lene disagreed repeatedly in the interview, and they disagreed about many different topics, the topic of this particular disagreement might not be significant. Instead, the researcher might be interested in comparing this couple with other couples, who rarely disagreed in the interview context.

A further analytical use of instances of explicit disagreement is to use the instance of disagreement as a sensitizing device to identify parallel, but maybe less explicit, instances of disagreement in other interviews. It is not unusual for participants to express disagreement in indirect ways that are difficult to detect unless the researcher’s attention has been sharpened by the more explicit instances. If and when you identify disagreements in other interviews, it is a good idea to look across the study group for similarities in the topics that participants disagree about. Certain topics may be found to be especially likely to evoke disagreement, and they may therefore be worth examining more closely.

To get a fuller picture of what a particular disagreement may mean to participants, it is a good idea to study how they speak about disagreements – their own and others’ – that have occurred outside the interview. For instance, Eva found that many couples (such as Stina and Stephen) emphasized that they rarely or never disagreed about anything, and that they “never, ever” quarreled with one another. The same couples also spoke disparagingly – often almost in the same breath – about couples who did disagree openly. Other couples told the interviewer about disagreements and quarrels that they had had, and yet other couples told about ongoing disagreements. When Eva followed up these different ways of talking about disagreements, she found a pattern across the couples: the couples who emphasized that they never quarreled were the ones who did not share housework and childcare equally, whereas the couples who talked about explicit disagreements were the ones who shared housework and childcare more equally. Eva used these differences in patterns of speaking about disagreements as the starting point for the third phase of analysis in her study.

**Contrasting and extreme cases**

Contrasting is a conversational feature that brings into a conversation a threatening or particularly unattractive alternative to a situation that the speaker presents as normal, good, or taken for granted. By depicting the alternative ideas or practices in negative ways, the speaker makes his or her favored practices or ideas appear superior. Recall how Stina and Stephen, in our first example, talked about other couples who “squabbled.” In another interview, Johan, a Swedish man, replied, when he was asked what made his wife Jessica a good person to live with: “Neither one makes unreasonable demands on the other. I think many relationships split up because of that: people keep demanding lots of things of each other. After all, we are two single individuals [...] One sees families where it
doesn't work our way [as flexibly as in their family]. And I would never be able to live like that.” Johan then described how the women in these other families demanded that their husbands come home from work at a set time each day, thus preventing the men from coming home when it suited them. Johan's contrasting can be seen in his word choice. He used expressions that conjure up unpleasantness and trouble, such as “unreasonable demands,” and “keep demanding lots of things of each other,” when he talked about the other couples whose life-style he would not be able to stand. And he used words that convey valued qualities, such as “flexibility” and “individuals” when he talked about the arrangements in his own family.

In talk that contrasts practices or ideas, speakers often use extreme case formulations. Extreme case formulations are expressions that describe phenomena in ways that bring to mind the outer edges of the range of possible judgments (Pomerantz, 1986; Edwards, 2000). An extreme case formulation may contain superlatives, such as best, worst, most, or biggest, or extreme adverbs such as always, never, absolutely, or phrases such as “everybody has the same problems” or “nobody likes him.” Johan, for instance, used the expression “unreasonable demands,” and the phrase “I would never be able to live like that.”

Locating extreme expressions and phrases in interview talk is a strategy for identifying instances of contrasting that merit further analysis. For instance, in Eva's couples study, Ulla, one of the participating women, argued that for the sake of their children, her husband should not be absent from home so often. Ulrik, her husband, answered that he did not think that he was away so often that it could be bad for the children. He continued, “just look at other children – look at X, her daughter grew up practically without a father, and there is nothing wrong with her!” He ended his argument, “so, if I am not home until after their bedtime a couple of nights a week, I really don’t think that will hurt them.” By conjuring up the extreme case of X's daughter and her absent father, Ulrik made his own less extreme absences look acceptable, at least to himself. When speakers use extreme case formulations in a conversation, it is a likely indication that something contentious or conflictual is underway. So it proved in this couple; they had a long discussion in the interview about prioritizing one's work or one's children, finally telling the interviewer that this was an issue about which they had not been able to agree. Here we see that this analysis touches on the previous section about disagreements. You may therefore want to pick up on the suggestions for further analysis in that section.

Metacommunication in interviews

It is not unusual that participants in interviews comment on their own stories or statements or on what is happening in the interview situation. Such comments are called metacommunications. The comments can be of different kinds, such as disclaimers, evaluative remarks, or reflexive comments, but they all relate to something that has been, or is, going on in the interview. A participant may express astonishment about what he or she has just told the interviewer, as when a participant in one of Jeanne’s studies said “I can't believe I'm telling you this!” after expressing criticism of her professional colleagues. It also may happen that a participant comments on the interviewer, as when a participant in one of Eva's studies exclaimed, “...it is so terribly easy to talk to you!” And sometimes, the participant's comment summarizes and evaluates a previous account. Such was the case when “Birgitta,” a participant in one of Eva's studies, exclaimed, “Yes, in our house things are completely traditional, so that all professional women would go crazy if they heard it!” (Magnusson, 1998). She made this comment after she had described who did what daily chores in her home.

Metacommunications in interviews are potentially interesting to the researcher, because they may be a sign that the participant is managing some kind of interactional issue or trouble related to the topic of the talk. It may be trouble in relation to some group or person outside the interview setting (such as the profession, in the first example above), or it may be trouble of some kind in the interview setting. Researchers are therefore well advised to analyze metacommunications closely. As always, such analyses should take into account the local and
larger rhetorical contexts in which the metacommunication appears. To illustrate, let us look closer at Birgitta’s statement above.

To begin with, Birgitta’s metacommunication can be taken as a summary of how she had just described the details of the distribution of housework in her family (“completely traditional”). Summarizing like this is a fairly common content-oriented function of metacommunication in interviews. Participants often comment on what they have just said in order to summarize it and perhaps also emphasize some especially important aspect.

However, metacommunications usually also do some interaction work in the interview setting. This was the case in Birgitta’s account. Its first part portrayed her as a traditional housewife (“in our house, things are completely traditional”). Its second part referred to “all professional women,” who, Birgitta said, would be aghast at her traditional household arrangements (“would go crazy”). Birgitta’s expression “professional women”2 had not been used earlier in this interview. Did it therefore carry some special significance at this point? And what, if any, interaction work did Birgitta’s metacommunication do? To begin to answer questions such as these, the researcher needs to take the rhetorical context into account.

What was the rhetorical context? The first dimension of the rhetorical context was the social relations between the participant and the interviewer, within the larger setting of the gender equality-political debates in contemporary Swedish society. The second dimension of the rhetorical context was the questions and opinions about sharing housework that had been discussed in the interview. In this case, the interviewer (Eva) was an academic researcher and a psychologist, and it is likely that Birgitta regarded her as one of “all professional women.” Therefore, when Birgitta exclaimed, “all professional women would go crazy if they heard it!”, did she perhaps imply that Eva would also “go crazy” about the lack of equality in her household? Did Birgitta’s utterance perhaps function as an excuse for having an unequal sharing situation in her home? That is one possible interpretation. Are other interpretations possible? Certainly. For instance, what if her exclamation about “all professional women” was instead a way to distance herself from the opinions that she ascribed to these women? If that interpretation is correct, Birgitta’s metacommunication might actually, via the detour of referring to professional women, be voicing a disagreement with Eva. Birgitta might be telling Eva that she did not share the set of values about gender equality in the home that she ascribed to “all professional women,” implicitly including Eva. In that case, Birgitta’s metacommunication is an instance of disagreement with the interviewer, and should be treated analytically as such (see the earlier section about disagreements).

Variability in accounts: when participants contradict themselves

Researchers almost invariably find that people sometimes contradict themselves while being interviewed and that they often do so without acknowledging that a contradiction took place. Sometimes the contradictions are evident, such as when a participant makes statements about a certain issue that clearly contradict one another. Often, though, participants do not state explicit contradictions but show variability in their accounts, for instance by using words with distinctly different meanings in different parts of the interview. Such variability will usually on closer scrutiny prove to contain or imply one or more contradictions.

Let us exemplify. Think back to the section about statements and justifications, where Barbara said, “Yes! I mangle our clothes […] but I don’t clean house a lot. I mangle and iron everything except underwear! [laughs] And some have stopped doing all such things. But it […] I do it for my own pleasure, because I want it that way!” In this account, Barbara emphasized that the reason why she did this type of housework, though others had stopped doing it, was that she enjoyed the results. Fair enough. Then six lines further down in the interview transcript, Barbara said, “…because […] they can come and

2 The Swedish word that we translated as “professional women” is “yrkeskvinnor,” a word that signifies a woman who has a high education and a fairly responsible position at work. Birgitta herself had a high-school education and about a year of college. She worked in a position as a secretary to a high official in a government office.
visit whenever they want to [...] the place won’t be messy. And I think that that would be harder for me, you know.” In this second account, she brought in “they,” who might come unannounced to visit her but who, because of her tidiness, would not find the house messy. If “they” had found the house messy, she also said, it would have been worse (“harder”) for her than doing the work to keep the house tidy. So, now we are faced with two reasons why Barbara was a conscientious housekeeper: her own pleasure and other people’s judgments. The reasons seem contradictory: she first says that she keeps her house tidy because she wants to, and then that she does it because she feels pressure from others.

