Building Up by Tearing Down

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Building Up by Tearing Down
Jessica S. Robles

Abstract
This paper analyzes mockery sequences among a group of friends to examine how this discursive practice mobilizes categories to manage stances toward differences and to construct group norms and boundaries. Using discourse analysis, I inspect how non-seriously tearing down or jocularly teasing/mocking participants within a peer group manages the practical problem of ingroup difference by reaffirming shared stances and norms around masculinity. The analysis highlights some of the ways in which groups navigate difference and identity moment-to-moment in interaction, showing how the moral organization of ingroup and outgroup assessments are built in the mundane world of conversation.

Keywords
discourse analysis, discursive psychology, membership categorization, stance, mockery, morality, masculinity, ingroup

The social phenomenon of groups is highly visible in human society. Whether it’s by politics or nation, music preference or sports team, our lives are filled with associations that lump us in with some people and separate us out from others. That groups differentiate from others and expect some internal conformity is a source of productive diversity and community, but also problems and conflict. Scholars have investigated these dimensions of groups across many research areas (e.g., Bond, 2005; Cohen, 1977; Gudykunst, Yoon & Nishida, 1987). But much of this work has

1 Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK
Corresponding Author:
Jessica S. Robles, Loughborough University, Department of Social Science, Brockington Building, LE113TU UK
Email: j.j.robles@lboro.ac.uk
not examined closely the emergent practices of naturalistic groups, or it has focused on the content of communication (see Tracy & Robles, 2010). What might be learned from inspecting how ordinary groups manage potential differences as they arise in interaction? What practices do groups employ to resolve possible troubles and reproduce a shared group identity?

This paper uses discursive psychological discourse analysis to examine a practice of non-seriously *tearing down* or mocking participants within a group. This practice of jocular teasing manages the practical problem of ingroup differences by reaffirming shared stances and group norms around masculine values and identity. The following sections discuss relevant literature, describe the methods of this study, present the results of the analysis, and reflect on implications.

**Non-Serious Mockery and Categorization**

Teasing is a way of getting a laugh that also calls out transgressions (to the point that even when taken as a joke, teasing tends to elicit serious responses). Drew (1987) describes a continuum between teasing that is accepted with laughter but also seriously rejected, and teasing that is taken up and extended, showing that seriously responding to teasing content is a way of setting the record straight even when acknowledging that the tease is joking or humorous. Haugh (2010) also describes teasing or what he calls *jocular mockery*, which incorporates provocation and playfulness, using insult to accomplish affiliation. Thus activities such as teasing and mockery constitute layered or blended frames (Gordon, 2008), cueing both affiliative and disaffiliative interpretations simultaneously.

This paper examines how teasing or jocular mockery can accomplish *ingrouping*. Research in social psychology has shown that ingroups tend to emphasize relative homogeneity based on shared moral values and worldviews (e.g., Pagliaro, Ellemers & Barreto, 2011), and theories such as social identity theory, identity theory, and status organizing theory demonstrate how ingroups orient to their own coherence as a group (e.g., Kalkhoff & Barnum, 2000; Tajfel,
Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). This paper takes a resonant but more discourse analytic and discursive psychological approach to these concepts (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 2012), focusing on how specifics of interaction can finely distinguish ingroup legitimacy in situated interactions. The practice examined herein will be described as tearing down, which draws on how group members police the boundaries of their self-categorized group (see Edwards, 1991 for a discussion of cognitive versus discursive orientations to categories).

Sacks (1992) describes tearing down as a practice in which non-serious insults are traded in interactions among friends. Categories are defined ways of grouping people; in the example “the baby cried, the mommy picked it up,” two categories are referenced (babies and mommies) that belong to a family collection. Sacks further describes the membership categorization device as a way of unpacking how these categories associate with activities in interpretation, in that we hear the baby as being the baby of the mommy who is mentioned, and therefore we hear her picking the baby up as being occasioned by the crying and as designed to provide comfort. Categories can be used to praise and blame, and in describing tearing down, Sacks provides the example of saying “yes Mommy” to a person who is not one’s mother. He calls this intentional misidentification (p. 417), a way of pointing up something reproachable or mockable in contrasting the person addressed (in this case, a peer) with their inappropriately-categorical behavior (in this case, some activity ordinarily associated with mothers) (for a similar example, see Cameron, 1998).

Categories do not have to be explicit, but it is a somewhat more difficult analytic task to work out an implied category. Most work on categories has therefore worked with descriptions that reference categories rather than how categories are demonstrated or enacted (Reynolds, 2017). Focusing on demonstrated as well as described categories can give insight into how communication constructs group membership. Features such as contextualization cues (aspects
of talk such as prosody and intonation that point to cultural frames of reference and membership) (Gumperz, 1989) and references to implicit background knowledge, shared activities, and overlapping frames are key ways in which group identity is performed through different styles and content in talk (Sierra, 2016). Producing mutually-intelligible topics in talk is important to how relational intimacy is enacted and progressed in interaction (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984). It is not just the topics themselves that matter, but the way participants collaboratively negotiate stances toward those topics, and how those topics are managed to do identity, that gives identity to the group as a whole (see Walton & Jaffe, 2011). Goodwin (2007) describes how different stances can be produced through aligning and disaligning actions that position participants as mundane moral actors in everyday activities. As people interact together, they accomplish these stances toward each other, their activities, one another’s talk, and the content of that talk (Tracy & Robles, 2013).

