

Social Actions, Gestalt Coherence, and Designations of Disability: Lessons from and about Autism

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This article has three main points: (1) "gestalt objects" are not just perceptual chimera, but are a feature of everyday talk and social action; (2) a disability such as autism can be treated in terms of the intelligence it may gloss as comprising analyzable practices-in-interaction; and (3) the sociology of deviance and social problems can benefit from studies of the intrinsic orderliness of everyday talk and social interaction in both regular, or ordinary, and more specialized settings such as clinics. The data are two segments from a testing and diagnostic center for developmental disabilities in the United States. Each segment involves a child who is diagnosed with autism and is being administered a test that poses questions such as, "What do you do when you're hungry?" The puzzle this test presents is to account for the patterns of both standard (commonsensical) and non-standard (autistic) answering. In accounting for patterns of answering, I use ordinary conversational instances of "what do you do when x happens?" to reveal the logic required in the test, and to describe both commonsense and autistic intelligence. Interactionally, autistic answering may reverse a structural preference for gestalt or global interpretation of utterances in favor of stimulus-bound, local understandings.

A major contribution of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to social science is in providing analyses and findings about how participants in social worlds use talk with its indexical expressions to form actions and social interactions. In terms of its sense for participants, an indexical expression or utterance depends upon its pragmatic context, including knowledge of the person saying or receiving it, the timing and temporal orderliness of the expression, its placement in space or where it is spoken, the kind of occasion, and other such circumstantial matters (Garfinkel 1967:4–6). One purpose of this article is to emphasize the continued need for sociology to appreciate talk as activity, or, more specifically, how utterances with their indexical qualities form the actions they do. A second purpose is to investigate how participants' social actions have a gestalt character to them in the original social psychological sense of that term, where the whole is somehow larger than its constituent parts. Mostly, investigators have treated gestalt coherence as inhering in perceptual objects, whereas the thesis here is that participants also produce and understand the relevance of particular forms of talk-based activity through an orientation to gestalt assembly.

Two video segments from a testing and diagnostic center for developmental disabilities in the United States are the starting point. Each segment involves a child diagnosed with autism who is being administered a subtest of the Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development (Brigance 1978). One issue is how a child analyzes the subtest questions to be able to

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produce commonsensical, correct, standard answers. What are the practices? Additionally, although incorrect and non-standard answers to subtlet questions may be indicative of autism, they show patterning. Accordingly, we can ask what the practices for assembling those answers are. In other words, besides analyzing the “social logics” (Ochs et al. 2004) of commonsense intelligence, we can dissect the logics or forms of practical reasoning in autistic intelligence.

Investigating autism in terms of practical reasoning is consistent with the literature on autism that recognizes definitions of the disorder often are “deficit accounts” (Happé, Briskman, and Frith 2001). That is, much has been said about what autism is not rather than what it is, as a form of being in the world.¹ For example, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (APA 2000:70–71) defines autism as involving qualitative impairment in social interaction; qualitative impairments in communication; and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. The manual emphasizes impairment and restriction in behavior, and when this triad is further specified, the manual refers to “failure” (in forming peer relationships), “lack” (of social or emotional reciprocity), “delays” (in language use), and so on. I do not mean to be commenting ironically on these definitions; the analysis below suggests that autistic reasoning does represent something much more limited than commonsense reasoning, although such a statement is itself embodying a commonsense perspective.² So the purpose is not to debunk the category of autism but to examine and elucidate autistic intelligence as it is exhibited in the Brigance subttest and, as we shall see, in ordinary conversation.

For the sociology of social problems and deviance, the close conversation analytic inspection of interaction employed in this article does not address labeling effects on the educational careers of children. Nor does it examine the social construction of developmental or other disabilities (Rapley 2004). In the latter vein, when participants use a term such as autism to diagnose and label individuals, social constructionism would investigate the community’s claims-making activities, their rhetorical procedures, material interests that may lie behind such activities and procedures, as well as how these activities, procedures, and interests constitute the deviance or social problem of concern (Best 1995; Kitsuse and Spector 1973; Loseke 1999; Miller and Holstein 1993; Schneider 1985). It should be acknowledged that, in regard to autism and the recent upsurge of diagnosis (Frith 2003:59–60), such a project would seem extremely timely: how has this increase in autism come about? However, ethnomethodological investigation of the kind pursued here does not attempt to account for any upsurges, downtrends, or other movements on the gauge of an entity’s existence, whether in terms of incidence or prevalence. Put briefly, with regard to testing situations, the purpose is to analyze how participants make sense of the questions being asked. The orderliness in conduct is the target of inquiry; analytical attention to practices and interaction brings to light structures involved in the routines of examination, including children’s natural language capacities, skills, and competence in both standard and nonstandard performances (Marlaire and Maynard 1990; Maynard and Marlaire 1992). Explication of these routines offers to ground the designations of social problems and deviance in participants’ own organizing conduct, whereby clinicians and educators in their interaction with children also decide upon diagnostic categories and classroom placements in schools (Maynard 1988). However, as mentioned, my stance is not ironic, wherein these categories and placements are the professionals’ impositions. There is no assessment of whether the diagnosed condition is or is not

1. The preoccupation with deficit accounts may be the source of what Goode (1994) discusses as “systematic clinical underestimation of competencies” (pp. 55–56). For an approach to the language competence of mentally retarded adults, see Abbeduto and Rosenberg (1980).

2. See Rapley (2004) and other discursive psychologists (e.g., Edwards and Potter 1992), who suggest that providing a picture of disability that mainly stresses the absences in a person’s everyday engagements leaves much to be learned about what is present in those engagements.

real. My strategy is to respecify what a deviance designation—in this case, the term autism as a diagnostic category—glosses in the concrete interactions and practices of co-participants.³

Gestalt Assembly, Global Coherence, and Autism

For social psychology, Aron Gurwitsch (1964) did much to resurrect a notion of gestalt perception for its importance to the assembly of everyday scenes, suggesting that perceptual data confront us with phenomenal aspects, features, and characters on account of their integration into a certain contexture or organized group of specific structure. By gestalt is meant “a unitary whole of varying degrees of detail, which, by virtue of its *intrinsic articulation and structure*, possesses coherence and consolidation and thus detaches itself as a closed unit from the surrounding field” (Gurwitsch 1964:115, my emphasis). Well-known illustrations of gestalts include the rabbit-duck figure, Rubin’s vase (which vacillates between being a vase and two faces looking at one another), and the Necker cube, named after the Swiss crystallographer who saw cubic shapes spontaneously reverse in perspective. Referring to these illustrations, Gurwitsch (1964) observes that, rather than being stimulus-bound to their lines in an additive fashion, the gestalt perceiver experiences the lines in a processual phase that “adumbrates” the ultimate perceptual whole (p. 207).

Still, the literature on gestalt formation is highly subjectivist, psychological, cognitivist, and sometimes neurobiological in its attempts to explain the phenomenon (Rock and Palmer 1990). Even Gurwitsch, in textually based illustrations of functional relations in gestalts, furthers an “intellectualization” or psychologizing of space (Lynch 1993:127). Eschewing such cognitivist accounts, Harold Garfinkel (2002:177) observes that what phenomenologists like Gurwitsch could be talking about in terms of actual and real phenomena is “only weakly foreshadowed” in their verbal descriptions and pictured illustrations of these phenomena. Worldly exhibits in speech and bodily movements are needed whereby gestalt configurations become manifest. Gestalt objects and their intrinsic features come about through the actual practices of actors engaging in observable conduct with one another. Accordingly, while I draw upon Gurwitsch along with literatures in autism, my approach is to discuss “speech acts” or talk-based actions as gestalt accomplishments in the real social world of interaction. We will see that speech acts may exhibit global rather than local coherence (Frith 2003), composite as opposed to constructive understandings (Sacks 1989), or commonsense instead of autistic intelligence.⁴

The Data and Methods

Some educational tests require embodied performances of various kinds, such as putting puzzles together, or matching blocks and discs by placing them together, and so on, whereas the Brigance subtest studied here primarily involves speech rather than other kinds of interactive work between clinician and child. The subtest poses questions of this order: “What do you do when you’re hungry/you’re sleepy/you’re cold/you’ve cut your finger/you’re sick,” and so on. The subtest is called “Knows What to Do in Different Situations,” and the skill being tested is described this way: “Gives appropriate responses for different situations” (Brigance 1978:172). Although the clinician reads test items from a booklet on the table in front of

3. The term “respecify” derives from Garfinkel’s (1988) considerations about how ordinary and professional topics, to the extent that they indicate phenomena of meaning and reasoning in particular social worlds, can be found as achievements of practical actions. For related but different versions of respecification, see also Button (1991); Edwards (2005).