What can the researcher learn from contradictory statements and variability in interviews? That depends on the researchable questions that are in focus. The researcher might be interested in the register of different meanings and contradictory meanings of an issue that a participant uses while talking about that issue. Further than that, the researcher may be interested in the register of meanings available to the whole group of participants in a study. In these cases, the researcher may want to analyze all the interviews for how participants use particular meanings in relation to a certain topic. Additionally, the researcher may be interested in how participants relate to the different rhetorical contexts evoked in an interview. For instance, participants may vary the meanings they give to a topic between different rhetorical contexts, and thereby position themselves or others in specific ways in different parts of the conversation (Magnusson, 1998).

Emphasizing consensus and corroboration by others

Emphasizing consensus is a way for speakers to give a sense of legitimacy to an opinion by presenting it as something that is agreed upon by a large number of people. Emphasizing consensus can also be used to convey a sense of objective existence to a claim, for example by describing it as corroborated by independent observers.

Let us give an example from Eva’s couples study. Mogens and Mette described their sharing of housework as very traditional, with Mette staying at home to take care of their children and the housework. Immediately after this description, Mogens said that he saw parallels to their arrangement in many other couples: “...there is a tendency that the sex role pattern is more divided again. [...] It’s to be father who works and mother who takes care of the children.” Mette agreed with him, saying: “Yes, I can see among my female friends, that they take care of the children, and then the father comes home late from work.” Mette and Mogens, through their references to “the sex role pattern,” to “a tendency,” and to “my female friends,” portrayed their own housework distribution as part of a larger social change back to a traditional pattern, and not just their personal fad. When reading this exchange, you need to know that this couple’s “traditional” arrangement went distinctly against the ideal in contemporary Danish society. It may be, therefore, that Mette and Mogens felt that they needed to justify their own arrangements by describing them as widely shared.

For the researcher, identifying instances where a participant recruits others for support is often a fruitful way of locating issues that are in some way troublesome for that participant, and therefore worthy of closer analysis. Mette and Mogens’ assertion of the increasing social consensus about unequal sharing led Eva to look for similar instances in other interviews, and eventually to do a detailed analysis of the various rhetorical strategies and conversational features that couples with traditional household arrangements used when arguing against the value of equal sharing of housework (Magnusson, 2006, 2008a).

Reported speech in interviews

Interview participants sometimes bring absent others into the conversation by quoting them verbatim. The term for this is reported speech. An instance of reported speech in an interview is often a sign that something worthy of closer analysis may be going on. For instance, speakers often use reported speech by authoritative persons to corroborate their own opinions. Another common use is to use reported speech to indirectly offer an opinion for which they themselves
do not want to be held accountable. Yet another use is for speakers to vivify an assertion that they have just made. An example was when May, a participant in a study of organization change that Eva did, told the interviewer that she was irritated because her work colleagues expected her to take care of most of the social functions in the workplace. She then exclaimed: *Just fancy, they take it for granted:* “Why, she will fix it” [..] *Yes, you hear that a lot:* “May will fix that, we can take it easy.” By inserting these quotes from her work colleagues into her talk, she is bringing in their talk as testimony that her assertion ought to be believed. These pieces of reported speech by May, who was a low-level office worker, gave Eva some of the initial material and analytical ideas for a study of the intertwining of social class and femininity in workplaces (Magnusson, 1997b).

In other cases, reported speech is used to highlight or emphasize disagreement about some contentious point. Paulina, a woman in Eva’s couples study, told the interviewer that it was important to her that she and her husband Petri both took independent initiatives and had equal responsibilities in the home. She then contrasted their practices with those of other couples, in which *..somehow the woman has all the threads in her hands and keeps giving advice to her husband about everything he ought to do, how he should feed the children, and so on. I don’t think I do that:* [quotes the other woman]: “Now it’s dinner time for the kid, you have to go and feed her!” *We have nothing like that.* Immediately after this instance of reported speech, Paulina and Petri jointly emphasized that it was of value for them that they were equally proficient on all household and childcare tasks. Paulina and Petri’s use of reported speech to disparage “traditional” couples led Eva to ask how the couples with the most equal sharing patterns talked about themselves in relation to their social surroundings. It turned out to be common to talk in terms of distance and contrast, and sometimes about being seen as avant-garde or odd or even deviant (Magnusson, 2006).

You may have noticed that the examples of reported speech above also contain some contrasting and extreme case formulations. This is to be expected; speakers often combine conversational features in their accounts.

**Descriptions and facts**

One function of many conversational features is that they contribute to depicting a speaker’s account as factual, objective, and trustworthy, and therefore not just the speaker’s personal opinion. This function of talk-as-action is called “fact construction,” because it makes a speaker’s account appear anchored in something (facts) outside the speaker's mind or opinions (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Speer, 2005). Facts, after all, are external to the speaker; they are not products of the speaker's mind, fancy, or opinion. Of the conversational features we have described above, the features contrasting, and consensus and corroboration, sometimes in combination with appeals to outside authority, are especially often used to construct “facts.” If you refer back to the interview with Mette and Mogens above, for instance, you will see that they stated as a fact – that is, something not based on their opinions – that many other couples had also reverted to a traditional family pattern.

Researchers have identified several techniques or strategies that people regularly use to construct facts in their talk. If the researcher is studying a controversial topic it will be useful to identify instances where these techniques are used. This is so, because it is quite common for speakers to use speech forms that make an account seem factual when they argue about controversial or morally contentious issues. Below, we introduce some fact construction techniques that researchers have described. Identifying instances when these techniques are used may be helpful as pointers to further analysis. At the end of the chapter we give suggestions for further reading about these techniques.

**Descriptions and vivid descriptions**

To describe a phenomenon or event is one way to give it a fact-like character. When a speaker describes something, he or she does so in ways that appear neutral and objective. The resulting description is made to appear as if “outside” the describer's own opinions and values that is, as a
fact. However, when speakers describe something, they always do so in a specific rhetorical context and from a specific speaking position. Therefore, when speakers describe events and phenomena, their descriptions may at the same time create an impression of how responsibility, agency, and power were distributed in the described situation. In this way a description may, for instance, suggest who is to be blamed and who is to be praised for a particular outcome in the situation or event that the speaker described (Edwards & Potter 1992; Speer, 2005).

**Vivid descriptions** entail describing an event or a situation with many contextual details and incidents. By giving a vivid description a speaker can give a particularly strong impression of authenticity and factuality to an account, almost like saying “I was there.” Vivid description can be used to talk about problematic or controversial events or other phenomena about which people disagree. Speakers sometimes enhance vivid description with reported speech; that is, quotes, or alleged quotes, from participants in the events that are recounted (Buttny 2003).

In an example from Eva’s couples study, Lars, one of the Danish men, argued that his son and daughter were fundamentally different because they belonged to different sex categories, not because they may have been brought up differently: “Now, we have a boy and a girl, and you can’t believe how different they are just because they are of different sexes! You may say that boys cry less because people have told them ‘You mustn’t cry! Be a man!’ But I don’t think that’s how it hangs together.” He followed his argument with a vivid description of his three-year-old son: “...if you give him a sword, then you can really see how two thousand years of masculinity comes out: He squeezes his eyebrows together and lifts his sword!”

### Systematic vagueness in descriptions

Rich and vivid descriptions carry their own risks, because too much detail may provide the listener with material for contestation. When a speaker takes the opposite description strategy and uses vague and global expressions, it may be difficult for listeners to find concrete points to question. At the same time, such a vague account may sometimes be enough to form the sense of factuality that the speaker wishes to create. If you refer back to the conversation between Stina and Stephen at the beginning of the chapter, you will see that they talked in a vague and unspecific way about “other couples.”

### Empiricist accounting in descriptions

“Empiricist accounting” is the term used for descriptions in which facts and phenomena are presented without a present narrator. This strategy makes the phenomena appear as if they were agents that more or less force themselves on the describer (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). The describer is either “deleted” from the account (for instance, by using passive voice constructions), or treated as a passive recipient of events (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Though empiricist accounting is more common in research reports than in conversations, it is not unknown in “ordinary” conversation, where it often points to topics and issues that are contentious.

In Eva’s couples study, empiricist accounting was used by some men who argued for the necessity or naturalness of dividing housework and childcare according to a traditionally gendered pattern. In such accounts, genes, nature, and “motherliness” featured as the agents. For example, John, one of the Finnish men, explained that the uneven distribution of housework and childcare in their family had come about naturally. This meant that the distribution was a consequence of biological differences between him and his wife. In his argumentation, he recruited genetic arguments such as: “But I think it has something to do with the female and male genes, that it lies – I could try, but it [the responsibility for childcare] lies closer to – [Jenny, his wife].” Later in the interview, John further explained why he did not take as much part in caring for their children as Jenny did, by referring to what he saw as fundamental differences between them: “...but perhaps it is still that mother-, the ‘mother thing’ is perhaps more a – It is more an instinct that is more innate I think, sort of stronger.”

John here recruited “female and male genes,” “the mother thing,” and “an instinct that is more innate” as the causes of his and his wife’s differing behaviors in the home. He thereby
moved the issue of gender equality in the home from being about ideology and justice to being about genetic differences. Explaining the uneven distribution of housework and childcare as caused by genes and instincts can make the distribution seem natural and not the speaker’s own “fault.” The distribution may even seem to be a fact of nature that presses itself upon the speaker.

**Category entitlement**

Speakers often bolster the truth of a description by referring to their membership in a particular category whose members are assumed to be especially knowledgeable about the issue under discussion. When speakers identify themselves as members of an especially knowledgeable category, this may lead people to assume the veracity of what they say. It is as if the category in itself is all that is needed (Potter, 1996). Another type of category entitlement comes from having had some unusual experience, such as being present at a road accident or natural disaster. Being a first person witness gives an entitlement to stronger feelings than being a listener to a story about the accident (Sacks, 1992).