Groups also build and talk about themselves by contrast with others and by locally enacting difference through divergent communication practices (Bailey, 2000; see also Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). When groups talk amongst themselves, as the ingroup, it is often talk about nonpresent others that does this sort of inclusion/exclusion boundary work, for example, through gossip (Jaworski & Coupland, 2005). In her research on girl peer groups, Goodwin (2002, 2007) showed how inclusionary and exclusionary moves are accomplished in situ to finely distinguish who does and does not belong, and to enforce the normative expectations of the group. Category-based insults and responses to them are one way peer groups negotiate identities, but this often requires keeping interaction within the frame of play (Evaldsson, 2005).

Teasing can function as a form of social control (Kochman, 1983) that may signal social transgressions (Drew, 1987), deal with conflict (Norrick & Spitz, 2008), and reconstitute group
hierarchies (Fine & de Soucey, 2005). By ridiculing and causing embarrassment, groups relate the individual to the expectations of the larger group and society more generally (Billig, 2001). As Goffman (1956) notes, embarrassment occurs when a presentation of self is made public that appears incompatible with one’s desired definition of self; deliberately causing or drawing attention to such events constitute a ritual for reaffirming a social system. In the current paper, a masculine identity is reinforced by talk that is about and displays stances toward masculine topics (or masculinized topics). This constitutes a sort of psycho-discursive practice, or practice in talk that implicates psychology, relying on ordinary assumptions about motives that inform male stereotypes (even if explicitly proposing to be outside of or resistant to them: Wetherell & Edley, 1999). The data herein feature men who embrace it, not in an explicit way, but in a tacit way that goes without saying literally, positioning members as more or less authentic to the group (Widdicombe & Woffitt, 1990). Disalignment, disagreement, and potential conflict over members’ positionings are mitigated through mock insults designed to put members in their place and re-establish shared stances and norms of the group.

**Methods**

The data comprise seven years of intermittent collected observations, interviews, audio recordings, and video recordings of a group of friends living in a small California suburb (USA). In total there are approximately five hours of video, 9 hours of audio, 12 interviews of five members over the years, various ancillary documents (emails, text messages, letters, postcards, etc.) and countless hours of observation. The majority of these were gathered during summer periods and in particular between 2008 and 2011. The group is made up primarily of men, with women being largely connected to the group through men as sisters, roommates, romantic partners, band members, and later wives. Day to day members’ lives revolve around work and work-related concerns while downtime and hobbies revolve around music and drinking. The
research focuses on five core members (aged late 20s in 2005 and late 20s to late 30s by the most recent data from January of 2013) herein called Jim, Darren, Dave, Alex, and Mark. The researcher was a friend of the group from high school and spent time with them socially, most frequently in the period from 1998-2000, and regularly but infrequently thereafter. The location of all research activity occurred primarily at people’s apartments or homes. Use of video, audio, and observations have been selected, constrained or altered in accordance with participant consent, and all names and identifiable places are pseudonyms.

The analysis takes a discourse analysis (Ehrlich & Romaniuk, 2014) approach drawing on discursive psychology and membership categorization (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Stokoe 2012) to focus on how psychological business such as opinion formation and ingroup identities are accomplished in social action. The analysis also takes the tactic of drawing on ethnomethodological conversation analysis to examine the ordinary methods by which categories are motivated in sequences of interaction (a common move in discursive psychology: see Potter, 2012; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2015). All audio and video have been transcribed verbatim using a simplified form of Jefferson’s (2004) notations. From the data were selected 49 sequences in which participants mocked one another’s actions; these sequences were examined for ways in which they motivated categories and implied their own category memberships. Many topics emerged as being central to the group’s norms and values, therefore serving as ripe moments for witnessing how members dealt with oppositional stances. This analysis focuses on discursive teasing strategies that accomplished stances toward masculinity to show how this practice of jocular mockery polices group members’ norms around core values (what to uphold) and identities (how to be).

Tearing Down

The following results describe how mockery was employed to construct participants as a group
of friends. The analysis discusses three ways in which participants teasingly attribute problematic categories to one another by producing stances toward members’ actions and collaborating to build shared stances:

1. nonliteral descriptions and ascriptions non-seriously and sometimes ridiculously question, for example, taste in music, occupation, and drinking ability;

2. stories highlight apparently-factual character flaws regarding, for example, work ethic and physical stature;

3. exaggerated performances challenge identities, for example, related to work, race, and gender.