4. For a complementary discussion of gestalts in talk, see Wieder (1974:188–89), who also draws on notions of the documentary method of interpretation (Garfinkel 1967) for an analysis of “telling the code” in a halfway house.

her and scores the child's answer in the same booklet, she presents the test items orally to the child, who holds his hands together on the table or positions them in various ways on his body (he often puts them on either side of his chest) rather than, as in other tests, using them to assemble or place objects.⁵ When consulted by families and schools, clinicians at the Center for Developmental Disabilities (pseudonym), where the data were collected, use the Brigance Inventory in its entirety, along with a variety of other educational tests, to diagnose children and make recommendations for classroom and school placements.

To investigate the analytic work of the child who hears and answers the subtlest questions, I wanted to know whether the what-do-you-do-when kind of question (hereafter, "WDYDW question") has its counterpart in natural or ordinary language contexts.⁶ It turned out that, in my tape-recorded and transcribed conversational collections, I found about 10 extracts that qualify. To expand on the conversational collection, I have asked students to see if they could find instances of WDYDW questions and answers by listening closely to their own conversations and then writing down, as close to verbatim as they could, what they heard. It seems that the phrase is somewhat commonly used, and my students have returned approximately 30 narratives in field notes that recount their conversations. Working with the WDYDW sequences in the mechanically and ethnographically recorded conversational collections, then, is a resource for understanding patterns in the actual administration of the subtest, which is both the impetus and trajectory for the current study. That is, the two Brigance examinations are the point from which this investigation originates.

To explicate the interactional structures in these subtests, a presumption is that they represent a specialized deployment of more generic and commonsensical conversational practices, and that analysis of these practices can inform the study of their institutional manifestations as here in a testing and diagnostic clinic for developmental disabilities (Heritage 1984b; Maynard 1991; Schegloff 1980). In other words, as what Emanuel A. Schegloff (1986) calls the "primordial site of social action," ordinary conversation and WDYDW sequences can be considered a basis upon which the Brigance subtest draws for its more specialized deployment of such sequences for purposes of assessment. Given the vagueness of the Brigance requirement of "appropriate responses for different situations," this strategy of examining conversational sequences is particularly important because it enables seeing how participants in ordinary talk construct WDYDW questions and answers. Analysis of conversational speech acts and commonsense, per Schegloff (2003:45–46), also will enable us to enter the world of autistic intelligence and to understand more fully sense-making and reasoning practices as manifested in the nonstandard answers to WDYDW questions—indeed, to distinguish the nonstandard from the standard and not conflate the two in the sense of attributing all the talk from a category member to the category in which they may be a member ("developmentally disabled" or "autistic," for instance). Overall, I employ the methods of conversation analysis; in part, this means working with questions and answers as organized sequences that embody social actions according to the displayed orientations of participants in their talk.

Space does not permit an analysis of the two entire Brigance administrations. I will only examine the initial parts of these subtests where each of the children who takes the test begins to experience trouble and produce answers that are, by the standards of the instrument, incorrect. Here is the first episode involving Tony (pseudonym), a five-year-old boy (a complete transcript of Tony's test is in the Appendix):

5. A videotape camera was situated behind a one-way mirror.

6. In another kind of interview context called "service audits," Antaki (2002) has analyzed discourse "in which care staff interviewed persons with learning difficulties about the services they were receiving" (p. 415). Questions include WDYDW forms ("what if you didn't want to do something we suggested, what would you say?") that attempt to find out whether the interviewees understand certain aspects of how they should orient to the care team. I will later discuss an aspect of Antaki's research very relevant to the data here. See Extract 14 and discussion.

(1) Brigance with Tony (CL = Clinician/Special Education; TO = Tony)

- 1 CL: ↑What do you do when you're hungry?
 2 (1.4)
 3 TO: You eat.
 4 CL: Okay. What do you do when you're sleepy.
 5 (1.0)
 6 TO: Reh- (0.8) you res:::t:s.
 7 CL: What do you do when you're col:d.
 8 (1.5)
 9 TO: And den you .hh and den you (1.4) and den you gets::
 10 fwo::zen.
 11 (0.2)
 12 CL: Y:e:::ah.
 13 (0.8)
 14 CL: An then- oka::y, what else?
 15 (1.4)
 16 TO: [What els::e.
 17 CL: ['n-
 18 CL: Yeah when you get ↑col:d what do you do::.
 19 (1.0)
 20 TO: You gets: hh .hh hh fwozen.

As correct answers for the question being hungry at line 1, the Brigance test booklet suggests “eat” and “get something to eat.” For the question about being sleepy at line 4, it lists “go to sleep, go to bed, lie down.” For being cold at line 7, the booklet has “get my coat, blanket, sweater, etc.; go in the house, get near the heater.” We will return to examine this episode with Tony and also later inspect the second episode with “Ronnie.”

Presently, my aim is to begin decomposing, from an interactional and commonsense standpoint, what the WDYDW gestalt is as a form of action. Decomposing the WDYDW query and its reply may look like an adherence to the stimulus-bound, additive version of gestalt theory, but the intent is only an analytic one. The decomposition will be in the service of the analysis of the practices of talk and social interaction whereby the gestalt is adumbrated and achieved collaboratively. Following Garfinkel (2002), the gestalt exists in and as those practices in detail.

Ordinary Conversation and What Do You Do When

My strategy is to analyze the conversational collection of WDYDW sequences for insights on how the Brigance subtest works. Uta Frith (1989:87) shows a cartoon of a child taking a related test⁷ who is asked, “What should you do if you cut yourself?” and answers, “bleed” (an item that is also on the Brigance).⁸ This answer exemplifies the associative and literal thinking that autistic individuals are regarded to have, and Frith (1989) states that the test “requires commonsense answers to seemingly ordinary, but really quite deep hypothetical questions. It is not sufficient to give a ‘correct’ answer, as in the example, but the answer needs to be relevant to the question” (p. 87). However, all these characterizations—of associative and literal thinking, and about difficulties with commonsense knowledge—beg a

7. The related test is the Comprehension section of the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children. As a guide to the scale explains, “items on the subtest directly test knowledge or awareness of appropriate behavior in social situations” (Truch 1993:144).

8. On the problem an autistic individual may have with the word “cut,” see also Park (2001), who describes an incident she experienced with her grown daughter, Jesse, who has autism: “So we read from the morning paper: the company is downsizing. ‘A certain number of people are going to be cut.’ ‘Cut?!’ [says Jesse]. The astonishment in her voice makes it plain: the autistic literalism survives” (p. 41).

Table 1 • Posing a Hypothetical Problem with WDYDW

<i>Commonsense Talk</i>	<i>Commonsense Subtest</i>
Use of question-answer sequence	Use of question-answer sequence

number of issues when applied to the Brigance subtest. What are these WDYDW questions as ordinary objects? In answering the subtest questions, what does it mean to be not only correct but also “relevant,” as Frith says, or “appropriate” as the Brigance itself states?

A beginning observation derives from Frith’s (1989:87) statement that such a subtest requires answers to hypothetical questions, so a most basic thing is the use of a WDYDW question-answer sequence for posing the hypothetical problem and for obtaining an answer. If we consider this sequence, or the competence to engage in it, as part of our natural language capacity,⁹ the sequence can be used as a starting point to chart on a table the various practices or practical competencies for producing and understanding the WDYDW question. The first column of the table charts commonsense practices involved in the sequence, while the second column shows the selection from these practices for purposes of assembling the test as a more restricted commonsense performance. In the initial row, then, we can see that commonsense talk and subtest both deploy the question-answer sequence as a fundamental form (see Table 1).

In this article, there is little space to say more about this sequence qua sequence, except to comment briefly on the structure of the subtest. A child taking the subtest needs to understand both the integrity and orderliness of the two-part pair of turns constituting each sequence, as well as the overall structure of the subtest in which each pair of turns is embedded. The overall structure constitutes what has so far been glossed as the Brigance “subtest,” comprising the series of WDYDW questions and answers. That any given sequence is understood to be part of this series helps to achieve the larger “coherence” in which the sequence participates (compare to Schegloff 1990). As for the integrity of each question-answer sequence, and other than its embeddedness in a series of similarly typed sequences, it is to be accomplished as its own topical unit, neither informing nor being informed by any previous or next such unit. In my data, there is one instance in which Tony seems to orient to an individual WDYDW question, his (incorrect) answer, and a subsequent or now second question that constitutes its prior as a first, as related units. This now-first sequence provides a context for, and is narratively developed by, his answer to the second question.¹⁰ Such an orientation goes against the commonsense subtest understanding of single WDYDW questions as part of a series while having a boundary with any previous or next turn in that series.

