'Fanboy' as a revolutionary category

Simon Locke,
Kingston University, UK

Abstract:
The use of the category 'fan' to describe comics readers raises issues of authenticity. From his interviews with *2000 AD* readers, Barker argued that 'Committeds' differentiate themselves from 'fans', which he suggested is an 'industry category'. In contrast, from his interviews with *Milestone* readers, Brown argued that 'fan' is a readers' self-description related to their development of 'unofficial' cultural capital. A re-analysis of some of their data suggests that neither view adequately captures the active identity work readers engage in to manage the *dilemma of the cultural dupe*. This especially arises for participants in cultural activities perceived to be downgraded in status with implications of inauthenticity. To counter this, participants mobilise resources of self-legitimation including producing contrastive categorisations. Within comics culture, one such category is 'fanboy', however, despite the potential charge of inauthenticity, two of Brown's interviewees employed this term as a self-description. To try to understand this, the paper follows Sacks's proposal that young people's categories are devices to assert control over cultural activity and as such are sites of struggle in, through and by which attributions of taste may be challenged. Since the 1950s, comics fans have struggled against the downgrading of their cultural activity and attempted to overturn prevailing taste attributions. The adoption of the category 'fanboy' is a further stage in this struggle involving a courageous, if seemingly paradoxical, assertion of authenticity.

Keywords: fans; comics; fanboy; Membership Categorisation Analysis; cultural capital; authenticity.

Introduction
The relatively few academic studies of comics fans (Barker 1989, 1993, 1997; Brown 1997, 2001; Tankel and Murphy 1998; Pustz 1999; Brooker 2000)[1] do not present an altogether clear or coherent picture, with one point of disagreement raising the long-standing question of the authenticity of popular cultural activities; that is, to what extent are these activities an artificial product imposed upon ordinary people by the culture industries (Hesmondhalgh

2012), as opposed to being grounded in and a genuine expression of their identity. In the case of comics readers, this contrast is found between Barker's (1993) view that the category 'fan' is a construct of the comics industry rejected by the type of reader he calls 'Committed' and Brown's (2001) argument that 'fandom' arose from comics readers' genuine interest in and love for the medium, on the basis of which he argues their activity can be understood in terms of a notion of 'cultural capital'. However, I shall argue here that on close inspection neither view does full justice to the complexity of the self-descriptions presented in their interview data, especially the way the categories 'fan' and 'fanboy' are used by comics readers to defend their activity as authentic. In this respect, I suggest these readers are negotiating *the dilemma of the cultural dupe* that to some extent all members of modern culture must manage as we seek to resist the ever-present potential imputation that our tastes are not authentically our own, but attributable to external influences such as the machinations of cultural mercenaries.

In this, I follow the work of Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) in their study of the language used by the members of subcultural groups, which seems to have been overlooked in discussions of fans (e.g., Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005; Smith 2011). I build further from this by drawing on Sacks's (1995) ground-breaking work in Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) to argue that, not only does this make better sense of Barker's and Brown's data, but also points to a challenging implication for theoretical understanding of the category 'fanboy' – to wit, that it is a revolutionary category. From this I suggest that its usage continues the active work of comics readers, who since the 1950s have been engaged in a cultural struggle against the downgrading of their fan activity and for whom, therefore, the dilemma of the cultural dupe has been especially pertinent. Even within popular culture, comics have long suffered cultural degradation (Groensteen 2008) and superheroes in particular have been 'thrice-damned' as culture, medium and genre (Locke 2005). In so far as this has changed in recent times, it is at least in part because of the cultural struggle waged by comics fans, with superhero fans – to describe some of whom the term 'fanboy' was coined (McCracken 2010) – at times at the forefront.

I first present a critique of Barker and Brown to show that, despite their strongly contrasting views of fans, they both nonetheless end up advancing theories in which most if not all comics readers appear as cultural dupes. I follow this with a re-analysis of a selection of their interview data drawing on Widdicombe and Wooffitt to show that, like the members of subcultural groups, comics fans are involved in negotiating the dilemma of the cultural dupe to try to resist the potential inference of inauthenticity about their activity. Notably, within this they use the category 'fan' in contrastive ways, sometimes to include and sometimes to exclude themselves. I then move on to raise some further matters regarding young people's inventive use of categories drawing a parallel with Sacks's (1995: 169-174, 396-403) discussion of 'hotrodder' to argue that 'fanboy' has something of the same revolutionary quality as a category used by comics readers to challenge their cultural downgrading.