Through these techniques, the group pointed out, made fun of, marginalized, and then defused the threat of non-conforming acts and identities to reinforce a shared masculinized identity.

**Nonliteral Descriptions and Ascriptions**

Though all of the examples examined were nonliteral to the extent that they involved designedly-nonserious insults, many such teasing instances also drew on factually inaccurate or impossible content. This allowed insults to operate under the guise of fake insults that could easily be treated as teasing because they contained ridiculous or untrue elements.

In these data, music is frequently relevant during group interactions, in three primary contexts: attending or performing at concerts, practicing and jamming, and listening to music recordings. The last is the most common, and typically takes place while people are hanging out at someone’s house before or after work (people often work several part-time jobs with different start times and are often coming and going throughout a day). While conversation is common, music is always on in the background and is regularly brought into the talk. The type of music one listens to has consequences for their identity: excerpt 1 illustrates mocking someone for
liking a style of music that is incommensurate with a masculine identity.

**Excerpt 1 “This band is assholes”**

```
((nearly two minutes of silent smoking while listening to music))
1 Darren: this reminds me of fucking- what’s that band
2 Craig: =Modest Mouse (.) what’s wrong with Modest Mouse
3 Jim: it’s emo.
4 Craig: so?
5 (2.0)
6 Mark: can we change it (.). seriously
7 Craig: you guys are assholes
8 Darren: this band is assholes
9 ((laughter))
```

Four men sit in one’s backyard smoking and drinking while music plays on an IPod. As frequently happens, a brief lull in the conversation is filled with listening to the music, indexed by Darren’s deictic reference “this” (“this music”) in line 1. Darren’s use of “fucking” projects a complaint or criticism of the music, an accountable action given the music had to have been selected by a member of the group. Craig’s uptake confirms that this is hearable as a complaint or criticism as he requests the account for “what’s wrong with Modest Mouse?” in line 3. Another present participant Jim (whose backyard they are in) supplies the reason by labeling the musical genre as “emo” (line 4), a common short form of *emocore* or *emotional hardcore* which is often contrasted with the form of music from which it originated, hardcore punk rock, the latter which is the preferred music of the group. “Emo” is presented as ‘reason enough’ needing no further elaboration, evidenced by the lack of follow-up (line 6) in response to Craig’s challenge on line 5.

When Mark speaks in line 7, he positions himself with Darren and Jim, aligning with the complaint initiated by Darren and upgrading it to a request to change the music. Though formulated as a request with an inclusive pronoun (“can we”), it is hearable as a fairly bald demand because it is otherwise unmitigated, and the result would be to remove the music
completely, suggesting it is so bad as to be unlistenable. That Craig takes this as a face-threat (Goffman, 1967) is evident in his insult “you guys are assholes” (line 8): this functions as a counter-insult while not taking up the disagreement further (and though he doesn’t comply immediately, he eventually does so without further prompting). Darren’s next turn in line 9 makes a play on this insult to further emphasize the divergent stance toward the music, and this is followed by laughter from all, including Craig (line 10), before a new topic is introduced.

Though laughter does not occur until that point, throughout the exchange, the tone never crosses into genuine anger. For example, Darren’s initial use of “fucking” and the later uses of “assholes” do not index a strong emotional stance. This is partly because they are not produced with nonverbal markers of negative emotionality, but also because swearing is casual and common among the group, in this conversation and across interactions. Furthermore, the silence at line 65, while dispreferred (Pomerantz 1984) in that it provides no response to the previous demand, is not oriented to as problematic. It is not pursued by Craig for example, and the postures of the men remain relaxed, their embodiment doing attending to nothing in particular: they sit slouched in chairs, gazes directed at neutral spaces between one another, engaged in alternating drags on cigarettes with taking sips of beer out of cans.

Music is a key dimension of ingroup identity and bias and emotional styles of music are not seen as sufficiently punk or masculine (Lonsdale & North, 2009; O’Meara, 2003). By calling out the activity of listening to music that is not valued by the group, participants mark out and question the membership of anyone who listens to that music. While the comment of “emo” is treated as a problem, the upshot that closes the sequence is the nonliteral formulation “this band is assholes.” It is a play on Craig’s defensive counter-insult, suggesting the others are justified in not liking and not wanting to listen to the music because it is so unlikeable as to be described with a ridiculous metaphor. It skirts the issue of directly insulting Craig himself by aligning to
take a negative stance toward the music rather than toward him directly; but as shown in Drew’s (1987) work on teasing, Craig treats this as casting a stance on his character as well, and responds to the content of the tease as a serious insult despite the jokey packaging. This is because, in a way, it is: the others are calling Craig out for listening to a type of music that is not valued by the group and by the group’s valued masculine performance of its identity.