9. See the extensive discussion of question-answer sequences in the interactions of parents and their children with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism in Kremer-Sadlik (2004), who explores what these sequences exhibit about the ability for interpersonal perspective-taking on the part of the children. The research connects with an extensive literature on “theory of mind” as it applies to Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism, suggesting greater theory-of-mind competence among these children than experimental research has found (Baron-Cohen 1996).

10. For the specific sequences discussed here, see Appendix, lines 36–60. It is possible that Tony, having responded to the question about going into a room that is dark (lines 36–37) and having suggested that you “watch TV” (lines 39, 43, 46), hears the next question about what you do “when your shoe is untied” (lines 51–52) as related to being in the same dark room. The formulation “in there” as part of his “and then you sleep in there” answer (line 54) would indicate this because it references a place though no such reference to a place is made in the question about the untied shoe. Accordingly, his line 54 answer could be incorporating an understanding of the previous two questions and, in a narrative-like fashion, proposing that when you go in a dark room, you watch tv, you untie your shoes, “and then” you go to sleep. On this analysis, Tony’s failure here has both aspects mentioned above: he appreciates neither that each question-answer sequence has its own integrity, nor that it is part of a series that constitutes an overall testing structure. In a sense, he may be entrenched in the immediacy of the contiguity among proposals about going into a room that is dark, watching tv, and having an untied shoe. (Tony may also build the next bit about “raining” as part of the narrative. See Appendix, lines 62–75.)

Conversational Practices: Use of Abstracted versus Concrete “When”

“If” and “when” are both terms that get used to pose hypothetical problems, but they do not appear to be interchangeable. I will note here only that the “when” construction poses the problem as a kind of presumed exigency. That is, the question premises the problematic situation as something that assumedly happens as a matter of course or routine in the situation being queried about. “If,” on the other hand, more strongly conveys contingency. The posed problem is something that might happen rather than something that assumedly does or will happen.¹¹ “If” may also more strongly convey that the hypothetical problem is to be considered abstractly rather than concretely (see Extract 14 and discussion). Most of the time, in the Brigance subtest, clinicians use the “when” form—which is how the questions are scripted—and it is that form on which analysis will now focus. Used for the WDYDW question, the form has the two senses I just mentioned: an abstract one in which it does not refer to any particular time and place, and a concrete one in which it does.

In this narrated extract, a guest queries an apartment dweller (the narrator) about her cat, using the “when” form. As the narrative indicates, the guest did not know about the cat before.

(2) WDYDW #2

A friend of mine was visiting my apartment for the first time and noticed that I had a pet cat. She didn’t know I had brought my cat from home and I explained how I’m not supposed to have her here without paying extra. That led into this sequence:

Kate: I didn’t know you had a cat!

Mary: Yeah, I brought her from home, but I’m not really supposed to have her here.

Kate: Why not?

Mary: Well actually we’re allowed to have cats, but I’m supposed to be paying 30 extra bucks on my rent and I’m not.

Kate: So your landlord doesn’t know?

Mary: Nope.

Kate: So *what do you do when* maintenance or your landlord has to come in the apartment?

Mary: Well the cat hides under my bed as soon as someone knocks on the door, but otherwise I hide her litter box in the bathtub!

The “when” construction poses a hypothetical problem as a kind of possible, presumed circumstance that could occur at any time. By use of the “when,” that is, Kate suggests that maintenance or the landlord “has to” come in the apartment at unspecified times. Notice how Mary answers the question in a way that exhibits the presumption; in saying that the cat “hides,” her present-tense verb form, along with a temporal formulation (“as soon as”) conveys the possibility of the event having occurred and with the potential for unspecified recurrence. In these ways, the “when” form is abstract and general.

In conversation, speakers may also use the “when” term to refer to particular times and places rather than abstracted circumstances. In Extract 3, “when” refers both to a particular time in August when the two friends are getting together, and to a particular place.

(3) WDYDW #26

I was on the phone with a friend the other day that is currently living in Mexico. We have a trip planned to Chicago in August. When the trip came up she said, “*What are we going to do when we first get there?*” I then said that we should go over to Navy Pier.

Notice that the verb form following “what,” is “are we going to do” rather than “do you do.” This grammatical articulation can be involved in the concretization of “when” by providing it

11. However, see Extract 8 below and the query, “What do you do if people have questions?”, directed to a student who was required to give a presentation in class. The answer is, “I just pray that they do not ask, otherwise I will just make stuff up.” The answer displays that people having questions is something that might happen, but that might not happen (and this may take divine intervention).

Table 2 • Posing a Hypothetical Problem with WDYDW

<i>Commonsense Talk</i>	<i>Commonsense Subtest</i>
Use of question-answer sequence	Use of question-answer sequence
Use of abstracted or concrete “when”	Use of abstracted “when”

with an open yet ostensive character; it points toward a future actual happening that the two participants can commonly project. So this is a concrete use of “when” in the question, and the answer proposes a course of action to be engaged at the ostensive time and place specified in the question.

Whereas conversational use of “when” occurs in both abstract and concrete ways, as embedded in test items on the Brigance subtest (for example, “what do you do when you are hungry”), it does not refer to a particular time or place. As Tony correctly responds, “You eat,” it exhibits a solving of the hypothetical problem that is not confined by spatial or temporal references. Accordingly, we will add to the table to show that the appropriate form of understanding subtest questions involves using the “when” term to abstract from time and place (see Table 2).

Pronouns in WDYDW Sequences: The Use of “You”

As participants in conversation employ the “you” pronoun, it can have different meanings. Harvey Sacks (1992a:348–53) observes this in his lectures, suggesting that “you” can be “systematically ambiguous” because it does not distinguish between singular and plural, or between addressing someone personally rather than referring to “everyone.” That is, “you” can be used in a categorical and generic sense or in personal sense (Watson 1987:268–70). In Extract 2, “So what do you do when maintenance or your landlord has to come in the apartment?” is referring to the apartment dweller in the latter sense—personally. In answering the question, Mary refers to herself: “I hide her litterbox in the bathtub.” Extract 4 below is different. The narrator is an experienced runner and appears to have been asked a question by her sister on that basis. The initial “you” in the sister’s quoted question is asking about the narrator’s circumstances as related to the sister’s (“she recently had concerns about side aches”). Given the course of action—“running together”—the two participants have been sharing that provides the activity context of the query about side aches, the “you” is akin to “we,” and may achieve dual or inclusively plural referencing (Lerner 1996b; Schegloff 1996).

(4) WDYDW #20

Two years ago I ran the Chicago marathon and I convinced my sister to sign up and run with me this year. She has never been a big runner but is looking to get into it. Lately, we have been running together to get our pace worked out. She recently had concerns about side aches and asked me, “What do you do when you get side aches?” I responded by saying, “I read this book about running that suggested you actually pinch the skin where you feel the ache.” I then told her, “This has always worked for me.” Her response was “oh, okay, I will have to try that next time.”

But then the sister, in answering, employs the “you” term in a categorical way when she quotes the “book about running” as suggesting what “you” should do—“pinch the skin.” That is, if the book is written for a general reader, the advice it gives via the sister’s reporting is for anyone. At the end of the extract, the sister testifies to the effectiveness of the categorical advice by claiming how it works for her personally. Finally, the proffered advice is treated with an “oh, okay” indication of its informativeness (Heritage 1984a) and a will-do form of advice receipt, a claim to “try” it “next time.”

Table 3 • Posing a Hypothetical Problem with WDYDW

<i>Commonsense Talk</i>	<i>Commonsense Subtest</i>
Use of question-answer sequence	Use of question-answer sequence
Use of abstracted or concrete “when”	Use of abstracted “when”
Referent of “you”: personal or categorical	Referent of “you”: categorical

In conversational instances of WDYDW questions, the “you” mostly refers to the recipient of the question, or to that person plus a partner, or to the question-asker and the recipient. In other words, it is regularly used in the personal mode although sometimes in the plural. However, it also can be used to refer categorically to “anyone.” And in the Brigance subtest, as with, “what do you when you’re hungry,” the pronoun “you” is to involve neither reference to the question recipient, the recipient and a partner, nor the question asker personally. Rather the “you” refers in a categorical sense—it refers to “anyone” who might be in the circumstances being depicted (see Table 3). Thus, a contribution to the generalized character of Tony’s response (“you eat”) to the question about being hungry derives from an impersonal use of “you.”

Actions Produced through the WDYDW Sequence

Having specified a few properties of the components in the WDYDW sequence, we are moving closer to an understanding of the gestalt-type social actions the sequence performs. To enable a characterization of these actions, another pattern in the data needs to be examined. There are different kinds of hypothetical problems: (1) hypothetical problems from the asker’s lived experience, (2) hypothetical problems from the recipient’s lived experience, and (3) hypothetical problems from theoretically projected experience.