**The purposes of analyzing talk-as-action**

As we conclude this chapter, we want to remind readers that the purpose of the types of analysis we have described here is not to produce a list of conversational features that were used by the participants in a study. Rather, the focus of analysis is always (as our examples illustrated) on the researchable questions or sub-questions that motivated the search through the interview material for conversational features. The conversational features that researcher identifies and studies serve as pointers to portions of an interview where difficult matters were being talked about, or where the interaction was conflicted.
Chapter 11
Analyzing for implicit cultural meanings

In this chapter we describe an analytical framework and two types of analytical procedures for studying how people's talk and meaning-making relate to locally and globally shared sets of meanings. The analytical procedures we describe require that researchers pay close attention to language and language use, as well as features of the larger culture and the local context. The researcher also needs to pay close attention to the relation of these larger cultural features to individual meaning-making.

We describe two kinds of analytical procedures. One kind focuses mainly on how people take shared sets of meanings into use in their talk and meaning-making. The second kind focuses mainly on how shared sets of meanings encourage certain ways of understanding oneself and others and discourage other ways. The procedures we describe treat interviews and other kinds of conversations as always part of a larger social world beyond the immediate context in which the words are said. Thinking about conversations in this way moves the researcher's attention to what we call implicit cultural meanings – that is, the meanings about some area of life that members of an interpretive community share and take for granted.

We begin with an overview of the analytical framework for the analytical procedures we describe in this chapter. After that, we describe analytical procedures that enable a researcher to discern the implicit cultural meanings that a group of people share, and to discern how they take them into use. In the final section of the chapter we describe analytical procedures that enable researchers to study individual meaning-making with a focus on how implicit cultural meanings may inform or restrict how people understand themselves and others.

Analytical framework: Implicit cultural meanings

The general theoretical framework of this book holds that personal meanings and meaning-making are not idiosyncratic. Personal meanings are always fashioned within the network of possible meanings that are available in a person's local and global cultural surroundings. People always understand events, themselves, and other people against a background of shared meanings. We use the expression implicit cultural meanings to denote the meanings about some issue or area of life that are shared, and taken for granted, by the members of a particular social group or that are commonplace in the culture at large.

An example may clarify what we mean: In the mainstream culture in many societies, it is taken for granted (that is, commonly understood) that if nothing is said to the contrary, a person can be assumed to be heterosexual. This meaning of “a person” as somebody who is heterosexual is cultural in the sense that it is shared by members of mainstream cultures in many societies. And the meaning is implicit because it is usually not voiced, that is, made explicit. Everybody “knows” that one should presume that people are heterosexual unless there is reason to think otherwise. One “knows” this, even if one has never been told outright to make that assumption. It is likely that people in these cultural settings do not consciously decide to make the assumption of heterosexuality every time they make a new acquaintance. Instead, it is as if the assumption has been made a priori: it is a culturally shared pre-conception. Such “knowing” that people are heterosexual unless specifically excepted is kept alive by daily experiences that seem to confirm the unvoiced assumption.

Implicit cultural meanings could be thought of as shared tacit knowledge that enables members of a particular social group to negotiate their daily lives in mutually compatible ways.
The shared meanings smooth people’s navigation through the social landscape of daily life. Members of a certain culture or of a local interpretive community have access to the same sets of implicit cultural meanings, and the same sets of expressions and words that are anchored in these cultural meanings. These cultural meanings and expressions are the resources on which members draw to compose their accounts and stories. You could say that a particular culture’s or interpretive community’s set of implicit cultural meanings are the main resources that the members have in order to make themselves understandable to each other and to themselves. In fact, being a competent member of a particular culture or sub-cultural group means having at hand the implicit cultural meanings shared by members of that group. When a set of implicit cultural meanings has been shared over time, people do not have to refer explicitly to a particular meaning for it to be invoked. Rather, people’s talk typically uses fragments of arguments, idiomatic expressions, or culturally familiar forms of talk to do the invoking (Wetherell, 1998).

One perspective on implicit cultural meanings focuses on the fact that such meanings sometimes and in some settings can be quite powerful. An implicit cultural meaning, if it is dominant, may make certain ways of seeing oneself, expressing a feeling, experiencing an event, or tying a cause to an effect seem to be the expected, normal, or even natural ones. A focus on this feature of implicit cultural meanings, which emphasizes their power to guide people’s meaning-making along particular channels, informs the analytical procedures that we describe in the second half of this chapter.

Another perspective on implicit cultural meanings stresses that the activity of personal meaning-making is inventive. Although people use already-existing pieces of language, culture, and history in their meaning-making, they often assemble something that did not exist before. Viewed from this perspective, speakers may be seen to recruit a particular cultural meaning in their talk in order to achieve a specific purpose, such as persuading a listener or placing themselves in a favorable light. Speakers can use the same cultural meaning in different ways, depending on differences in the rhetorical context, including differences in the speaker’s intentions. Speakers can also refer to different cultural meanings, depending on differences in the rhetorical context. This perspective on implicit cultural meanings will be the focus of the analytical procedures that we describe in the first part of the chapter.

The two perspectives on implicit cultural meanings that we briefly outlined in the two previous paragraphs originate in different theoretical and epistemological traditions. The two perspectives diverge. There is a theoretical divide between conceiving of people as active, voluntary “users” of implicit cultural meanings for their own purposes, or as “responders,” who are influenced and constrained by implicit cultural meanings. This divide has given rise to much debate among interpretative researchers (see for instance Edwards et al, 1995; Parker, 1990a,b; Potter et al, 1990). Our standpoint is that which of the two perspectives on implicit cultural meanings that a researcher chooses should depend on the researcher’s knowledge interest and researchable questions in a particular study. There have also been efforts to find ways to encompass both perspectives within the frame of a study (see for instance Wetherell, 1998). This could mean that one study will contain analyses made from more than one perspective.

**Terminology in this chapter**

You may have noted that our description of implicit cultural meanings in the previous section shows similarities with some existing definitions of terms such as discourses, interpretative repertoires, and interpretative resources, which you may have encountered elsewhere. And you may wonder why we do not use one of those more commonly used terms. We have several answers to this query. Our first answer is that the research literature contains a profusion of different definitions of those terms, and different uses of these definitions. Consequently, learners often find themselves thoroughly bewildered about which definition to take up, and how to put the chosen definition to analytical use. We hope to avoid causing such bewilderment by using a clearly defined term here. We also wanted a term that is clearly located within the larger
theoretical framework for the book. Our second answer is that any choice of a particular definition of terms such as discourse or interpretative repertoire would draw you into the fray of debates and positionings among researchers. This we felt to be inappropriate for the kind of book we have written – a learner's guide. Our third answer is that in empirical research articles, the actual uses of these different terms often “boil down” to the two general aspects of implicit cultural meanings that we described in the previous section. We therefore decided to use the term “implicit cultural meanings.”

We are aware that experts in one or the other of the fields we write about may find that our term does not capture their exact uses of their various terms. If so, that cannot be helped. We have found that, as a way for learners to move into the analytical territory that we describe in this chapter, the strategy we take has often been helpful.

The analyses that we describe in this chapter are commensurate with some forms of discourse analysis in the social sciences. However, consistent with our choice of terms above, we do not use the term “discourse analysis” to characterize these analyses. The reason is that the term is used to refer to so many different types of analysis, with such different theoretical bases and analytical goals, that learners invariably become confused. In an effort to avoid some of that confusion, we have decided to use a terminology that stays within the theoretical framework of our book. At the end of the chapter, we suggest further readings.

Analytical procedures:

(A) Group-focused analysis of implicit cultural meanings

In this section, we describe a way to analyze interviews when your main interest is to elucidate what are the most common ways of making sense of a particular topic or issue in a specific setting, and how people in that setting take them into use in their accounts, stories, or interactions. For instance, it is by using certain cultural meanings to inform their talk, and using them in certain ways, that members of a social group demonstrate their membership to themselves and to others. Usually, a speaker does not have to make a particular cultural meaning explicit for this to happen; rather, certain key words or brief indirect references are enough.

The analyses we describe here share some characteristics with the types of analysis we described in Chapter 8 (both concern patterns of shared meaning-making) and Chapter 10 (both focus on how people “use” talk). However, the analyses that we describe here take another turn than those that we describe in Chapter 8 and 10. They focus specifically on how the common understandings, and the ways people may use them, are located in the cultural surroundings of the speaker. Often, researchers want to find out if and how people use culturally shared meanings when they give their accounts about a topic or issue. Also, researchers often want to find out what options for action certain culturally shared meanings open up or close down for speakers in the group under study.

The first step: selecting the material to analyze

The purpose of the preliminary phase of this type of analysis is, as always in interpretative research, to become familiar with the interview material. The researcher reads through the whole set of interviews with her knowledge interests and researchable questions in mind. The next, and more structured, phase of the analysis also looks much like some of the other types of analysis we describe: the researcher searches through the entire interview material for pieces of talk that relate to the researchable questions. To do this, you copy the pieces of talk into separate excerpt files for each researchable question or sub-question. As in other types of interpretative analysis, it is quite common for researchers to develop new questions while reading the transcripts. For any such additional tentative topic or question, you should create a new excerpt file for the new excerpts you select. As is also typical of this phase of interpretative research, as you go through
more and more interviews, you will discover new facets of your researchable questions. You may want to use these new facets of the questions to complement or change the initial versions of them. If you make such changes, you need to go back and re-read material that you had already excerpted, to see if you have to do move some excerpts. You may also need to go back to the full transcripts to see if more interview material will fit with the revised versions of the researchable questions.