In addition to music, work and particular jobs or occupations are another dimension on which participants’ masculinity and conformity are measured. Work-related categories come with a number of mundane moral relevancies (see Jayyusi, 2014; Stokoe & Edwards, 2014), and the implications for participants’ personal and other identities (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Tracy & Robles, 2013) have direct consequences for their efficacy as members of the group. Work is a chief concern among the group and several members struggle at times to find work, keep work, or work enough to pay their bills. Excerpt 2 shows an instance in which a sales job is disparaged.

Excerpt 2 “Press that suit”

11 Alex: are you coming back here? ((gazing at Darren))
12 Darren: I don’t know (. ) work ends at like three am
13 Jim: people will still be here
14 Darren: yea:h but I’ll be ex(hh)hausted
15 Jim: oh yeah true (. ) you could come and sleep for a bit
16 Alex: yeah I don’t- HEY fuckface where you goin
17 ((unintelligible)) ((Kip leaves))((Darren leaves))
18 Alex: that little shit ((about Kip))
19 (1.0)
20 Derrick: I have to get up early
21 Alex: yeah I bet
22 Owen: press that suit ((leans over to get a beer))
23 Derrick: shut the fuck up

When Derrick claims he has to get up early (preparatory to leaving a party), this is mocked with “press that suit” (line 22), an exaggeration of the sort of dress Derrick would need for his work, though it is not literally what Derrick wears to work. Derrick’s “shut the fuck up” in line 23
treats it as an insult (orienting to the literal dimension of the tease, as discussed by Drew, 1987),
showing that wearing a suit is an activity negatively associated with a certain category of person
with which he is being associated. This can be contrasted with the sympathetic stance shown
toward Darren’s more valued blue-collar job in lines 13-16. White-collar work is looked down
on, and members who have those sorts of jobs are mocked despite the fact that work is otherwise
generally seen as necessary and even honorable. Indeed, having jobs that pay less or spending
more time unemployed (to an extent) was frequently treated as a better option than ‘selling out’
for a job in customer service or in an office (more examples forthcoming in the analysis).

Because work is such an explicit critical matter for many of the people in the group (as
well as linking up with related topics such as financial problems, free time, physical pain from
hard labor, schedules, etc.), there were many opportunities to observe similar situations in which
work was topicalized and compared across participants. In almost every situation, certain
members were mocked for having work orientations or situations that seemed to differ from the
norms already established. For example, Dave has a service job at a popular guitar sales shop in
an upper-middle class city, and is regularly teased for working with the public (requiring more
care about his appearance, which is negatively assessed), working at a chain store with high
prices and ‘phonies’ who don’t necessarily understand guitars in a real way, and working in a
richer city outside their town (requiring more money for gas and bridge toll, a car, and other
markers of higher class) (for a discussion of this example, see Robles, 2016). Talk like this
serves to carefully code and differentiate who is and is not conforming fully to the highest
standards the group espouses—who is not centrally in the masculinized category of the group.

Race, heritage, and other aspects of ethnic identity were also a site of stance contestation,
particularly in relation to the perceived masculinity of certain races: for example, a perception of
Samoans as “strong,” borne out by numerous praising of “huge” and “scary” Samoans within or
known by members. However, a key ‘trait’ valued and highly relevant to the group’s everyday activities was drinking alcohol, in which masculinity is associated with being able to drink a lot.

In the following example, participants tear each other down around ethnic self-categorizations (for example, lines 5, 8, and 18) and relate them to the perceived ability to drink more alcohol.

This excerpt opened with Jim bringing up his Irish background, and leads to the rest of the group chiming in with their own racial categorizations (see also, Robles, 2015, 2016).

Excerpt 3 “You’re Japanese enough”

1 Matt: I don’t have any Irish in me
2 (0.5)
3 JR: ((gasps))=
4 Matt: =bu:t=
5 Mark: =<get the fuck out>
6 Matt: I’ve got German,
7 Jim: I’ve got Scottish,=
8 ?: =◦nobody cares◦=
9 Matt: =and Scottish
10 Dave: I’ve got German and Irish [◦dude◦
11 Mark: and ] Japanese (.)
12 [you’re Japanese
13 Matt: [I don’t have any Irish,
14 Dave: [a(h)nd J(h)apanese=
15 Mark: =you’re Japanese Dave shut up
16 Dave: shut u:p man (0.5) I’m only half Japanese
17 Mark: [you’re Japanese enough
18 Matt: [that’s still a reason you] can’t [drink
19 ? [((laughs quietly))] [heck ] ya

One important dimension of identity for this group is race: several of the members of this group are proud of their cultural heritage in some way, and one’s racial or ethnic background is regularly brought up and discussed. Most of the members of the group (and the surrounding locale) have racial identities (claimed, and visible) that are white. Two Mexican-identified participants do not participate in the conversation about their heritage. The only “core” member of the five focused on in this paper who does participate, but who is not obviously and only white, is Dave, who is half-Japanese and who is torn down in particular by Mark, starting with
Dave’s claim of German and Irish heritage (line 10). As the conversation unfolds, it becomes clear that Dave’s incumbency in one particular category (“Japanese,” lines 11, 12, 14-16) is prohibiting his claiming membership in others. This is formulated in an extreme way that is factually true to some extent, but also nonliteral, since Dave is not only Japanese. Furthermore, Dave’s reduction to the category Japanese is partly due to the yardstick that is put forward as a basis of measuring ethnic membership, which is being able to hold one’s liquor (lines 18-19). A negative stance is implied toward not being able to drink. The implication is that Dave cannot do so and that this is a feature of his being Japanese, thereby defining him in that way, since German and Irish backgrounds are here associated with drinking (line 22).