(1) *Hypothetical Problem from the Asker’s Lived Experience: Requesting Advice.* A number of instances are like Extract 4: the hypothetical problem is exhibited as from the asker’s own lived experience. In Extract 4, specifically, the initiator of the WDYDW sequence is having a difficulty that derives from not previously having been “a big runner.” My collection contains numerous examples like this. In vernacular terms, I characterize these sequences as the gestalt action of requesting advice because the questioner is seeking information about how to handle his or her own life difficulty or issue (Heritage and Sefi 1992:370–77). In another extract, two women are discussing their bridge game and strategies to employ:

(5) SBL:2:2:3:R:18:939 (modified)

- 1 Mar: I’d love to have a good answer in uh (0.3) somebody bids in
 2 trump en you c- you can’t answer.
 3 Ann: Ye:ah, hhhhh Well I’d sure like t’know what you do when
 4 you have a voi:d when yo don’t have any points
 5 (0.3)
 6 Mar: Yah.
 7 (1.8)
 8 Ann: Because I know durn well I coulda made two clubs,
 9 Mar: Yeah.
 10 (0.8)
 11 Mar: I think yih go to flush.
 12 (1.9)
 13 Ann: Well I’m gunnuh find out if- if they’re not gonna use that
 14 as a signoff I’m not gonna say anything with five points
 15 then.

Ann's question at lines 3–4 initially can be heard as about “anyone” who has a void and no points, but subsequent talk—her claim to have been able to have “made two clubs” (line 8)—displays that she must have found herself in the situation portrayed at lines 3–4. Marge acknowledges the query (line 6) and later the claim (line 9), and then tentatively offers a bit of advice (line 11), which Ann appears not to accept completely (line 13). In this instance, the WDYDW query derives from Ann's lived experience of discussing game strategies and posing a hypothetical problem from her knowledge of how the game transpires or has already transpired for her.

(2) *Hypothetical Problem from the Recipient's Lived Experience: Showing Concern.* The above considerations suggest that, when askers of the WDYDW question pose a problem related to their own lived experience, it regularly constitutes the social action of requesting advice or recommendations about a problem within that experience. Askers of the question can also pose a hypothetical problem related to the recipient's lived experience, such that the gestalt-type social action appears to be showing concern. Extract 2 in which a guest asks about her host's problem with a cat who doesn't belong in the apartment is one example. Here is an extract from a medical interview in which the patient complains about tightness in the chest:

(6) Frankel data: Medical Interview #3 (Hopper collection)

1 Pt: =Uh- (0.2) And I experience the tightness uh, if I'm more
 2 active (0.3) physically like (0.4) pushing (1.0) washers an
 3 dryers around uh the store floor (0.3) I work in a store,
 4 .hhhh then (0.4) the feeling the tightness is much more
 5 intense
 6 Dr: Uhm hm
 7 Pt: And then gives me a lot more trouble.
 8 (0.5)
 9 Dr: What do you do when the pain comes on to alleviate it?
 10 Pt: I have to stop whatever it is I'm doing uh sit down, I try
 11 tuh breathe deeply and the tightness usually passes very
 12 quickly...

Having heard the complaint and symptoms, the physician asks what the patient does to “alleviate” the pain (line 9), thereby requesting and obtaining an explication of how the patient as recipient of the question remedies a presumed hypothetical problem in his experience. The doctor's question, a routine way of taking a medical history (Boyd and Heritage forthcoming), is a way of showing professional concern, and the patient answers generically. He stops “whatever” he is “doing,” sits down, and the “tightness usually passes.”

When taking a history, a doctor follows the answer to a WDYDW question with more questioning (as happens after the talk in Extract 6). Accordingly, the demonstration of professional concern in the WDYDW utterance and the post-answer questioning as an interviewing stratagem that involves withholding comment are aspects of what might be called doing diagnosis. In conversational contexts, rather than doing diagnosis (although this can occur in a lay fashion), the WDYDW sequence may be part of an environment where encouragement is being offered to the recipient about some difficulty. For example, in Extract 7, before her WDYDW query about Andrea's “giving a presentation in class” difficulty, Emily offers sympathy (“that sucks”) and reassurance in a contrasting mode (“I am sure you will be fine though”).

(7) Narrative #6; conversation overheard by roommate of Andrea and Emily

Andrea: I am giving a presentation in class today and I know nothing about it.
 Emily: That sucks, I am sure you will be fine though.
 Andrea: Yeah, I am just going to wing it.
 Emily: *What do you do if people have questions?*

Andrea: Haha, I just pray that they do not ask, otherwise, I will just make stuff up.

Emily: Sounds like the best plan to me.

Then, after Andrea's answer to the query, Emily proposes that it "sounds like the best plan," thereby engaging another form of encouragement.

My collection contains a variety of hypothetical problems posed in relation to the lived experiences of question recipients. They include a woman who told her boyfriend that she couldn't "hang out" because she was cramming for an exam, whereupon he asked, "What do you do when you stay up all night and end up trying to function the next day without any sleep?", and a woman asking her roommate, who had applied for three post-graduation jobs, "What do you do if you have to decide between all three places?" In all of these, the question is dealing with the recipient's lived experience and shows sensitivity to or concern for some hypothetical difficulty or issue portrayed as presumably or contingently arising in it. As a gestalt-type social action enacted through the WDYDW question, the phenomenon of showing concern has, as an identifying feature, prior talk displaying the untoward life circumstances of the recipient.

(3) *Hypothetical Problem Theorized for the Recipient's Projected Experience: Testing the Other.* A third kind of hypothetical problem is closer to those that are posed on the Brigrance subtest: instances where the use of WDYDW deals with neither the asker's nor the recipient's actual lived experience. The question's mode projects an experience for the recipient, and projects this experience from an Archimedean standpoint, or one that is outside of the time and place of either asker or recipient (Smith 1987:70–71). The question, reflecting a standpoint related to the theoretical interests of the question asker, facilitates a gestalt action of testing the recipient. In Extract 8, the narrator reports a conversation she had while interviewing for a job. The theoretical standpoint of the asker can be noticed in that the interviewer announces himself as having "some questions" (lines 1), which suggests a preconceived agenda (concerns about performance in a "work environment"; line 2) from which his inquiry arises, rather than a relation to present circumstances of either co-participant, as those circumstances may have been topicalized in preceding talk. In addition, the question projects the interviewee being on the job—in a "work environment." She is then presented with a presumably routine hypothetical problem (lines 4–5).

(8) WDYDW narrative #3

Int: I have some questions I'd like to ask you to understand how you are in a work environment.

Me: Okay.

Int: My first question is: *What do you do when you feel stressed or overloaded? How do you handle that?*

Me: I generally don't allow myself to get too stressed since I am anything but a procrastinator. I like to work on things ahead of time. However, whenever I feel stressed I try to get help from anyone that is willing or I try to take a break and do something different for awhile.

Int: Good, good. Now can you give me an example of the last time you felt stressed?

That this problem is understood to be projected and theoretical can be seen in the recipient's way of answering. She speaks in general terms, in relation to a characterological trait ("anything but a procrastinator"; line 7), according to a preference ("I like to work on things ahead of time"; lines 7–8), and by what she tries to do ("get help from anyone . . . take a break . . . do something different"; lines 8–10), not according to what she has done specifically and in particular. Notice that, after the recipient responds to the question, the interviewer does not indicate being informed by the answer, as would be the case with a "real" rather than "test" question (Heritage 1984b:287–90). Instead, in a prototypical testing way, he simply evaluates the answer (Mehan 1979) with approvals ("good, good") before going on to ask another question.

Table 4 • Posing a Hypothetical Problem with WDYDW

<i>Commonsense Talk</i>	<i>Commonsense Subtest</i>
Use of question-answer sequence	Use of question-answer sequence
Use of abstracted or concrete “when”	Use of abstracted “when”
Referent of “you”: personal or categorical	Referent of “you”: categorical
About lived, or theoretical and projected, experience	About theoretical and projected experience

Posing a Hypothetical Problem through WDYDW

We are now in a position to add to our table. Where there are different kinds of problems posed by the WDYDW phrase in conversation, and in relation to its sequential-contextual entanglements there, the posed problem in the subtest is not about the asker’s or the recipient’s lived experience. The operative social action, in other words, is neither asking for advice about one’s own circumstances nor showing concern about the other’s circumstances. Rather it is a hypothetical problem from an experience disconnected from an actual lived experience of asker or recipient, and the question solicits an answer that is to be evaluated not for its fit with that experience but for its fit with projected circumstances and an Archimedean standpoint (i.e., the “appropriateness” of the answer according to the test booklet) that is of theoretical relevance for the asker. In these ways, the operative social action is a testing one (see Table 4).