While you are selecting excerpts for the excerpt files, it is useful to annotate the excerpted pieces of talk with short labels, questions, or other comments related to your analytical interests. This will make it easier to locate relevant pieces later in the analysis.

The initial step of the analysis that we have just described has two purposes: first, to select the material that the researcher intends to analyze closely; and second, to get the material sorted by researchable questions or topics, rather than by participants. This re-sorting of the material is essential to the type of analysis we describe here, because the purpose of the analysis is not to classify individuals, but to identify and study the use of implicit cultural meanings related to a certain topic or question.

What we have just described may at first glance appear identical to the analyses that we described in Chapter 8. However, while there are similarities in the early parts of the procedure, the later parts are different. In the analyses we describe in Chapter 8, the purpose is to identify patterns of individual meaning-making about some question or issue across a group or groups of participants. Therefore, the researchable questions, and the criteria for selecting portions of the interview to excerpt, are focused on how the participants understand a question or issue. In the type of analysis we describe in this chapter, the aim is to identify the implicit cultural meanings that speakers make use of in their accounts. (Note that it could be the cultural meanings made use of in accounts about how they understand a question or issue.) The researchable questions in these analyses, therefore, are focused on meanings that are shared in a group or sub-culture, and on the participants’ ways of “using” these meanings. These characteristics of the researchable questions determine the criteria for selecting pieces of talk to excerpt.

After this description of the first step of the analytical procedures, we illustrate the following steps of the procedures with an example taken from one of our research projects.

The second step: from researchable questions to group commonalities

We use a set of excerpts from Eva’s study of Nordic heterosexual couples with children that you encountered in Chapter 2 as our material to illustrate group-focused analysis for implicit cultural meanings. In that study, identifying and studying differences between couples in how they talked about sharing housework and childcare was part of the original researchable questions. For that purpose, Eva excerpted pieces of such talk in couples with different levels of housework sharing into separate excerpt files (one file for the equally sharing couples, one for couples who did not share, and one for the couples whose sharing patterns fell in between). Reading through these files, Eva noticed that there were many aspects of their talk that differed among these three groups. One aspect was that in the couples with the most unequal sharing of housework and childcare, virtually all the men gave accounts that explicitly, and in a “taken-for-granted” fashion, described and justified their low level of participation. There were also a few instances of similar talk by the men in the in-between group. As would be expected, there was no such talk by the men in the equally-sharing group. Eva was interested in finding out more about the accounts the men gave, especially about what implicit cultural meanings that the accounts might invoke. Eva was also interested in how these accounts “worked” in the conversation. Below is a selection of accounts:

Johan stated, as he compared his own situation at home with male colleagues who prioritized their families’ needs on a par with their wives: “I don’t know if I myself would like to do it that way. I think[,] I get so enormously engrossed. I get absorbed in my work.” He complemented this statement by
describing his attitude to work: “I’m a bit of a career person. So things have to become more difficult, tougher, more responsibility all the time. Otherwise it’s no fun.”

Lars told about the reason why he hardly ever shopped food for his family: “I am so bad at shopping for food even when Lene has made a shopping-list, I forget half of it. Yes, I am hopeless.”

This is what Bengt said about his wife Britta and their unequal distribution of housework and childcare: “I think she knows that there are certain chores that she can’t make me do.” He also declared that he could not possibly imagine staying home with the children on parental leave.

When Valdemar and his wife Vivi discussed what would happen if she were to start working full time, he said: “It would mean that I would also have to do some reorganization [of my work schedule]. But I really don’t know if I’m prepared to do that. One should realize one’s personal ambitions, and I can’t see how I could do that if I were to work part-time. That’s just bow it is.”

When Malin and Mattias talked to the interviewer about their unequal distribution of most of the housework and childcare, Mattias gave his view of how this distribution had come about: “I guess it’s about that threshold [i.e., who first “sees” and feels the necessity of doing a chore] that well, I don’t care that much.”

Torben declared that he kept out of all kinds of house-cleaning: “Well, I have always bowed out of such things. Cleaning [that’s not me. I like to have things orderly, but I’m not the kind of person who can be bothered to scrub the floor.”

Carl explained why he did less housework than his wife: “No, I guess I’m not very domestic. /”I don’t make such things a priority”

Peter told his wife in the interview: “You have to go on shopping for food, because I can’t be bothered to do that. I hate shopping for food. [I hate shops] things like standing in line and the like.”

Ulrik had been fond of cooking, but that was before they had children. He said: “If I’m to cook at all, I need to have half a day to spend just looking at and thinking about the ingredients.” If he could not spend that amount of time, he was not prepared to do the cooking: “cooking spaghetti bolognese is not for me. It’s a bit too simple.”

Mika said, about house-cleaning (for which his wife Minna had the main responsibility): “Well, no, I guess I am more in favor of a laissez-faire style on that question.”

In the accounts listed above, the men stated either directly or indirectly, both that they did not perform certain tasks and that they would not perform them. A characteristic of these statements that Eva noticed was that the assertions that they both did not and would not perform the tasks were phrased in seemingly non-problematizing and self-evident ways. It was as if the statements needed no justifications or explanations. What cannot be seen in the short excerpts, but which Eva had noted down when reading through the interview transcripts, was that most of the wives of these men did not criticize their husbands’ levels of housework sharing, or their statements that they would not perform certain tasks. The only women who voiced any (even mild) criticism of their husbands were in the in-between sharing group. Therefore Eva asked how it could be that the men’s assertions seemed to be uncritically accepted by their wives.

Eva found thinking in terms of implicit cultural meanings analytically helpful for her purposes. Implicit cultural meanings, as we have described them, are commonalities of meaning on a larger, cultural, scale compared to the meanings that we identified in the previous paragraph (such as that all the non-sharing men stated that they would not do certain tasks, and that their
wives did not object). Within the analytical framework of this chapter, implicit cultural meanings are what makes it possible for specific commonalities in content to be common to a certain interpretive community.

We should note here that the specific analytical strategies in this phase may vary between studies, depending on the type of project and the type of researchable questions (such as whether the questions emphasize identifying implicit cultural meanings as such, or focus on how they are being deployed). Researchers and textbook authors have found it notoriously difficult to describe the following analytical phases in structured or stepwise ways. Researchers usually learn how to do these kinds of analyses through taking part in other researchers’ studies or reading about the details of studies. We hope that our descriptions here will furnish enough material for such learning.

The third step: From group commonalities to implicit cultural meanings

The analytical step from the commonalities of meaning in a group to the implicit cultural meanings is one that often baffles learners of the type of analysis we describe here. We will therefore use Eva’s study to describe this step. How could Eva find out what implicit cultural meanings the men in the non-sharing couples made use of when they talked about their meager contributions to housework and childcare? Because implicit cultural meanings are “cultural” and not individual, she had first to widen her gaze beyond her interview material and then to develop a strategy for interpreting the patterns she had identified in the material in the light of the cultural commonalities that the speakers were likely to share.

Widening the researcher’s gaze beyond the interviews first requires taking into account the cultural and societal settings of the participants in the study. For Eva this meant learning as much as she could about the cultural settings of the Nordic countries and the ongoing political and other debates about gender equality and housework sharing. Because she was a member of the same larger culture as the couples in the study, Eva could also use her own experiences and cultural competence to identify potentially relevant issues. One such issue was that in these countries, equal sharing of housework and childcare was put forth as desirable and good in national politics and policies (such as shared parental leave). This meant then that the men in Eva’s study who proclaimed their unwillingness to share were incongruently positioned in relation to national ideals. Against this incongruity the seemingly non-problematizing and self-evident accounts by the men in Eva’s study became even more intriguing and worthy of further study.

Widening the researcher’s gaze beyond the interviews also requires consulting other research. Eva drew on earlier research as an aid to refine and develop the researchable questions at this point. Much research has shown that housework-sharing in heterosexual couples is intimately entangled with gendered power issues. On the basis of this research, Eva asked whether gender, and available meanings of gender, might be implicated in the implicit cultural meanings to which the men had recourse. She formulated this general researchable question: What implicit cultural meanings, especially meanings that relate to gender and masculinity, were in the background when the men in non-sharing couples described and justified their non-sharing in housework and childcare? Eva also wanted to explore what the presence of these implicit cultural meanings did in the interviews. A second researchable question therefore was: What did the non-sharing men’s talk about their housework (non-)sharing achieve in the interview context?

Returning to the interview excerpts to look for implicit cultural meanings. So, how do you find implicit cultural meanings in people’s talk after you have selected pieces of talk to scrutinize in detail and have widened your gaze? To begin with, you are not likely to “find” them in the explicit content of people’s talk. For instance, if you were to read through the interview excerpts above again, you would not “find” implicit cultural meanings spelled out there. They are implicit in what is said, and they are part of what members of a culture or an interpretive community use to explain themselves. Because the set of meanings has been shared over time, speakers do not need to refer explicitly to a particular cultural meaning in order for that meaning to be invoked. Speakers use
recurring idiomatic expressions, fragments of well-known arguments, or habitual forms of talk to do the invoking (Wetherell, 1998). Listeners who are members of the same interpretive community will pick up the meaning from these utterances. For the members of the community, the idiomatic expressions, etc., as well as the implicit cultural meanings they invoke, are often so taken for granted that they will not be seen as “meanings” or as ways of making sense, but as the way things are. To find implicit cultural meanings, you therefore need to unpack “the way things are.”