However, Mark has started his mocking before that point with the baldly-stated contradiction “you’re Japanese” (line 12) which is then repeated with the addition of the injunction to “shut up” (line 15). When Dave protests by calling himself “only half Japanese” (implying room for other identities; line 16), Mark calls him “Japanese enough” (line 17). This is hearable retrospectively as ‘Japanese enough to not hold your liquor,’ since the next turn offers this reasoning, but the prior to line 18 it is also hearable as related to Dave’s appearance, which is more physically similar to that of Japanese people (see Paoletti 1998, re: on-sight categorization). By implication, Dave is also not (fully, visibly) white. Of all the people in this interaction who claim racial categories, Dave is the only one who is not of an obvious anglo-European background who joins in. And it is interesting that the person who calls him out on this—Mark—is another person in the group who is clearly and visibly not white. The participants treat talking about one’s race, or trying to associate with European ancestry, as problematic for those with non-white bodies. The moral implications of these category memberships provide the material by which to accept or reject people’s actions (see Sacks 1992). Here, the racial aspect is tied to the masculinization of being able to drink a lot. Other non-white
races (e.g., black) may not be treated this way if they were associated with stereotypes about drinking ability.

In these and similar excerpts, categorizations are used to infer undesirable and un-masculine identity positions—such as the sort of person who like bad emotional music, the sort of person with a white-collar, not physically-demanding job, or the sort of person who can’t drink much—and these positions are policed through the systematic deployment of insults that align against a minority stance. While such practices can be seen as a form of light-hearted teasing—and indeed, their surface realization presents them as such—they reveal significant potential conflicts based on an intolerance toward differences of opinion and identity, and serve to moralize and enforce conformity. The next section displays a rather different, more truth-grounded, basis of mockery, in which the seriousness may be more evident, and therefore delivery of the tease requires more care.

*Stories Highlighting Flaws*

Other examples of tearing down were not treated as inaccurate or impossible, but focused on prior events and behaviors grounded in shared understanding of one another’s possible flaws and weaknesses (as defined by the masculine values of the group). These insults had therefore to be delivered in such a way that emphasized their nonserious or trivial nature such that they could be seen as less directly threatening. In the following excerpt, which takes place a few years after excerpt 1, the researcher is hanging out with the group in Jim’s wife’s parents’ backyard. A sequence is initiated by Jim’s announcement (line 1) that he has a new job.

**Excerpt 4 “A new job”**

1  Jim:  Hey I just got a new job=
2  JR:    =oh yeah?
3  Darren:  washin dishes
4  Jim:    washing dishes yeah at that new resta urant on
5  second (.). have you been there?=
Here the delivery of the news (line 1) is done for the visitor (JR) and appears to be already known to the other participants (evidenced by Darren supplying Jim’s next turn in line 3). However, the positive news of having obtained a job and becoming a working agent is obscured by a series of derisive expansions on (and perhaps ironic counterpoints to) the theme of “laid back” (line 6). These turns present prior knowledge of a story about a time when Jim slept in and was called by his boss (lines 7-8). The potentially problematic nature of this story retelling is mitigated by Jim’s “it was fine” (line 12), assessing the act as having been unworthy of note since his boss “is cool” and apparently did not fire Jim nor give him too hard a time. The tearing down of Jim is followed up by praising of Darren’s job (lines 13-15), which is introduced as a
sort of second-story that serves as both collaborative and competitive (Theobald & Reynolds, 2015). Darren’s is a late-night job working heavy machinery for a recycling plant; this job is valorized by all for its long hours, its status as a real job (manual labor jobs being prized over service or white collar work), and most importantly how much it pays. Alex then follows these rounds with his own complaints, which simultaneously links to Jim’s earlier complaints about hours (except having too many, lines 24-25, rather than not getting enough, lines 11-12).