Elicited Answers to the WDYDW Question

One more dimension of the Brigrance subtest has to do with the nature of the answer that the WDYDW question elicits. Answers are produced in various forms that require careful delineation. An initial point is to distinguish between those answers that orient to the question as posing a hypothetical problem in need of a generic solution and those that orient to the question as posing a problem with a specific solution. I will make a further distinction in those answers that are somewhere beyond generic and specific solutions; these are answers with generic consequences.

Overwhelmingly, the instances of WDYDW sequences in my collection are of the first type; Extracts 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 all involve recipients producing answers that are generic solutions to the hypothetical problems. While the questions pose problematic states of various kinds, the answers suggest actions the recipient or others can take to remedy those states. For example, when the landlord comes in the apartment, the cat hides under the bed (Extract 2); when your side aches from running, you pinch the skin (Extract 4); or—in an extract not included verbatim here—a potential volunteer asks what you do when you need to leave a job helping in the museum and his recruiter says that you just go because “it is a fairly flexible thing, people will be coming and going all afternoon”; and so on.

The specific type of solution is not numerically the most common, but it can be a relevant way of answering the question, as in Extract 3, where the question is about what the parties are going to do when they arrive in Chicago. Unlike generic solutions, which abstract from time and place, specific solutions, by virtue of the uses of “when” and “you,” are temporally and locationally concrete and personal. Going to Navy Pier is what just those friends will do as visitors to a particular place (Chicago) and at a relatively definite time. Another illustration of the specific solution is the interaction in Extract 9 below. Leslie is talking to her “mum” who is planning to visit Leslie. At lines 1–2, Leslie tells Mum where Mark (Leslie’s husband) will meet her “coach,” or bus.

(9) Holt:X[C]-1-2-7]:2:2 (Modified transcript)

- 1 Les: Jus’ to tell you that Mark says, try’n get off at Sparkford
2 an’ he’ll meet the coach.

- 3 (0.6)
 4 Mum: Yes. Oka[y
 5 Les: [Alright?
 6 Mum: And if what. (0.8) 'f they won't let me, set me down there
 7 what.
 8 Les: Well go on to Yeovil.
 9 (0.2)
 10 Mum: Yes. (0.7) Ye- I'll ask .hh They wouldn't they wouldn't say
 11 you see they said no, you'll have to ask the driver.
 12 Les: Yes. Well if not go on t'Yeovil.
 13 Mum: Yeh. Okay love- (0.3) I'll try.

Mum's question at lines 6–7, prefaced with “and,” is in the contingent if-form (lines 6–7), and refers to the projected circumstance that “they” (the coach driver) might not let her off at Sparkford (per line 1). Next (line 8) Leslie proposes, with a “Well” preface that may mark the reply as dispreferred,¹² that Mum “go on to Yeovil.” After reporting that she had already asked about the projected circumstance, and received a recommendation “to ask the driver” (lines 10–11), Leslie’s acknowledges this and repeats, “Well if not go on t'Yeovil” (line 12), as a solution. The operative action on Mum’s part is asking for, and receiving advice, as Mum responds with a mitigated will-do form, claiming an intention to “try” carrying out this course of action (line 13). The concrete and personal character to the problem and solution, along with references to a particular time and place and ordered events, contribute to the character of the answer as a specific, rather than generic, solution.

However, not all answers to WDYDW questions with hypothetical problems provide solutions of either the generic or specific type. That is, some answers may avoid a solution to the problem altogether and portray generic consequences for those affected by it. Rather than having a capacity for agency, they are shown to be further objects of some condition related to the initial problem. To explicate this further distinction in answering, I will draw on conversation analytic research regarding what are called compound Turn Constructional Units (Lerner 1996a). In conversation, participants often use “If *x*” + “then *y*” to pose hypothetical problems and candidate solutions:

(10) (Lerner, 1996a:314, ex. [15])

- 1 A: If for any reason you uh can't be there at ten o'clock,
 2 [let me know
 3 B: [I will call you
 4 A: All right

This extract illustrates once more the phenomenon of a specific solution: each party, in dealing with the hypothetical, proposes a remedy that involves particular referencing (A refers to B as “you,” and B refers to self as “I”), a concrete time (“ten o'clock”), and an actual next action (B letting A know or calling A).

Compare Extract 10 to Extract 11, which illustrates a different way of responding to a hypothetical problem, as it is posed in the first part of a compound Turn Constructional Unit at line 4:

(11) (Lerner, 1996a:310, ex. [9])

- 1 A: But if you look at, say the Ten Commandments, they really
 2 are based on race survival
 3 B: I think so. I really do.
 4 A: If you don't obey those Ten Commandments,
 5 B: the race is going to go to hell pretty damn fast.

The second part of the Turn Constructional Unit (line 5) is not a solution; nothing is proposed as a remedy to the problematic state of not obeying the commandments. The “you” is being

12. Conversational “preference” structure is discussed in more detail below.

Table 5 • Posing a Hypothetical Problem with WDYDW

<i>Commonsense Talk</i>	<i>Commonsense Subtest</i>
Use of question-answer sequence	Use of question-answer sequence
Use of abstracted or concrete “when”	Use of abstracted “when”
Referent of “you”: personal or categorical	Referent of “you”: categorical
About lived, or theoretical and projected, experience	About theoretical and projected experience
Elicits generic or specific solution, or generic consequence	Elicits a generic solution

used in the categorical rather than personal mode and can refer to anyone who doesn't obey the commandments. “You” in fact can tie back to the reference-term “race” (line 2) and forward contingently to the same term in line 5 where B responds to the hypothetical problem by replacing “you” with “the race.” This kind of referencing helps render the response generic. And, “going to go to hell” provides for what happens next as a collective consequence for the race that is non-compliant with the Ten Commandments. It is not an action that an involved party can take but something that happens to the category of sinners. It is in this sense that a resolution to the hypothetical problem is in terms of a generic consequence.

Together, Extracts 10 and 11 suggest that there can be variation in the *y* part of an “if *x*” + “then *y*” turn, and, by extension, a “when *x*” + “then *y*” or question-answer pair of turns as formed through the WDYDW sequence. The extracts from Lerner suggest that while some *ys* connect to hypothetical problems by posing specific solutions, other *ys* treat hypothetical problems as having generic consequences. Thus, the final dimension to our chart describes the way that solutions to WDYDW questions get fashioned (see Table 5.) Out of the possible elicited responses, the one that characterizes a correct answer to the Brigance subtest is a generic solution rather than either a specific solution or generic consequence. For instance, “What do you do when you get hungry?” obtains, as a correct answer, the generic solution “you eat.”

Practices in Assembling a Social Action as a Gestalt

This chart highlights practices—the “social logics” (Ochs et al. 2004) and practical reasoning—by which participants in everyday talk produce and understand WDYDW questions. Following the left column in Table 5, such questions and their answers form gestalt actions, whereby a party can pose a hypothetical problem through engaging in a bounded question-answer sequence, invoking concrete or abstract times and places, referring personally or to members of the category “anyone.” Furthermore, the problem, as posed, can derive from the asker's or recipient's lived experience, or can pose a projected circumstance relevant to an Archimedean or theoretical standpoint of the asker. Finally, the problem can elicit a generic or specific solution, but also occasion the posing of a generic consequence.

In vernacular terms, the gestalt actions that are formed through the concerted deployment and articulation of these practices include requesting advice, showing concern for others' circumstances, and testing the question recipient. Although I have decomposed the actions in a way to identify discrete practices, it should be understood that the practices themselves are formed in and as the gestalt. As the WDYDW question-answer sequence is underway, the abstractness or concreteness of the “when,” the personal or categorical quality of “you,” the reference to actual and lived or theoretical and projected experience, and the articulation of a solution or a generic consequence are in indexical relations to one another, the sequencing of the talk, and the overall action in which they participate.

These practices are only “adumbrations,” and not entities in their own right, apart from these relations, which are, in Gurwitsch's (1964) terms, relations of “functional significance”

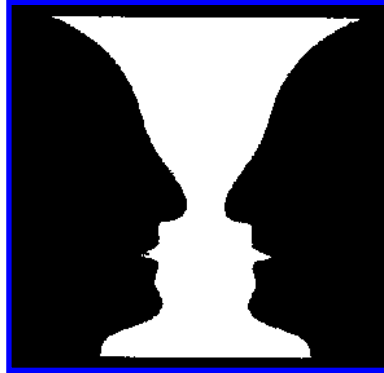


Figure 1 • *Rubin Gestalt*

(p. 122). Functional significance means that a constituent of the gestalt has a function within the whole perceptual object that is defined by the object at the same time as the constituent contributes to that object. In Figure 1, a small segment of the Rubin gestalt (the half-open mouth of the black faces), for example, has its identity determined according to whether the gestalt is apprehended as those two faces confronting one another in a kind of white space, a white goblet against a black background, or as a geometric angle (by covering aspects of the figure other than the segment itself) (Gurwitsch 1964:118–19). In simultaneity, that segment also helps constitute the particular figure in which it is perceptually immersed. Accounting for a part in terms of the contexture implies that, for our investigation of talk-based gestalts, as participants deploy the practices of assembling a question-answer sequence, managing concreteness or abstractness, referring categorically or personally, and the rest, these are already in the service of particular social actions—asking for advice, showing concern, testing—whose understanding informs what those practices can be and to which they contribute. Moreover, as Garfinkel (1988) observes about how members produce orderliness in actual social settings, those practices themselves are a proxy for participants’ lived experience as it is displayed in the further detail of their behavior together.