*Unpacking taken-for-granted meanings in the interview talk.* As we have pointed out, interpretative researchers argue that people use recurring expressions and forms of talk to invoke implicit cultural meanings. This means that if the researcher identifies such recurring expressions or other patterns of talk in a group of speakers, it makes sense to assume that the patterns indicate that one or more implicit cultural meanings are being invoked. Let us illustrate with material from Eva’s excerpts earlier in this section.

We have already noted that all the men whose excerpts were selected stated that there were certain tasks that they did not do and would not do. Those statements were the ones that Eva selected for closer analysis and that you read a few pages back. The statements are similar on the manifest, or “content” level. The task now is to look once more at the excerpts with the statements to see if they have other characteristics in common, such as key expressions, or recurring ways of talking, or word use. As we said above, such common characteristics might indicate that a certain shared cultural meaning is used by the speakers.

A common characteristic that Eva noticed in the excerpts was that the men consistently referred to characteristics or traits of themselves, or in a few cases to strong personal attitudes. A few of the men used somewhat more indirect references to themselves, but all the men in one way or another brought themselves into their accounts. We have copied the self-descriptive pieces here for easier reference:

- Johan: “I’m a bit of a career person. .. I get absorbed in my work.”
- Lars: “I am so bad at shopping for food.”
- Valdemar: “I really don’t know if I’m prepared to do that.”
- Mattias: “I don’t care that much.”
- Torben: “I’m not the kind of person who can be bothered to scrub the floor.”
- Carl: “I’m not very domestic.”
- Peter: “I can’t be bothered to do that [shopping]. I hate shopping for food. I hate shops.”
- Ulrik: “cooking spaghetti bolognese is not for me. It’s a bit too simple.”
- Mika: “I’m more in favor of a laissez-faire style on that question.”
- Mattias: “Well, I don’t care that much.”
- Bengt said, a little more indirectly than the others, “I think she knows that there are certain chores that she can’t make me do.”

Some key expressions in these excerpts were “I’m,” “I don’t care...,” “I can’t be bothered...,” that is, self-referring and self-descriptive phrases. Another common feature of the excerpts was that the speakers brought forward these self-descriptive statements as reasons for, and justifications of, their low level of sharing housework and childcare with their wives. Eva coined the expression the “That’s Just Who I Am” stance as a shorthand for this pattern.

The women in these couples did not object to the self-describing justifications. This points to another feature of the talk we are studying: the men’s utterances seemed to “work,” that is, they were not followed by debate or questioning. In fact, these utterances seemed to put a stop to discussion. Hardly any talk about the topic followed after these self-descriptive utterances by the men. This was a contrast to other parts of the interview interactions, in which discussions often were kept up for a while.

Having come this far in the analysis, the researcher should consider whether the patterns of talk that have been identified are specific to the speakers whose talk has been scrutinized, or whether they are more widespread and appear in the rest of the interview material in the study. When Eva read through the interviews with the other couples in the study, she found that the use of self-descriptions as justifications for not doing housework was practically non-existent among the other couples, men as well as women. While both men and women in the other couples certainly made references to their own traits and characteristics in various contexts, they did not use them rhetorically as justifications as the men in the excerpts above did. This means that using
self-descriptions such as “That’s Just Who I Am” as justifications for not performing certain
tasks appeared unique to men who did not share housework equally.

Let us now summarize the characteristics that we have so far pointed out in these men’s talk
in the excerpts, to see if the sum of characteristics can give ideas about implicit cultural
meanings. A recurring expression that the men used was “I’m,” as part of self-descriptions that
were central to their arguments. Their self-descriptions were placed so that they justified the
speakers’ refusals to do certain tasks. Eva summarized this as the “That’s Just Who I Am” stance.
This stance, which was found only in the talk of these men, seemed to set fairly narrow and self-
deﬁned boundaries for what these men were prepared to do at home. In the interviews, the
presence of this stance was paired with the absence of objections by the men’s wives to it. This
absence can probably be read to signal that this kind of talk in the interview situation “worked.”

Referring back to the researchable question. In our example the researchable question was “What
implicit cultural meanings, especially meanings that relate to gender and masculinity, were in the
background when the men in non-sharing couples described and justified their non-sharing in
housework and childcare?” This question reminds us that these men were married to women, and
that the tasks that were being talked about were mainly tasks that have traditionally been
associated with women.

We should therefore at this point juxtapose the characteristic speech patterns with the
traditional gender-speciﬁc division of household labor and childcare. Distinct characteristics that
these men’s talk projected about them were: Having great personal latitude; being able to realize
and pursue one’s own interests without having to take others’ interests and needs into account;
not being easily inﬂuenced by others (perhaps especially not by a woman); and being able to set
down and enforce limits on what one will or won’t do.

What does this set of characteristics allow us to conclude about the implicit cultural
meanings around which these men’s talk was organized? One thing they have in common is that
they point to some of the key ingredients of traditional masculinity, perhaps especially a career-
oriented masculinity in western, high-income countries. Eva’s provisional conclusion therefore
was that the men in the non-sharing couples formulated their justificatory accounts on the basis
of the implicit cultural meaning “traditional masculinity.”

Towards drawing conclusions: bringing in the larger picture of the study to verify ideas

At this stage the conclusion about implicit cultural meanings should be seen as provisional. When
the researcher has identiﬁed one or more implicit cultural meanings and suggested how they are
taken into use by some participants, it is time to re-read the interviews to see if these suggestions
hold within the larger material of the study.

In the case of Eva’s study, she asked whether the use of “traditional masculinity” as
justiﬁcation was speciﬁc to the men in the non-sharing couples. She found that it was. Traditional
masculinity was referred to by other men in the study; however, when these other men invoked it,
they always used negative terms and immediately distanced themselves from it. Thus, it was not
only the men in non-sharing couples who had access to “traditional masculinity,” but they were
the only ones who made use of it to justify their choices and behavior in everyday family life.
Further, the men in equally-sharing couples who referred negatively to “traditional masculinity”
invariably explicitly named it as such before taking exception to it. In contrast, the men in non-
sharing couples never referred explicitly to “traditional masculinity.” They conﬁned themselves to
the key expressions and speech forms that we saw above.

At this stage the researcher has identiﬁed and brieﬂy explored the uses of one or more
implicit cultural meanings that may be central to the people who are being studied. In our
illustration, we wanted to keep the analysis reasonably easy to follow and we therefore described
only analysis related to one implicit cultural meaning. However, it is much more common that a
researcher would study several implicit cultural meanings in parallel.
Whether or not the analysis ends here depends on the general knowledge interest of the researcher. If identifying and describing active implicit cultural meanings was the goal, the analysis is finished. Sometimes identifying implicit cultural meanings leads the way to further questions.

**Toward synthesizing and drawing conclusions**

As you after one or more analysis like the one above are about move toward synthesizing the results, you should begin by using the researchable questions in your study as the organizing framework. This means that you will be considering how the results of specific analyses speak to the researchable questions, and that you will eventually be able to tie the results into a coherent whole. Much of this work will be done while you are writing your report about your project. Chapter 12 offers more specific information about how to organize and write a written report.

**Outline of the steps in the analysis**

1) Selecting the material to analyze  
2) From researchable questions to group commonalities  
3) From group commonalities to implicit cultural meanings  
   - Widening the researcher’s gaze beyond the interviews  
   - Returning to the interview excerpts to look for implicit cultural meanings  
   - Unpacking taken-for-granted meanings in the interview talk  
   - Referring back to the researchable question  
4) Towards drawing conclusions: bringing in the larger picture of the study to verify the results

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**Analytical procedures**

**B) Studying an individual's meaning-making in a cultural context**

The analytical procedures that we describe in this part of the chapter focus on the restraining as well as “productive” aspects of implicit cultural meanings. The analyses show how these can be inferred by studying an individual person’s accounts in the light of the local and larger cultural contexts within which that person lives.

Cultural settings provide their members with resources for meaning-making, among them implicit cultural meanings. Implicit cultural meanings function both to enable and restrict the meanings of an event or experience that will be available to members of a setting, making certain meanings more self-evident or natural-seeming than others. Particularly well-established cultural meanings come to be taken as “the way things are,” not as one of many possible ways of understanding things. What implicit cultural meanings will dominate in a setting is the result of some negotiation, sometimes recent, but far from always so. A cultural meaning may have been established long ago and now be taken as “natural,” rather than seeming to be the result of negotiation.

In many interactions in daily life, people find themselves in positions with unequal power to influence ongoing meaning-making and decisions. Such different subject positions and their resulting access to power are often corollaries of salient social categories, such as sex category, social class, ethnic group, age, or a combination of them (REF__). These categories are enduring but they have different impact in different interaction settings.
There are many ways to analyze for implicit cultural meanings in people’s individual accounts and stories. The literature in the fields of “critical discourse analysis” and “critical discursive psychology” provides many similar but simultaneously diverging ways into this type of analysis (REF__). As in the other analysis chapters in this book, we present analytical procedures that exemplify and illustrate some basic aspects of the approaches encompassed in these fields. The procedures are fairly easy to describe, and easy for a learner to follow. At the end of the chapter we suggest further readings about discourse theory and analytical procedures.

The analysis example

To illustrate analytical procedures for studying implicit cultural meanings in an individual’s interview accounts, we provide a step-by-step outline of procedures and illustrate them with a research example. For illustration we use material from a study that Eva did of women in the Swedish civil services during a three-year period of thoroughgoing organizational changes to their workplaces (Magnusson, 1997a; 1998). Eva was interested in how the women (who were chosen to represent the different hierarchical positions in the organizations) experienced and dealt with the challenges they confronted during this period. She therefore interviewed them twice a year during the project period. The initial analyses of the interviews were done using procedures similar to those we described in Chapter 8. These analyses focused on the women’s accounts of their experiences in their daily lives at work and at home during the three years. The analyses yielded a wide range of variation in how the women experienced and reacted to demands and expectations from their surroundings, and in how they reflected on and understood themselves as women in their local settings.