The tearing down which occurs here singles Jim out for actions which could be seen as violating the worth ethic assumed concomitant with such a valorization of the masculine working subject. And yet Alex is not ‘torn down’ for complaining in potentially similar ways. Categories such as “hard worker,” “employed,” and so forth are implicitly invoked through the sorts of complaints made. Complaints about work occur in a code of being grateful for having work—and this is a fine balance. The tearing down of Jim is a performance: a ritual intended to honor the value of work in the face of its complaints by challenging his (relatively minor) work-related failings. The tearing down in this case is done playfully and without rancor, but pointedly too, eliciting an acknowledgement and account from Jim (lines 11-12). Jim’s follow up with yet another complaint could be seen as potentially undoing his prior acceptance of something like chastisement, but is in fact consistent with the footing work (Goffman 1981) necessary to maintain the balance by still having a tough, complainable, masculine job. Only Darren in this excerpt (and in most other cases) can get away with being almost entirely favorable about his job, and so lauded by others, precisely because his job is known to be the most valued (difficult, requiring skill, long-term, late-night, high-paying, etc.). The following excerpt shows a similar instance in which members are mocked for some dimension of their work life.

**Excerpt 5 “Fuck customer service”**

1       JR:       How’s the cafe
In excerpt 5, JR initiates a request for information about work, and is updated on Owen’s new job. Owen, Jim and Mike treat the news as remarkable in some way (with Owen’s “I know” and Jim’s and Mike’s laughter ratifying accountability) while JR orients to not seeing the problem in line 6. Owen (supported by the others) denigrates his job in line 7, and treats this as a sufficient account with “I have one thing to say” and “that’s all I have to say” (lines 7, 9). The type of job is treated as the problem, as something toward which it is expected the others will have a negative stance. Jim labels the problem in line 10 by calling Owen a “sell out” and closing the sequence. The type of work is seen as inferior because it involves customer service and “sell out” implies that is in contradiction with the working class ethos valued by the group.

A final example occurs during another typical topic of conversation in which participants compliment the toughness of particular members. For the sake of space, several lines have been omitted in which participants praise specific aspects of Casey’s large and “punk” appearance and relate specific stories about the (allegedly-justified) violent acts he has committed.

Excerpt 6 “Lucky Jim”

```
1  Jon:  have you met Casey
2  JR:  m (.) I don’t think so
3  Darren:  you’ve met Casey
4  Jon:  she hasn’t
5  Owen:  he’s a high schooler
6  Jon:  yeah (.) but he’s the toughest fucking high schooler you’ve ever-
7  Owen:  [oh yeah I wasn’t saying]
8  Alex:  [that guy is huge]
9  Jon:  he’s bigger than Marvin
10 (21 lines omitted)
```
In excerpt 6, after establishing how much Casey matches up to the group’s ideals in terms of physical stature, style and appearance, ability to fight, and (honorable) reasons for fighting (lines 6-35), Jim is presented as a contrast, highlighted by an instance (which is not made explicit here) in which Jim had said something to “piss Casey off” and after which Casey jokingly physically threatened him. Here, Jim’s relative lack of physical stature and fighting ability is indexed by teasing him for having irritated Casey and commenting on how hopeless he would have been if Casey had actually fought him (lines 36-48); the basis for teasing Jim is also visible in his appearance (he is short and skinny), contrastable with the descriptions of Casey and his known appearance (to those who have met him). Because Jim actually is smaller and less strong than other members of the group, and because the group so values largeness and strength as masculine, teasing him in this way could cut close to the bone, implying he is not as valued a member of the group. Thus, the tone in which these comments are delivered, and Jim’s ‘good sport’ going along with it, serve to take the sting away, as does Jon’s comment (line 48) in which he references a common nickname for Jim (Jammy Jim) which reinforces that the insult to Jim’s size is light-hearted even while it is true.

This and the previous excerpts illustrate how participants negotiate teasing insults that
call out members’ differences in ways that might be more factual, and therefore more dangerous. 

Though the teases are treated as teases and laughed off, they are also oriented to for pointing out facts about people and their transgressions (Drew, 1987). These occasions point out real distinctions that matter: members are reminded when they do not fully and categorically fit in—and no one is going to let this go (such reminders are so common as to almost occur at every interaction)—but tearing down becomes part of the performance of putting up with these differences. The next section discusses an even more ritualized form of this practice, in which the most delicate of differences are mocked in exaggerated performances of otherness.

Exaggerated Performances Challenging Identities

A final set of examples involves participants taking on performed characters and challenging others’ identities in mock-insulting ways. These insults were less common, but let participants deal with the most transgressive, potentially-sensitive teases. Excerpt 7 follows on from excerpt 3, in which Mark has been insisting that Dave is “only” Japanese after Dave claimed German and Irish ancestry.