When someone poses a hypothetical problem such as, “So what do you do when maintenance or your landlord has to come in the apartment?”, it has a gestalt coherence that can be glossed as showing concern. The practical terms of its production and response include abstractness of time reference, personal reference, relation to lived experience, and genericness of solution; those terms are themselves embodied in functional relations to one another, the setting, the participants and what they know of one another, and the variety of particulars that members in the social world know in common and take for granted in any real situation. The question about the landlord emerged in an environment where the questioner had discovered the apartment resident’s cat, after the resident’s announcement that she was “not supposed to have her here” without paying more rent, and a confirmation that the “landlord doesn’t know.” With these background particulars, the WDYDW query about the landlord coming in the apartment shows concern for the recipient by displaying a hypothetical problem of hers, whereas WDYDW questions in the Brigance are part of a series of WDYDW questions and thus a differently constituted background that helps assemble the testing activity. In addition, the design of questioning turns is informative for the comprehension of those turns; we have seen that the abstractness or concreteness of “when” can be partly accomplished by the grammar of the turn in which it appears. And so on. The practices in Table 5 should be taken as pointing beyond themselves to functional relations among further particulars of the

interactive environment as they are ordered by and imbued with the prior gestalt actions of which they are a part.

Practices involved in assembling WDYDW sequences are natural language competencies. Rather than employing the full array of competencies identified from conversational sequences, the Brigance subtest draws selectively, as the right column of Table 5 shows. It requires skill in doing the basic question-answer sequence (as a discrete part of a series), but is limited in other ways. The test poses hypothetical problems that are abstract rather than concrete, proposed to be experienced by anyone rather than either the particular questioner or recipient, theoretical rather than lived, and solicitous of a generic solution. Accordingly, the most overriding characteristic of the WDYDW question-answer sequence in the testing environment is its accentuated academic quality. That is, one dictionary definition of *academic* is to describe something as “theoretical or speculative without a practical purpose or intention.” Unlike conversational instances of WDYDW sequences, which have practical intentions or actions that are palpable to both participants, in the testing environment, such intentions or actions are academic in the sense of relating to purposes that have their provenance in educational or employment contexts outside participants’ lived experience (Goode 1994; Goodwin 2003; Kovarsky 1999).

Competence at doing the Brigance subtest, the WISC Comprehension subtest, or related examinations requires what Margaret Donaldson (1978) calls “disembedded” thought. In addition, such thought and the academic character of the WDYDW question-answer sequence requires talk-work on the part of the examiner and subject, just as the experiential character of “seeking advice” and “showing concern” do in everyday contexts. In each environment, participants need practical mastery of that environment as structures of social action in order to perform well, such that, in the testing interactions, examiner and subject are producing the very environment that is the setting for the subject’s performance. On an item-by-item basis, testing theory would suggest that performance indicates individual ability independent of social context (Frith 1989:89); here the measured capacity for disembedded thought involves in situ competent deployment of practices-as-context (i.e., in shaping the social action) and practices leading to correct or appropriate outcomes at one and the same time.

The Brigance Subtest and What Do You Do When

We now have some tools with which to return to our Brigance subtest and to make suggestions about the analyses or social logics the subjects in this test perform to obtain the “relevant,” “appropriate,” or commonsensical, intelligent, standard answers, and what kinds of analyses or logics they perform to obtain the autistically intelligent or nonstandard answers.

Tony and the Brigance Subtest

Recall from Extract 1 that, with his first two answers, Tony gives the commonsensically intelligent answers. When you’re hungry, you eat (lines 1–3), and when you’re sleepy, you rest (lines 4–6). But then there is a series where he gives the autistically intelligent answers before he gets one commonsensically correct again. At lines 7–11 below is where Tony first gets onto a different track than the commonsense one.

(12) Excerpt from Extract (1)

- 1 CL: ↑What do you do when you’re hungry?
 2 (1.4)
 3 TO: You eat.
 4 CL: Okay. What do you do when you’re sleepy.
 5 (1.0)
 6 TO: Reh- (0.8) you res::::t:s.

7 CL: What do you do when you're cold.
 8 (1.5)
 9 TO: And den you .hh and den you (1.4) and den you gets::
 10 fwo::zen.
 11 (0.2)
 12 CL: Y:e:::ah.

It's possible to see and hear right away that Tony has difficulty with the question about what you do when you're cold, because he hesitates with repetitious prefaces ("and den [then] you"), and also begins rocking in his chair during the 1.4 second silence at line 9 and through the rest of his turn. With the first two questions, he gives the answer almost immediately. Apparently taking from the state descriptor that ends a question (such as "you're hungry?"), Tony repeats the reference form "you," deletes the verb ("are"), and replaces the state descriptor with a remedy descriptor ("eat"). The grammatical form of the answer is *you + remedy descriptor*, which ties to the question by posing a generic solution. However, with the "you're cold" question, he inserts the "and den you" phrase and repeats it twice before coming up with "you gets fwozen [frozen]" (line 9), whereby now the categorical *you* is shown to experience another problematic state rather than solve the problem. The "and then" preface is a *connective* (Levinson 1983:108; Schiffrin 1986; Turk 2004; van Dijk 1979)—that is, a device whereby a speaker can add components to a storytelling (Jefferson 1978:234–35). By using the connective, as well as the substitution of "gets" for "are" after the reference to "you," Tony has not only altered the grammar of his answering but seems to build a kind of narrative tie between question and answer. The clinician acknowledges but does not accept his answer and twice initiates repair (see Appendix, lines 12–20) while Tony stays with his "gets frozen" answer.

The invocation of "and then you" with its narrative tie to the question is a regular feature of Tony's incorrect answers on the subtest. For example, after the segment concerning "cold" are two questions (lines 1, 5 below) where Tony errs in this manner. See the answers at line 3 and line 7, and note the vacillation between categorical and personal reference at line 3:

(13) Continuation of Extract (1)

1 CL: Oka:y, what do you do when you cut your finger.
 2 (1.6)
 3 TO: And den yer- and den I- .hh hh and den you don't ha:fve its.
 4 (0.6)
 5 CL Oh:ka:y. .hh what do you do when you're s::i:ck.
 6 (0.5)
 7 TO: An den you tro::w u::p.
 8 CL: Oka::y.
 9 (2.0)
 10 CL: How bou::t (0.8) what do you do when you see your ha::nds
 11 are dirty.
 12 (1.2)
 13 TO: You wa::sh:: 'em.

In response to the question about dirty hands (lines 10–11) Tony answers correctly by returning to the grammar of *you + remedy descriptor* and the sequential tie between problem and solution. However, in addition to the above two instances, five other incorrect answers are marked by the "and then you" phrase, whereas his acceptable answering has no such marking.

We can summarize here by returning to Table 5. When Tony answers the WDYDW questions correctly, he understands them as posing hypothetical problems, according to the right hand column of Table 5, by orderly participation in the question-answer sequence, dealing with the "when" as abstract, understanding "you" as referring categorically to anyone,

addressing the problems as theoretical, and answering with generic solutions. When Tony departs from this kind of reasoning, as with the question about what you do when you're cold, he understands them through the same practices except for answering with generic solutions. In constructing a narrative tie between question and answer, and rather than answering with a generic solution, he suggests another state (such as "frozen") and proposes a generic consequence to the hypothetical problem of being cold.

Notice the subtle difference between the analytic work involved in the autistically intelligent answers and the commonsensically intelligent ones. Tony's errant answers, in posing a generic consequence, differ from the correct ones mainly on one dimension listed in Table 5. Yet, from the commonsense standpoint, it is remarkable how noticeable, if not jarring, the autistically intelligent answers can be; they "miss the gist" and have a "subtle 'off' quality" (Solomon 2004:271). When I play this extract for audiences, members often laugh when they figure out that Tony has said that you get "frozen" in response to the question about getting cold, or that you don't have your finger when you cut it, or that you throw up when you are sick (see discussion of puns and jokes below). A second thing to notice is that the interpretive practice that Tony employs when he answers incorrectly can in some sense be located within ordinary commonsense competence. That is, by examining the left and right sides in the fifth row of Table 5, we see that the practice he uses for fashioning his answer is part of natural language competence. At times, parties in ordinary talk may answer a WDYDW question with a generic consequence and not a generic solution, when they may thereby also move from problem-solution to narrative ties between the sequence turns.