Eva also wanted to explore how her participants’ ways of being women were channeled by local as well as larger implicit cultural meanings in their everyday worlds. Specifically she was interested in how the women’s ways of understanding themselves and their worlds were enabled by or restricted by certain implicit cultural meanings. Eva thus moved her analytical focus from the individual perspectives of her participants in the first set of analyses, to how these perspectives were constituted by the cultural surroundings in which the women moved. The analytical focus thus shifted to implicit cultural meanings.

The women Eva interviewed were living through a time of changing and sometimes contradictory organizational “messages” about what was the best way of being a female civil servant. Traditionally, women in the civil services had mostly had functions as secretaries, lower-level clerks with routine tasks, and receptionists. These positions were associated with certain types of subservient feminine behaviors. Such were the expectations that most of the women had encountered when they entered their workplaces one or more decades earlier. During the period of study the expectations were changing: the messages now were that employees were supposed to be “modern” and strategic, and career-oriented. The expectations of women outside the workplace had also changed in Swedish society; there was in many parts of society a strong emphasis on gender equality and on questioning traditional ways of being a woman. It was likely, then, that the women in Eva’s study were surrounded by many conflicting cultural meanings of “being a woman” in their workplaces as well as in their family lives. The analysis that we describe below gives one example of how Eva explored the implicit cultural meanings connected with being a woman that formed the background for one participant’s interview accounts. This analysis addressed aspects of one of the researchable questions in the study. The example is chosen from an interview with Birgitta, who you already met in Chapter 10.

Birgitta, her husband, and the professional women

One of the researchable questions in Eva’s study was how the women in the study – given the culturally expected ways of being a woman that they were accustomed to – understood situations
where gendered power might be at large. The excerpt from one of the interviews with Birgitta speaks to this researchable question. Eva had two reasons for choosing this excerpt. First, she chose it because in it there seemed to be some conflict related to the researchable question. This meant that there were textual characteristics, especially contradictions, in the excerpt that made it likely that it would be illuminating to analyze. Second, Eva chose the excerpt because parts of the narrative resonated with many other participants’ interviews.

**How to select excerpts for analysis**

There are four key characteristics of talk that the researcher may consider when selecting excerpts for analysis:

- **A pertinent topic:** a general criterion, which should always be fulfilled, is that the topic of the talk should be pertinent to at least one of the researchable questions in the study.

- **Representativeness:** sometimes the researcher selects a piece of talk by one participant because that piece resembles what goes on in the talk of several other participants.

- **Contrast and deviation:** sometimes a researcher selects a piece of talk by one participant because it deviates from the talk of most participants in some way that is relevant to one of the researchable questions. Such a piece of talk may illustrate a phenomenon that was not present in the talk of the other participants.

- **Characteristics of the talk:** researchers often select a piece of talk from among several equally representative (or deviant) ones, because it contains, for instance, potentially interesting contradictions or inconsistencies. They often signal that conflicts between implicit cultural meanings have been activated, perhaps in analytically interesting ways.

At the time of the interview Birgitta was about 45 years old; she had an advanced high-school diploma and worked as a secretary to a manager who held a high organizational position. She was married but had no children living at home. Just before the selected piece from the interview began, Eva had asked about the distribution of housework in her family. Birgitta had told Eva that in her family, housework was very traditionally distributed. She was very pleased with this situation, she said, and continued: “Yes, in our house things are completely traditional, so that all professional women would go crazy if they heard it!” Directly afterwards, Eva asked her how decision-making was done in their family. Birgitta’s narrative in answer to this question was as follows:

*Eva: ...who makes the decisions?*

*Birgitta:* It’s actually really me, though he thinks he does. [.] That’s how it’s done, you see. [.] Food and that kind of thing [.] I decide about those. [.] I have got to know him so well that – it’s sort of a question of planning your strategy. [.] And that means that if I want something to happen, then I begin at an early stage to talk around it. And then I have talked so much “around” that he thinks it’s he who has come up with the suggestion! [.] And then that’s called, in military-speak, that he has made a decision! So then, when we are visiting - [Birgitta here alluded to social situations in which her husband told others about an activity as completely his own idea and decision.]

/ It’s like a life-form, you see, so if I want to have that particular goal, then- And it’s not possible to change direction along the way. [.] you have to talk slowly about it [.] because it isn’t possible to say it right out. Once I have gotten in along one road, then I can’t change direction [.] because, you see, then he is on that road! [.] Therefore I know already when I begin [.] what I want. But it takes its time, you know. And then I get my way, though he may not really understand that I do get my way. On the contrary, he thinks he is the one who came up with the suggestion. And I let him think so.

/ I only present the suggestions that I want to have discussed! [here Birgitta comments on a story that she had just told about decision making for a vacation trip]

/ But really, I would never take it on my conscience to trick him into something that I know would be bad for him. / And [.] but I could never do him any harm, or trick him into anything.

/ It’s probably I who am the most active. But now and then he makes his own decisions, sort of [.] I mean, he is very [.] he is like this: if he says no, then it is NO! Then you get nowhere!
At work he is known to be a very good leader, can take decisions, be very straightforward, gets very good evaluations [at work] and such things. But at home he is a completely different man. 3

Reading and reflecting: the preliminary step

As always when analyzing talk for its meanings, a preliminary step when analyzing for implicit cultural meanings is to read through the excerpt carefully several times and note down reflections and associations to do with the meaning that the participant seems to be communicating in the piece of talk.

In this case, Eva noted down what Birgitta seemed to want to tell her about the situations that she described, and what kind of sense these situations seemed to make. Eva inferred that Birgitta was telling her that it was she who made the decisions in her family. Eva also inferred that the experiences and situations that Birgitta talked about seemed to her to hang together, that is, they were not presented as a bundle of contradictory events. However, Eva observed that the story was not wholly smooth; there were some inconsistencies.

Subjects and verbs: beginning to identify the action in Birgitta’s account

The analysis now moves towards identifying the implicit cultural meanings that form the background of the conversation. The general assumption when this phase of the analysis begins is that one or more implicit cultural meanings bring in, inform, or influence at least parts of what is said in a conversation.

The specific assumption in the example of Birgitta’s interview is this: in a historical situation where old and new cultural meanings about how to be a proper married woman and a proper married man are competing, it is likely that there will be traces of those norms and their conflicts in conversations about related topics. Of course, norms and meanings cannot be active participants in a conversation. The influence of implicit cultural meanings therefore is channeled through the things that people say and do, that is, through the action in the text.

To begin to target the presence and influence of implicit cultural meanings, the researcher looks for the action in a conversation: what it is that happens there and what events are being talked about. Grammar helps the researcher to find the action. Verbs carry the actions – to talk, to write, to scream, to discuss, and so on. Grammatical subjects bring about the actions. Subjects such as I, you, we, a man, a woman, etc., do things like talking, writing, screaming, discussing, making decisions, and so on, in a text.

In the type of analysis we describe here, the researcher assumes that the same physical subject (person) can appear to be speaking as more than one textual or grammatical subject, that is, speaking from more than one textual subject positions. To illustrate: in a conversation, a woman may speak as the daughter of her parents, as the mother of her children, or as the worker in a workplace: three different textual subjects within the same physical person.

Identifying textual subjects: In what follows, we show how Eva identified the textual subjects in the excerpt from Birgitta’s interview. We also describe how Eva reasoned about the textual subjects within the framework of her interview: Eva used pronouns and nouns (such as “I,” “He,” “Friends”) to denote physical subjects. She then added numbers (to make “I 1,” “He 2,” etc.) to point out the different textual subject positions that a physical subject was given or took in different parts of the conversation. Eva also gave short names or labels to each textual subject. These labels should be thought out with care, and the researcher should be prepared to change

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3 Note that this excerpt is translated from the original Swedish. The translation focuses on maintaining the meaning of what was said, rather than the style of the conversation. We mention this, because, even though Eva has worked through the translation several times, she still does not think that it gives quite the same overall impression as the Swedish original does. Note also, that the analysis was done in Swedish, using the original Swedish version of the interview transcription.
them as she learns more while doing the analysis. Eva also provided short quotes from Birgitta’s talk to document how she arrived at each textual subject.

*Widening the researcher’s view:* The information to which Eva had access when she did the original analysis was the whole interview text and her knowledge about Birgitta from other interviews, combined with her knowledge about Birgitta’s social situation and the political and social situation in Sweden when this study was done. Such knowledge should be taken into account when analyzing for implicit cultural meanings. Thus, analysis for implicit cultural meanings in a piece of talk cannot be just an analysis of what goes on in that piece of talk. It always has to include at least parts of the larger social and cultural contexts.

**Textual subjects in Birgitta’s story**

I no. 1 – *the powerful wife who makes the decisions.* This textual subject talks about herself as the one who is really making the decisions in their house. She also talks about herself as the one who drives changes and takes initiatives, while pointing out that this is not how things appear to her husband or to their friends. *To document how Eva arrived at this textual subject, we enclose the pieces of talk that led her there:* “It’s actually really me [who makes decisions], though he thinks he does. […] That’s how it’s done, you see;” “And then I get my way, though he may not really understand that I do get my way”; “he thinks he is the one who came up with the suggestion. And I let him think so.”