Excerpt 7 “Kombanwa”

20 (1.0)
21 Mark: ↑kom[banwa
22 konbanwa=good evening
23 Jim: [>yeah I don’t think<]it’s the German or the Irish
24 Matt & Jim: ((laugh))
25 ((laugh))
26 Mark:                           
27 Kate & Jim: ([izzt=]) .) VAS IZ DAS
28 ist=is was ist das=what is that
29 ((laughter))
30 Mark: ↑kombanwa
31 Dave: das du: ka[f
32 das dummen kopf=the stupid head
33 Mark: [su:mise:n] kambanwa:=
34 sumimasen=I’m sorry
35 Dave: =das du kaff=
36 Mark: =o genki dess [ka
37 o-genki desu ka=how are you?
This excerpt takes place right after it’s mentioned that Dave is identifiable as Japanese mainly because he cannot hold his liquor. Dave’s attributed identity provides resources on which his friends draw to delimit his category memberships (see Whitehead, 2012) racially as a way of commenting on his lack of a particular valued masculine trait of being able to drink a lot of alcohol. Nationally-identifiable languages provide the next strategy marginalizing Dave: the interaction is expanded after the point of possible completion in line 20 when Mark reopens the issue by speaking in stylized, mock-Japanese phrases at Dave (lines 21, 24, 27, 29, 31), to which Dave responds in German insults (lines 25, 28, 30). It is not clear how fluent either party is in each language; Mark knows Japanese from his time in the military, while Dave learned German in high school. So it seems unlikely that this interchange functions as a straightforward example of code-switching that indexes ethnicity (e.g., De Fina, 2007). Instead, the content of their talk is less important than its function to perform their continued disagreement toward and mockery of one another. It is notable that the style of Mark’s mock-Japanese is lilting with varied intonation, which could be a subtle feminized performance, while Dave counters with quick, guttural pronunciations of German—a language often thought of as angry-sounding by Americans, and which may also be masculinized in this way. These counter-stylizations accomplish disalignment and index language ideologies in which language is associated with certain affective and assessable categories of people (see Åhlund & Aronsson, 2015).

This banter is only closed when the researcher names what they are doing (line 32-33),
and Dave makes it more explicit by explicating the categories of person and languages (lines 38-39). Dave acknowledges his own category as “Japanese.” Perhaps because he has acceded to this point, Mark finally drops his attack. By pointing out who can and cannot claim to be white, the group members naturalize whiteness as a default characteristic of the group and use race as a logic for understanding and assessing actions (e.g., Whitehead, 2009), while further reinforcing the stance toward Dave’s position as someone who is not white and cannot drink a lot of alcohol. Because this positioning of Dave is serious and could even be seen as cruel, the whole exchange is done as a tease and finishes in a ridiculous way that even Dave acknowledges as silly, abandoning his earlier attempts to set the record straight (as Drew, 1987, points out is so common in teasing).

An even more common orientation to identity in this group involved highlighting gender. While previous examples have been implicitly related to masculinity, this one is the most explicit. Even the larger group (beyond the five people focused on herein) is overwhelmingly male, and women (including the researcher) are typically only accorded temporary and provisional status as part of ‘the group.’ Far from making gender invisible, this group highlighted and performed masculinity quite regularly in all of the ways already described: through talk about masculine-associated work (carpentry, physical labor, etc.), praising the fighting skills and strength of members, deriding feminism and non-gender conforming women, and even competing in feats of strength (wrestling, arm-wrestling, and so forth). In the following excerpt from a party, a woman (Sara, whose house it is) has talked one of the men (Darren) into dressing up in her clothes. Darren has come back into the room and is being teased by the others.

**Excerpt 8 “That’s disturbing”**

1 Taylor:  [slap his ass again]
2 JR:  [((laughing))]
3 Alex:  ( ) be and then a fuck- oh:: (. ) damn brother=  

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In this bit of the interaction, participants have been encouraging Darren to act (and encouraging others to treat Darren) “like a woman” through activities such as Darren sitting on present men’s laps, others spanking him, and so forth. During the directive on line 1, Darren has returned to the room after leaving briefly. Alex’s self-interruption and repair signals his noticing that Darren is now wearing lipstick, and Sara and Alex (lines 4-5) assess this negatively. Darren reframes their talk and makes an exaggerated pass at Craig, attempting to sit on his lap, which Craig deflects by shoving him away (line 8). Alex closes this particular sequence with a slightly more positive assessment of Darren (lines 10-11), after which there is a brief silence and then another participant is volunteered to dress up.

In this case, Darren is mocked in a different way, for an identity he does not possess (based on gender presentation). The goal of mocking him is not so much to police him individually, but to make an example of him. In this interaction, all the members, either explicitly or by not disagreeing with the current activity, collaboratively produce a boundary about what constitutes a man and therefore who might be allowed to temporarily suspend the rules. In the end, two more men end up dressing up after Darren; none of the three typically violate gender norms; rather, all of them are acknowledged in the group as being masculine men who are not typically teased (as some others are) for such failings as having less masculine jobs, dating infrequently, having less strength and being too skinny (or without much muscle), being slow to fight when masculinity is threatened, etc. The group as a whole reproduces their strict
local rules for masculinity, and the teasing is of a certain sort precisely to highlight what’s problematic (displays of femininity by men) and what displays of femininity entail (sexualized, objectifying behavior), while also acknowledging that these performances are allowed by these particular men because (1) these men are manly, and probably also because they (2) dressed up at the request of a woman and (3) performed ‘without shame’ as a way of denying any attempts at derision and framing their activity as non-deviant because of their typical (unquestioned) masculine status.

