

Queering the Sri Lankan Middle Class: Negotiating Norms and Morals

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In this paper, I examine how Sri Lankan English-speaking middle-class norms and morality are conceptualized and enacted through the lens of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), originally proposed by Sacks (1972). Developed as part of the Conversation Analysis (CA) tradition, MCA was introduced by Sacks to explore “culture in action.” Over time, MCA has evolved into a distinct analytical framework, separate from CA. A key development in this evolution is Housley and Fitzgerald’s (2009) reconceptualization of MCA as a tool for examining not only culture in action but also “norms in action.” Drawing on five interviews selected from a larger corpus of 47 ethnographic interviews, I focus on non-heterosexual bilingual men (assigned male at birth) who speak English as their first language. Each interview, conducted in English, ranges from 1.5 to 2.5 hours in length. The five participants represent a segment of the English-speaking class that functions as a “cultural elite” (Rambukwella, 2018), and reflect diverse Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim cultural values. The findings highlight key Membership Categorization Devices (MCDs) such as sexual orientation, linguistic practices, religiosity, and class behaviour, along with their corresponding contrastive membership pairs: gay vs. straight, English speaker vs. Sinhala speaker, Buddhist/Christian/Muslim. Moreover, in line with Housley and Fitzgerald’s (2009) insights on devices as procedural and relational, the respondents seek public accountability through categories. Here, the use of contrastive pairs like “respectable” vs. “disrespectable” are consistently prevalent in interview talk. These appear across interactions, shaping how individuals are read within dominant frameworks of heteronormativity, middle-class morality, and middle-class respectability. For example, while English fluency is read as a form of “proper” conduct that affords queer men social acceptance, religious affiliations enable one to be seen as a means of “social acceptance.” Yet, both these dominant normative discourses are constantly resisted and negotiated—often through a more personal, reflective engagement with either ideology, which one participant described as rejecting the pull of “narcotic Buddhism.

Moreover, respectability is both a resource and a constraint, enabling conditional inclusion while reinforcing exclusionary norms. Finally, the study foregrounds how identity categories are not merely descriptive of culture but, when strategically deployed, serve as tools to challenge and reconfigure middle-class moral codes—often queering them in the process.

Key words: Queer Subjectivities, Membership Category Analysis, Norms and Morals in Action, Contrastive Membership Pairs, Middle Class Morality

Approval of the thesis supervisor to submit the abstract:

Prof. Dr. Erez Levon

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, flowing letters that appear to read 'Erez Levon'.

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