I no. 2 – *the traditional housewife.* She decides about food and other practical things in the house; she also carries out the work that they entail. “[Food and that kind of thing – I decide about those.]” Elsewhere in the interview, Birgitta had told Eva that she took care of all the indoor chores and her husband did the outdoor work.

He no. 1 – *the husband who thinks he makes the decisions.* He believes, although it is not so, that he is the one who comes up with ideas and suggestions and who makes the decisions in their family. “[..that’s called, in military-speak, that he has made a decision!; “he thinks he is the one who came up with the suggestion.”]

I no. 3 – *the strategist who knows her husband.* She is so well acquainted with her husband that she knows what to do to get her own way. She also makes sure to know from the very beginning what it is she wants to accomplish. And she is prepared to plan well in advance and allow time to pass. “[if I want something to happen, then I begin at an early stage to talk around it. And then I have talked so much “around” that he thinks it’s he who has come up with the suggestion!”; “I only present the suggestions that I want to have discussed!; “I know already when I begin - what I want. But it takes its time, you know.”]

We – *the couple who present a united picture of their marriage.* When they are in the company of friends, Birgitta and her husband tell about their choices and decisions in ways that feature him as the decision-maker as well as the person with the good ideas. [“..when we are visiting.” An allusion to social situations when her husband tells others about an activity as if it was completely his own initiative and decision.]

*Friends and acquaintances:* their circle of acquaintances who expects a family life pattern in which the husband makes big decisions. This “subject” can be inferred from Birgitta’s talk, although there are no explicit utterances tied to it.

*Her conscience:* Birgitta talks about her conscience as keeping her from abusing her power over her husband, that is, it stops her from tricking him into doing things that might be bad for him. [“really, I would never take it on my conscience to trick him into something that I know would be bad for him.”]
He no. 2 / “him” – the husband who needs protection. This is Birgitta’s husband as an object of her actions, rather than an active subject. Even so, “He no. 2/him” is central to her story. Birgitta told Eva that she had a responsibility to protect her husband and not trick him into doing things that would be bad for him. (“really, I would never take it on my conscience to trick him into something that I know would be bad for him.”)

He no. 3 – the unbending and impervious man. It is completely impossible to shake her husband when he has made a decision, but equally so as soon as he has set out on the road toward a particular decision. This is so, even if it is a decision that was “planted” by Birgitta. (“Once I have gotten into one road, then I can't change direction [.] because, you see, then he is on that road!”, “now and then he makes his own decisions, sort of [.] I mean, he is very [.] he is like this: if he says no, then it is NO! Then you get nowhere!”)

I no. 4 (“you”) – the powerless wife. Once her husband has made up his mind to something, there is nothing she can do about it; she must go along with his decision. (“if he says no, then it is NO! Then you get nowhere!”)

In this list of textual subjects, the physical subjects Birgitta and her husband have become “unpacked” such that each of them seems to be speaking from several positions. It is perhaps not surprising that they can be “unpacked” in this manner, given the topic: it is to be expected that there will be several opinions in relation to topics about which there is political debate and conflict. At the time when this interview was done, there was much debate in Sweden about power and decision-making in heterosexual couples.

One initial thing to make note of in Birgitta’s talk in the excerpt is that all the different textual subjects seemed to be able to co-exist in the story she told in the interview. She made no comments about explicit conflicts between the textual subjects that she had been activating. Even so, it seems likely that some subjects would co-exist more smoothly with one another than others. It also seems likely that the researcher might learn something from looking at the smooth co-existences and the disagreements. Close looks at the lines of conflict and agreement between textual subjects are therefore often a focus of analysis for implicit cultural meanings – as they were in this example. The lines of conflict and the lines of agreement tell the researcher different things, though. We begin with the disagreements.

Identifying textual subjects that seem to disagree

We should keep in mind here that it is the researcher who discerns disagreement and conflict between subjects. Birgitta did not explicitly point out any such disagreements or conflicts, nor did she implicitly refer to them. Whether she saw some conflicts but preferred not to mention them to Eva, we cannot say. In Birgitta’s transcript, Eva located lines of conflict between the following subjects:

(a) I no. 1 – the powerful wife who makes the decisions vs. He no. 1 – the husband who thinks he makes the decisions.
(b) I no. 1 – the powerful wife who makes the decisions vs. Friends and acquaintances.
(c) I no. 1 – the powerful wife who makes the decisions vs. I no. 4 – “you” the powerless wife.
(d) I no. 1 – the powerful wife who makes the decisions vs. He no. 3 – the unbending and impervious man.
(e) He no. 2 - “him” who is an object of Birgitta’s actions vs. He no. 3 – the unbending and impervious man.
(f) He no. 2 - “him” who is an object of Birgitta’s actions vs. I no. 4 - “you” the powerless wife.
This list indicates that several parts of Birgitta’s narrative are potentially in conflict with one another. The fact that Birgitta did not point them out as being in conflict may lead the researcher to speculate about what her intentions were – in the situations she was describing, and in her telling Eva about those situations. If we look closely at the list we see that there were two different kinds of misalignments in Birgitta’s account, contrasts and contradictions. (a), (b), and (d) above involved contrasts between two or more physical subjects who had different ways of describing reality. (c) and (e), instead, involved contradictions between two textual subjects located in the same physical body. (f) is less easily categorized, because it seems speculative to ascribe any explicit ambitions to “him”; we do not have enough information about “him” to do so.

Finding this number of lines of conflict in a piece of talk is typical. What the lines of conflict in this case indicate is that in the types of situations that Birgitta talked about there are likely to be (at least for her) both the possibility of disagreements between physical subjects (persons), and the possibility of “internal” contradictions or conflicts between textual subjects (within the same person). Where these lines get drawn, and whether they seem to be mainly “external” or “internal” should be kept in mind in the next step of the analysis – locating the agreements between the textual subjects.

Textual subjects that seem to agree: on the way to identifying cultural meanings

The previous step in the analysis identified several disagreements in Birgitta’s talk, but there are also several agreements in it. These agreements are what holds Birgitta’s talk together as a story, instead of a scattered mass of contradictory utterances. After all, even if we find that Birgitta’s talk is shot through with disagreeing textual subjects, she does not dwell on the disagreements. And it is her story, and how her story is constituted, that we are interested in learning about. Therefore, the next step of the analysis looks for the agreements. It does so on the assumption that utterances or textual subjects that agree in a story are likely to draw on the same implicit cultural meanings.

There are two parts to the analysis for agreements: identifying textual subjects that agree with one another and group them together, and describing the characteristics of each grouping with the aim of arriving at ideas for implicit cultural meanings.

Identifying textual subjects that agree

The first part is to identify textual subjects that seem to agree about one or more of the issues that are brought forward in a participant’s talk. In this analysis it is the researcher who discerns the agreements between the textual subjects; Birgitta did not explicitly point them out. When Eva scrutinized Birgitta’s narrative for agreements between textual subjects, she discerned four clusters of textual subjects that seemed likely to agree on the central issues in the story. (Other clusters could perhaps be identified; the ones here are the ones most relevant to the researchable questions.) The clusters were as follows:

(a) I no. 1 – the powerful wife who makes the decisions + I no. 3 – the strategist who knows her husband + He no. 1 – the husband who thinks he makes the decisions (+ possibly He no. 2, “him” who is an object of Birgitta’s actions).

(b) The Conscience + He no. 2 - “him” who is an object of Birgitta’s actions (+ possibly I no. 2 – the traditional housewife).

(c) He no. 1 - who thinks he makes the decisions + We + Friends and acquaintances + He no. 3 the unbending and impervious man (+ possibly I no. 2, the traditional housewife).
(d) I no. 3 - the strategist who knows her husband + He no. 3 - the unbending and impervious man + I no. 4 - “you” the powerless wife.

If we were to imagine that the textual subjects in each of the clusters could speak, we would expect their utterances to agree with one another, given the context of Birgitta’s storytelling. We can imagine such utterances because the textual subjects have a “larger” existence beyond Birgitta’s story. That is, these textual subjects all have some anchoring in the local context or the larger surrounding culture within which Birgitta tells her story. This means that people who share Birgitta’s cultural context could recognize these textual subjects. To take two examples, people would recognize “the traditional housewife” and “the strategist who knows her husband.” And as a consequence of their “larger” existence, the textual subjects in a cluster – if they could speak – would speak within the frame of the same implicit cultural meaning.

From agreeing textual subjects to implicit cultural meanings

In the second part of this step the researcher begins by thinking about and make notes about what it is that the textual subjects in each cluster “agree” about. The researcher then uses these notes to describe the clusters of agreeing subjects in order to be able to infer the implicit cultural meanings around which they cluster. Each cluster is assumed to identify one implicit cultural meaning. Below are the associations and descriptions that Eva produced at this point in the analysis. The associations and descriptions were based on the textual subjects within each cluster, the general tenor of Birgitta’s story, and Eva’s knowledge about Swedish society and ongoing debates at the time of the interview.

(a) This cluster conjures up notions of secrecy and perhaps an image of women as manipulating behind the scene. This image fits sayings such as “the woman behind it all...” The images and the kind of power that is conjured up, do not seem to be compatible with a modern view of “gender equality.” Historical parallels can perhaps be found in old counter-arguments against women’s suffrage, such as claims that women had much greater opportunities to wield power by indirectly influencing their husbands at home, than by being allowed to vote in elections. The textual subjects in this cluster coalesce into an implicit cultural meaning that Eva named “Women’s hidden power.”