As Goodwin (2002) points out in her more observably oppositional data, in these data, there were constantly-negotiated power shifts accomplished as part of aggressive moral activities around peers’ actions and identities. While in Goodwin’s cases asymmetries were far more flexible and member statuses more amorphous, in the data examined here, conformity and the status quo took precedence. Competition certainly reigned, but as a function of already-established roles and norms. The practice analyzed herein was also done nonliterally, as a way of glancing at the fact of a difference while warning members to make it disappear and step back into place (or at least be aware that their differences were noticed). Direct insults like “this band is assholes” or indirect insults like “you sleep in and the boss calls you” are not meant to be taken at face value—a band isn’t objectively bad, and accidentally sleeping in and missing work is not a terrible offense—neither is “you’re Japanese”. As true as the statement may be, its implication that Dave can be nothing else is logically, even genetically, false. Instead, all these actions pick on someone in order to make a point. Conflict is not avoided at all cost, but rather indexed or pointed to in order to dance around it. In this way, a particular moral order is locally maintained.

**Building Up**

This paper described how a practice of *tearing down*—a form of jocular mockery that rides the
line of serious and non-serious—accomplishes ingrouping: the construction of a group’s identity based on its members’ categorical adherence to masculine norms. Three discursive tearing down strategies were described: (1) nonliteral descriptions and ascriptions designed to question target’s activities, preferences, abilities, and so forth; (2) fact-based stories about people’s flaws; and (3) exaggerated performances challenging unacceptable identities. In these ways, the group produced a shared norm of homogeneity by exorcising potentially-divergent values around masculinity based on stances toward particular topics. Groups need not be identical to identify, but sufficiently similar (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Here, the mockery has a basis in revealing, and disassembling, differences of opinion or identity performance. Mockery does affiliation (Haugh, 2010), but there is a more dis-affiliative edge to it: it reveals, and disassembles, differences of opinion or identity performance.

The differences themselves are treated as real: some members do not share the same musical tastes, some members do have different financial and work situations, some members have different ethnicities and masculinities, some members more or less conform to ideal body types and displays of manliness, and no one avoids commenting on these in their talk. The goal is not to hide these things but to diffuse their potential impact, as teasing often does (Drew, 1987). The mockery is a practice that might be about anything, from the trivial to the consequential, but here it is a ritual that exorcises the threat of being too different. Goodwin (2002) shows how adolescent girl peer groups do opposition to push unratified members to the fringes or outside of the group, and use more indirect strategies to sanction the behavior of ingroup members. The latter is similar to what occurs in the data examined here, but in these data the activity never seems to cross far enough into seriousness to constitute a punishment or degradation ritual, serving instead more as a warning or reminder to people about what their roles should be.
Within the interactions and in interviews with members, no single metadiscursive term emerged to capture this practice, which is why I use *mockery* from Haugh (2010) and *teasing* from Drew (1987) generically, and borrow Sacks’ (1992) phrase *tearing down*; however, several recognizable American phrases came up which have similar or equivalent meanings, including the following: talking shit (or shit-talking), giving [name] shit, picking on [name], and being a dick. The practice was described as being non-serious, as aiming to get a laugh, and as making fun of someone or pointing out their flaws. It was described as something “everyone does to everyone,” and as something that one person should not do too much of to a specific other person (especially if that other person was regarded as someone with a ‘temper’). Even in their attempts to explain this practice, members never treated it fully seriously—even if they acknowledged that “but [name] is really like that” or “but everyone actually does hate [band],” they insisted it “didn’t really matter” and that “no one really cares,” thus maintaining as much as possible the non-serious frame even outside of the potentially-troubling circumstances in which these events occurred.

These results have shown some ways in which groups such as this might be formulated and brought into being through talk. A core and enduring interest in discursive psychology is how purportedly-mental matters, such as opinions and attitudes, are produced as interactional practices (Tileagă & Stokoe, 2015). This paper explores how group members’ masculinized preferences and identities are social activities, and thus also contribute to how a key issue in social psychology: how ingrouping is accomplished in everyday life. Policing the extent to which members take their place in the syntax of a certain activity (and collections of activities over time) is a way of drawing the boundaries of a group and letting people know when they are stepping to close to (or even out of) those boundaries.

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**Author Biography**

Jessica S. Robles (PhD, University of Colorado at Boulder) is a Lecturer in Social Psychology in the Department of Social Science at Loughborough University, UK. Her research draws on discourse and conversation analysis to examine the social organization of difference and how people interactionally manage ordinary moral troubles in their everyday lives. This work has covered, for example, political disagreements, gift-exchange dilemmas, and responses to racist talk.