Ronnie and the Brigance Subtest

For purposes of comparison, we can see how another child, five-year-old "Ronnie," participates in the same section of the Brigance subtest. Also, the clinician in this episode is different from the one testing Tony.

(14) Brigance with Ronnie (RO = Ronnie)

- 1 CL: Whatyado, Ronnie, when you're hungry.
 2 (0.8)
 3 RO: You eat break↑fast.
 4 CL: Mm: ka:↑::y, (2.2) .hhh what do you do when you're slee:py.
 5 (1.2)
 6 RO: Go ta be::d?
 7 CL: That's ri::ght. .hhh Whatyado when you're co::ld.
 8 RO: .hh Go in the hou::se, when me and Jimmy are co:↑ld.
 9 CL: Arri::↑ght, what if yer in the house and yer s:till cold,
 10 whatya do.
 11 RO: tch .hh stay i::n.
 12 (0.5)
 13 CL: Mm ka:↑:y.

Ronnie, like Tony, gets the first two answers correct (although he specifies "you eat" at line 3 with a reference to breakfast). Recall that the Brigance booklet suggests the generic "go in the house" among possible correct answers. Ronnie produces that phrase at line 8 but adds further components that render it problematic. First, his answer cites an experience with a particular other person—presumably, a friend or playmate—and, if so, it is a personalized version of an answer. Second, insofar as Ronnie is indicating that he and Jimmy have experienced this problem, Ronnie regards the problem as related to lived rather than theoretical experience. It may be something that has actually happened to them, and they went inside when it was cold. Third, Ronnie's answer is along the lines of a specific rather than a generic solution: its personalized concreteness renders it as something that happened next, after an actual experience in time and space, rather than as something to do at any point in time or at any place when a person is cold.

The clinician initiates repair at lines 9–10, first acknowledging his answer and then re-issuing the question. In doing so, she alters her way of posing the problem from using “when” in the first rendition of the question (line 7) to invoking “if” in the second, and indicates an interpretation that Ronnie, who himself has used the when form, does not understand that “when” is not to be used as a concrete reference form but as in the abstract and hypothetical mode. His answer, “stay in,” by virtue of its tie to his previous answer, is still concrete and thereby remains as a specific solution rather than a generic one. The clinician delays in acknowledging this answer, and apparently codes it as incorrect. By contrast with the data Charles Antaki (2002) examines, in which the interviewers of learning disabled individuals explicitly work to obtain acceptable answers to WDYDW-type questions by personalizing and particularizing them, mostly the clinicians in my data strategically discourage exhibits of personalizing and particularizing on the part of children being examined. Here, an orientation to maintaining and exhibiting disembedded thought is very strong.¹³

Returning to Extract 14, with what you do when you’re hungry and when you’re sleepy, Ronnie comprehends them by employing the commonsense subtest practices as listed in the second column of Table 5. When Ronnie departs from those practices and the reasoning they represent, as with the question about what you do when you’re cold, he comprehends by properly participating in the sequence, but dealing with the “when” as concrete, understanding “you” as referring personally, addressing the problem from lived experience, and proposing a specific solution as its answer. With four out of the five practices arrayed in Table 5 (second column), Ronnie’s displayed reasoning on the third question is a departure from what is commonsensically required in the subtest. Nevertheless, the reasoning practices once again are among the set of natural language competencies identified in the first column.

This time, as compared with the extracts involving Tony, the difference between the analytic work involved in the autistically intelligent answers and the commonsensical ones is a little more radical. This radical contrast, as opposed to the more limited dissimilarity in Tony’s case, raises a further observation. Consistent with the autism literature, which purports the wide diversity and the idiosyncrasies of autistic intelligence, we can see that departures from commonsense may vary along a continuum. In the testing situation, it might pay to investigate this continuum rather than treating unacceptable answers as univocally irrelevant, inappropriate, or incorrect.

Autistic Intelligence as a Reversal in Conversational Preference Orders

Social orderliness exhibited in environments of testing (i.e., ways in which participants including administrators and subjects together assemble accountable assessments) involves practices at a very detailed interactional level. This article means to contribute to a social scientific appreciation of such detail and orderliness; it has general implications regarding the assembly of gestalt objects, a respecification of the term autism in terms of the intelligence it may gloss, and an ethnomethodological approach to disability designations.

Gestalt objects and their ambiguity are familiar enough from the famous Necker cubes, Rubin vases, duck-rabbit pictures, and other figures, chimera, and illusions. How to extricate

13. An exception in Ronnie’s case is at line 5 below (normalized transcription):

CL: What do you do if your shoe is untied.

RO: Walk.

CL: Mmkay. What do you do if you’re walkin’ along and your shoe is untied?

RO: Uh:::m go to the park.

CL: What if it was like this? ((points to Ronnie’s shoe)) What would you do?

As CL continues to point and asks him again about his shoe, Ronnie finally says, “tie,” whereupon she responds with “That’s right!”

these objects and their perception from the individual's mind and its substrata, and land them autochthonously as actual methods of people acting in concert with one another, is another matter. Indeed, how to investigate gestalt assembly outside of laboratories and beyond visual perceptions (Rock and Palmer 1990), also should be of sociological interest. One proposal drawn from this article is that we need to recover those gestalts as they are situated in the social world as part of a field of ethnomethods or concerted embodied practices, including those involved in talk and social interaction. A gestalt as a coherent, unitary whole is something that both participants in a dyad assemble in real time. Therefore, whatever the psychological reality may be for a gestalt in artificial settings, its social reality involves participant actions and reactions that are co-constitutive of the phenomenal object. Investigation of the Brigrance substest led to WDYDW phrases in ordinary talk. There the phrase initiates a collaborative sequence and gestalt-type social actions of various kinds through the practical work of both parties to the transaction. The gestalt actions that emerged by way of empirical inquiry include, but are not limited to, showing concern, asking for advice, and testing.

Another proposal in this article is that as we have learned about commonsense we also have learned something about autistic intelligence. It will pay to reconsider the suggestion that autistic intelligence is a departure from commonsense reasoning because it represents a disturbance in the ability to form central or global coherence across a wide range of stimuli (Frith 1989, 2003). This proposes that autism entails difficulty in gestalt assembly. Instead of achieving global or gestalt coherence, autistic intelligence assembles details of social objects in a stimulus-bound, literal, or additive fashion. Experts on autism regard the orientation as an emphasis on processing "local" information and achieving a more limited coherence (Navon 1977). If there is truth to these formulations, they nevertheless generalize about the details of the phenomena of autism. Further, as deficit accounts, they say what autism lacks rather than what is present in the reasoning of the autistic person and in the particulars of the talk shared between that person and the commonsense actor. Moreover, deficit accounts draw a boundary between commonsense and autistic intelligence that misses relations between them.

Consider another pair of terms related to the distinctions between gestalts and stimulus-bound, additive wholes, and global and local coherence. Conversation analysts draw this contrast between constructive and composite understandings of utterances. Sacks (1989), examining the use of "may I help you," has stated that such an utterance is a constructive when it is "understood by taking the pieces and adding them up in some way" (pp. 222–23). As a constructive, the phrase can be interpreted literally with its sense built from the utterance parts as a question about the recipient's state of knowledge. Thereby, the question can obtain an answer such as "I don't know." As a composite whose sense is not reducible to its parts, on the other hand, *may I help you* is a "piece of etiquette" and works idiomatically as a way for its speaker (in a store, for example) to announce the kind of setting the recipient has entered.¹⁴ Composite and constructive are analogous to the other distinctions we have been suggesting (see Table 6 for terminological comparisons).

Both constructive and composite understandings of utterances occur in ordinary conversation. Composite understandings—commonsense social actions that utterances perform—sometimes run against constructive understandings and vice versa, and result in misunderstanding and efforts at repair. For instance, Schegloff (1990:66–70) examines a spate of talk in which Bonnie has asked Jim if she can borrow his gun, and he replies "What gun?" For Bonnie, who understands Jim idiomatically to be denying that he owns a gun and thereby rejecting her request, this utterance operates as a composite. However, as subsequent talk exhibits, Jim built the utterance in a way to be asking Bonnie to specify which among the guns he owned she was requesting, and meant the utterance in a more literal or constructive way. There can be no question that the tension between constructive (additive) and compos-

14. My explication of Sacks (1989) draws in part on Schegloff (1987:210).

Table 6 • Posing a Hypothetical Problem with WDYDW

<i>Types of Intelligence/Understanding</i>	
<i>Commonsense</i>	<i>Autistic</i>
Gestalt	Additive or stimulus bound
Global	Local
Idiomatic	Literal
Composite	Constructive

ite (idiomatic) understandings is a source of misunderstanding in talk, but more than this, Schegloff (1987:210–12) also conjectures that composites might be preferred structurally over their counterparts.