(b) This cluster conjures up the idea that it would be Birgitta’s fault if anything bad were to happen to her husband because of what she decided. There are resonances, for instance, with the tendencies to “blame the mother/woman” that have been prevalent in psychiatry, education and child psychology. The textual subjects in this cluster coalesce into the implicit cultural meaning “The responsible woman.”

(c) This cluster is based in traditional patriarchal views of marriage, in which the husband makes the big and important decisions, and is the one who represents the family to the outside world. This had earlier been a pervasive masculine ideal in Swedish society. The textual subjects in this cluster coalesce into the implicit cultural meaning “The strong (perhaps unbending) man.”

(d) This cluster exemplifies the conditions necessary for a powerless person to influence a superior person. Any possibilities for such influence require detailed knowledge of the superior person. This knowledge makes it possible to predict the superior person’s actions and whims and eventually to surreptitiously introduce one’s own ideas disguised as his. The textual subjects in this cluster coalesce into the implicit cultural meaning “The manipulator from below.”

Discussing the implicit cultural meanings
Up to this point in the analytical procedure, the kinds of analyses we are describing make the claim that certain utterances have something in common that seems to be connected to larger cultural patterns (that is, they share the same implicit cultural meaning or culturally shared pattern of talking). So far so good. It does seem possible to substantiate such claims by combining the scrutiny of the talk with the researcher’s knowledge of larger socio-cultural patterns. However, sometimes implied in that claim is another claim, namely that these implicit cultural meanings have a deeper meaning for the person whose talk is being analyzed. Sometimes a researcher might also want to argue that the implicit cultural meanings that have been identified could in one way or another motivate a person’s utterances or actions.

When a researcher considers making these later claims, he or she needs to be careful not to fall into circular reasoning. We especially warn against the circularity of using implicit cultural meanings that the researcher has identified in a person’s talk to explain utterances (or implied actions) in that same piece of talk (see also Antic, Billig, Edwards & Potter, 2003). Such claims cannot be substantiated solely by scrutinizing the interview talk and combining it with knowledge about socio-cultural patterns.

Let us look into Birgitta’s story again, keeping the warnings about circularity in mind, and reminding ourselves about the researchable question that formed the background for the analysis: How the women in the study – given the culturally expected ways of being a woman that they were accustomed to – understood situations in which gendered power might be at large.

The analysis up to this point had led to the claim that Birgitta’s story was informed, or influenced, by the four implicit cultural meanings in the list above. This claim seemed reasonably well substantiated by the researcher’s cultural knowledge and the scrutiny of Birgitta’s talk. The implicit cultural meanings also seem to be connected to culturally expected ways of being a woman; thus the analyses were germane to the researchable question. So far so good. How do we move the analysis further? Can we make any claims, or draw any conclusions that go beyond this point?

Overt and hidden power: To explore possible further claims while keeping in mind the issues of circularity that we discussed above, we begin at the moment when Birgitta told Eva that she could influence her husband only so long as he was unaware that she was wielding any influence (“you have to talk slowly about it [...] because it isn’t possible to say it right out”). We had earlier in the analysis identified this utterance as being one of those that invoked the implicit cultural meaning “Women’s hidden power.” When Birgitta talked about her husband, in contrast, he came across as able to influence her when she was aware that decisions were being made. Thus, when her husband at times decided to wield power explicitly (“now and then he makes his own decisions”), he could not be challenged: (“...if he says no, then it is NO! Then you get nowhere!”).

Such utterances had earlier been identified as invoking the implicit cultural meaning “The strong (and perhaps unbending) man.”

Beyond his power to make explicit decisions when both were aware of it (which Birgitta lacked), her husband also could abstain from making decisions initially. If he at a later stage wanted to make a decision or change one of her decisions, he could do so. Birgitta’s conscience ensured that initial refraining was safe for him (“I would never take it on my conscience to trick him into something that I know would be bad for him.”). This utterance was among those that invoked the implicit cultural meaning “The responsible woman.” It seemed then, as if her husband was able to assert power whenever he wanted to. For Birgitta things seemed different. If she initially refrained from exerting her (hidden) power, she could not take it for granted that her husband would later take her wishes and needs into consideration (“Then you get nowhere!”).

This was in contrast to what her conscience demanded of her, which was to take his needs into account when she made decisions.

Birgitta’s claims to be able to influence her husband did not seem groundless. When she told Eva that she repeatedly got her husband where she wanted him, she appeared to be talking about real decisions, real changes, and consequently real influence. The prerequisites for her influence were that it had to be gradual (“I begin at an early stage to talk around it”) and that she had to
decide on her goals in detail well in advance: (“I know already when I begin - what I want”). It thus seemed as if she saw herself as getting her own way only when she acted in accordance with the implicit cultural meaning “Women’s hidden power.”

Birgitta’s story thus contained two distinct strands: in one strand Birgitta indirectly succeeded in getting her way, and in the other strand she was powerless to get her way (when her husband had made a decision and when there were open negotiations about whose will should prevail).

Power and women’s responsibility. At this point Eva brought into consideration the researchable question about accepted ways of being a woman and the relation of those ways to power in a couple. She focused especially on the conflation of power and responsibility in women’s daily lives. It has until recently (and perhaps still is in some settings) been common to label women’s responsibility for the details of their families’ everyday life as “women’s power in the family.” Could it be that this conflation of power and responsibility was operating in Birgitta’s story?

An indication that it might be so was that she talked about her own power as closely coupled to responsibility. She invoked her conscience as forcing her to use her power responsibly (“I would never take it on my conscience to trick him into something that I know would be bad for him.” “And [.] but I could never do him any harm, or trick him into anything.”). These utterances invoked the implicit cultural meaning “The responsible woman,” which thus seemed prominent for Birgitta, especially when she talked about her own power.

If Birgitta associated her own decision-making above all with responsibility and concealment, perhaps her power had other implications for her than her husband’s power? For instance, could it be that when she made decisions, she interpreted them in accordance with the implicit cultural meaning “The responsible woman” (where “blame the woman” might loom)? (And could it conversely be that when her husband made decisions, no such “responsibility” was conjured up?)

Birgitta’s descriptions of how she protected her husband from awareness of her decision-making indicate another possible responsibility for her: she may have worried that her husband would be offended or have his self-esteem bruised if he were to uncover her stratagems or notice that she really made decisions. (“It’s actually really me [who makes decisions], though he thinks he does.”; “he thinks he is the one who came up with the suggestion. And I let him think so”).

Decision-making and femininity. It seems likely, in the cultural setting we are talking about, that if Birgitta were found to be making decisions, whether explicitly or covertly, she would be violating the cultural expectation that it was her husband who made the decisions. What might be the consequences for her if such a violation were uncovered? Here we can only speculate, but we have to take care to avoid circular reasoning (see above). Our speculations can be aided by the common observation that when an individual is found to violate powerful cultural rules or expectations, there will be personal penalties of some kind for that individual. One relevant cultural “rule” or expectation in Birgitta’s case was femininity: the culturally expected and accepted ways of being a woman. This brings us back to the researchable question that motivated this analysis, How the women in the study – given the culturally expected ways of being a woman that they were accustomed to – understood situations where gendered power might be at large.

To speculate about femininity and decision-making in Birgitta’s life, we have to move outside the interview material that was analyzed here. First, we need to bring in any available specific knowledge about cultural patterns related to femininity in the location where the interview was done. Second, we have to bring in other information about Birgitta, if any. Eva had done several interviews with Birgitta over the three years of the study and they provided additional material. Eva had, for instance, observed in the other interviews with her that Birgitta was among the few women in the group of participants who explicitly spoke about themselves as being feminine. The meanings of “feminine” that she invoked included being nicely dressed and coiffed, being good at housework and having abundant social graces. As a secretary, she worked in a position that was heavily coded as traditionally feminine. The meanings that Birgitta ascribed to femininity
in her various stories did not seem to encompass decision-making and power. Thus, the kind of femininity that Birgitta spoke of as ideal might lead us to speculate that if she were to be visible as a decision-maker in the couple, she would run the risk of having her femininity called into question. She could also run the risk, as we discussed above, of injuring her husband’s self-esteem – and this in itself might be seen as another “blot” on her femininity.

Towards synthesizing the results

The analysis of Birgitta’s story has helped us to address parts of the researchable question “How the women in the study – given the culturally expected ways of being a woman that they were accustomed to – understood situations where gendered power might be at large.” The section “Discussing the implicit cultural meanings” lays out three of the possible answers. However, this analysis concerned one woman’s story, albeit in the light of larger cultural patterns in her country and local cultural setting. This analysis needs to be complemented by similar analyses of the stories by other women in the group of participants. There are of course also several other possible avenues for following up and complementing an analysis such as this; for instance by analyzing other kinds of material from the same time period.

As the researcher at this point moves toward synthesizing the results, the researchable questions in the study can serve as the organizing framework. That is, by considering how the results of specific analyses speak to the researchable questions the researcher will be able to tie those results into a coherent whole (cf. Taylor, 2001). Much of this work will be done during the process of writing about the project. Chapter 12 offers more specific information about how to organize and write a written report.

Outline of the steps in analysis of individual excerpts for implicit cultural meanings

- Selecting excerpts for analysis
- Reading and reflecting
- Subjects and verbs: beginning to identify the action
  - Identifying textual subjects
  - Widening the researcher’s view
- Identifying textual subjects that seem to disagree
- Textual subjects that seem to agree: on the way to identifying cultural meanings
  - Identifying textual subjects that agree
  - From agreeing textual subjects to implicit cultural meanings
- Discussing the implicit cultural meanings
- Synthesizing the results