The concepts of “preference” and “preference structure” are extremely important in the conversation analytic literature. Rather than formulating something about psychological attitudes or motivations of participants, they refer to asymmetric patterning and organization in social interaction, practices that participants engage through talk and embodiment. Research has shown that agreement is preferred over disagreement, acceptance is preferred over rejection, and being offered a favor is preferred over asking for it. The preferencing is exhibited in how participants produce agreements, acceptances, and the like—immediately and in straightforward terms—whereas they issue their opposites after noticeable delays, in combination with preceding affiliative terms, and in ways that imply rather than state the upshot (Heritage 1984b; Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987; Schegloff 1988).

If it is ordinarily true that composite or gestalt understandings are interactionally preferred over constructive or additive ones, there are several qualifications and implications. Locally coherent, stimulus bound utterances—that is, expressions of autistic intelligence—are part of our everyday discourse and something that a participant intentionally or unintentionally may articulate. It can happen when a participant builds a request in a literal rather than idiomatic fashion (per the above), responds in such a fashion, or produces a joke or pun (Sacks 1973).¹⁵ If a participant momentarily exhibits autistic intelligence, it is one thing. Distinguishing autism as an interactional phenomenon (nominally) rather than as a participant’s condition (adjectivally) may be a regular tendency for that participant to reverse conversational structures, where instead of gestalt actions and global coherence being preferred, local coherence and stimulus-bound, additive understandings are. That is, for example, Tony’s and Ronnie’s errant responses to WDYDW questions display a preference for local coherence, as a matter of behavioral practices. Whatever the cognitive or neurological mechanism may be, such preferencing, as an interactional matter, is skilled production existing in the detailed orderliness of talk and not well described in terms of deficit.

A related implication is that, since adhering to ordinary preference structures is how participants show affiliation by “supporting and ratifying the interactants and the interaction” (Pomerantz 1984:95), the reversal in autism has relational ramifications in the sense of being morally suspect and sanctionable (Heritage 1984b:268). In other words, not just a misunderstanding can occur, but also a violation of interactional trust. Finally, an aspect of this regular reversal in preference is that efforts to repair understanding, or to elicit commonsense rather than autistic interpretations of utterances, simply fail. Such failure of repair is regularly evident in both Tony’s and Ronnie’s test performances. Yet both are capable of commonsense interpretations of questions, which is why the apparent reversal of preferences is not universal

15. Sacks (1992b:419–30) suggests that when proverbs occur in conversation, as at the end of a story, a “first hearing” will not be an empirical or referential understanding—and will not, in other words, be one that exploits the possibility of punning. A first hearing will be a proverbial understanding. Like Schegloff’s (1987) later discussion, this is suggesting a conversational-structural preference for composite (proverbial) rather than constructive interpretations.

in their conduct. So also in everyday interactions, manifestations of autism, as with its cousin Asperger's Syndrome, are not across the board and occur instead in particular ways and under specific conditions (Attwood 1998; Frith 1991).

Conclusion

In the earlier special issue of *Social Problems*, I advocated for studies on the topic of language and social interaction because therein is the "stuff and substance" of social life (Maynard 1988). How participants use language in social interaction tells us about deviance and social problems not necessarily because of an initial concern with these problems. Rather, studies of real, in situ speech activities are informative about an endogenous orderliness in settings where social problems and deviance are manifest to participants. Moreover, because these settings are natural sites of social disruption, they can alert us to what is afoot in ordinary social situations (Garfinkel 1963). Investigating the Brigance WDYDW questions led us to learn something about natural language practices so as to better understand the capacities, skills, and competence exhibited in both standard and nonstandard test responses.

When some behavior in the social world manifests deviance or disability, this matter becomes visible through situated evaluations, attempts at repair, or other interactional mechanisms signifying "trouble" (Emerson and Messinger 1977). Ethnomethodological and conversation analytic inquiry is directed to such trouble spots but in a non-ironic way because the marker of trouble is a members' designation, not an analytic one. Rather than, as in the stronger versions of constructionism, impugning, blaming, demonizing, or otherwise assigning creative capacities to the community of reactors, ethnomethodological and conversation analysis asks about what exactly and precisely goes on in interaction whether or not participants perceive or sense deviance and disability then and there. To the extent that a community does sense deviance or perceives disability, and while members' reactions can co-constitute manifestations of the deviance or disability, those manifestations may also have a relational integrity capable of analytic appreciation in their own right. Relational integrity means that the deviance or disability is an independent entity in the eyes of its beholders (Pollner 1987; Weinberg 1997), and it is to be described in terms of practices not only on the part of surrounding participants but also within the co-oriented conduct of the designee. Accordingly, in settings where deviance and social problems may be on their way to, or already have, an acquired official status, we can respecify what disability categories gloss in everyday conduct and obtain analytical purchase on disability and its relation to ability or competence. Then a possible connection or "limited affinity" (Maynard 2003) between ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies and social constructionism exists in an appreciation for detail and organization already extant in social conduct before what Gale Miller and James A. Holstein (1989) call "social problems work" in rhetorical and other claims-making activities can have its way.

Appendix

Transcript of Brigance Subtest ("Knows What to Do in Different Situations") with Tony

- 1 CL: ↑What do you do when you're hungry?
- 2 (1.4)
- 3 CH: You eat.
- 4 CL: Okay. What do you do when you're sleepy.
- 5 (1.0)
- 6 CH: Weh- (0.8) you res::::t:s.
- 7 CL: What do you do when you're col:d.

8 (1.5)
 9 CH: And den you .hh and den you (1.4) and den you gets::
 10 fwo::zen.
 11 (0.2)
 12 CL: Y:e:::ah.
 13 (0.8)
 14 CL: An then- oka::y, what else?
 15 (1.4)
 16 CH: [What els::e.
 17 CL ['n-
 18 CL: Yeah when you get ↑col:d what do you do::.
 19 (1.0)
 20 CH: You gets: hh .hh hh fwozen.
 21 CL Oka:y, what do you do when you cut your finger.
 22 (1.6)
 23 CH: And den yer- and den I- .hh hh and den you don't ha:fve
 24 its.
 25 (0.6)
 26 CL Oh:ka:y. .hh what do you do when you're s::i:ck.
 27 (0.5)
 28 CH: An den you tro::w u::p.
 29 CL: Oka::y.
 30 (2.0)
 31 CL: How bou::t (0.8) what do you do when you see your ha::nds
 32 are dirty.
 33 (1.2)
 34 CH: You wa::sh:: 'em.
 35 (0.2)
 36 CL: ↓Ok↑a::y, what do you do when you go to a roo::m that is
 37 da:rk.
 38 (3.6)
 39 CH: Watts:.
 40 (1.0)
 41 CL: °What?°
 42 (1.0)
 43 CH: thh wa::tts:.
 44 CL: Wa:tch?
 45 (1.2)
 46 CH: Tee vee:.
 47 (0.6)
 48 CL: Watch tee vee?
 49 CH: Yea:h.
 50 (0.3)
 51 CL: And uh- oka:ay. .hh what do you do when you see your shoe::
 52 is untied.
 53 (1.0)
 54 CH: And den you shee::p in der::e.
 55 (3.6)
 56 CL: What do you do when your sh:oe: is untied.
 57 (1.4)
 58 CH: And den you slee::p.
 59 (0.5)
 60 CL: ↓Oka↑::y.
 61 (1.4)
 62 CL: What do you do when you want to go outside, and it's
 63 rai:ning.
 64 (5.5)

- 65 CH: And den its raining.
 66 (0.5)
 67 CL: Oka↑::y.
 68 (1.4)
 69 CL: What do you see when a hou::se is on- (.) What do you do
 70 when you see a hou::se on fire.
 71 (6.2)
 72 CH: Watch.
 73 CL: ↓Oka::↑y.
 74 (1.5)
 75 CL: That's a goo::d answer, yo::u're thinking.
 76 (0.3)
 77 CL: What do you do when you break something that belo::ngs to
 78 someone ↑else.
 79 (2.8)
 80 (): .hh
 81 (1.0)
 82 CL: [(Ih-
 83 CH: [(Hit the) piano
 84 (0.4)
 85 CL: Ih- piano?
 86 CH: And den you will bring itih:.
 87 CL: Oka:↑ay.
 88 (2.0)
 89 CL: What do you do if you're offered ca::ndy by a stran:ger.
 90 (1.8)
 91 CH: And den you get candy.
 92 (0.2)
 93 CL: Nkay.
 94 (1.2)
 95 CL: Arrright. (.) 'at's very good. Thank you.

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