Fans – authentic or not? Barker and Brown

Since Brown's analysis is developed partly in critical response to Barker (1993), it is as well to consider the latter first. Barker summarises the major findings from his research into readers of the UK comic, *2000 AD*, framing this with a significant critique of the focus on gender in then current audience research, against which he argues for a return 'to issues of the organisation and control of production ... within the framework of capitalism; and the understanding of cultural forms ... as partial responses to those structures'. In particular, he calls for 'an exploration of the role of future-fantasy in thinking about increasingly disempowered readers' (161), drawing back from then fashionable notions of the 'active' audience that emphasised the power of readers to resist forms of ideological incorporation instantiated in popular cultural texts. However, he does see at least *some* readers as resisting, but it is less textual incorporation than the way in which relations between producers and audience were being reconfigured by the comics industry, something he argues is apparent in the 'hostility to the perceived implications of the word "fan"' (178) shown by his respondents. Thus, he quotes one reader as follows:

> 'I hate the word "fan". You have Kylie fans, you have Jason fans. "Fan" implies it's a fad, a phase, whereas for me it's been so long that I've been reading them that I can definitely say it's not a phase. So I would define myself as ... a comics reader, and collector ... I like sitting in the middle of them. I don't really like the standard comics fan – they have a very bad image, in my opinion. They all seem to be into role-playing games and they are the kind of people, I imagine, who get a kick out of going paint-balling at weekends. Not that I've anything against going paint-balling. It's just this idea of little boys getting a buzz out of guns and splat and kerpow. Probably I'm stereotyping them, but I don't want to meet the fans – I think of them as grubby little people.' (178-9)

Barker remarks on what he sees as the 'honest admission' in this description that it is 'formed at a distance' rather than through direct knowledge of fans, observing it to be 'very "cut-and-paste" ... borrow[ing] from a repertoire of other images' that show 'real ambivalence about whether fans are actually like this' or not (179). He then suggests that such reactions are responding to 'a complex of two presences': the 'fan' projected by *2000 AD* through editorial material and the 'paraphernalia' of fanzines, marts, merchandising, auterism and so on in the wider comics market; and relatedly how the comics industry was working to shape the way audiences engaged with the medium. Thus, he argues

> the image of the "fan" is not some social/mental "stereotype" which actual fans feel insulted by. Rather, it is a *real site* which the conditions of the comics industry have created and encouraged .... [I]t is a cartoon drawn from the *actual* social relationships allowed by the dominant production forms in the present-day comics industry. (179-180; emphases original.)

'Fan', then for Barker is an industry category in that producers have organised specific practices designed to direct and delimit how audiences engage with their products to serve their own interests, thereby constructing a 'real site', the form and characteristics of which effectively define what it means to be a 'fan'. The implication, then, is that relations between producers and readers are marked by a power imbalance in which readers are at best reacting against industry practices that seek to control the market through mechanisms defining 'fan' activity. Accordingly, the idea of 'fan' is a 'cartoon' representation of these 'actual' relations and given this, it would seem that there is a notion of ideology at work in Barker's account located, not in texts, but in the (material) practices that inform and surround them. Ideological incorporation, then, comes not from reading texts but from submission to these practices, something he makes more or less explicit by distinguishing types of comics reader in terms of how they view the category 'fan'. Hypothesising that there is 'an actual connection between depth of involvement with the comics medium, and strength of resistance to the designation "fan",' he distinguishes between those who are 'most involved' and 'most strongly resist the term', and 'more casual readers' for whom the term 'retains a slight honorific sense' (179).

This distinction is troubling, however, because it seems to imply that at least some readers – possibly a majority – *are* ideologically incorporated. In Barker's terms, it is only the 'Committeds' who resist incorporation by rejecting the category 'fan'. All other readers, those Barker categorises as 'Regulars' and 'Casuals' are then at least to some degree dupes of the capitalist comics industry, especially if they view being a 'fan' as some sort of badge of honour. This seems a rather surprising retrograde step taking us back to the kinds of over-simplified view of readers that Barker (1984, 1989) himself has done so much to challenge. But there is a much deeper problem that undermines even the limited amount of resistance offered by the Committeds. In the interview data Barker presents, there is no obvious evidence of such readers explicitly referring to the features of the comics industry or the category 'fan' he proposes they are really reacting against. In the above quotation, for example, nothing is explicitly said about the activities of comics producers; indeed, the activities mentioned are not about comics, but other kinds of media and consumer activity, including soap opera (and/or music), role-playing games and paint-balling. Barker's point that this draws on a 'repertoire' of images is well made in this respect. However, his theoretical proposal effectively downgrades any significance this may have because it treats it as a 'cartoon' against the 'real site' of industry practices. Hence, it is not 'real', which then seems to imply that even Committeds mistake appearance for reality and cannot distinguish a superficial image from 'real' practices. So even *they* end up being ideological dupes. Thus, the upshot of Barker's argument seems to be that comics readers are, to one degree or another and in one sense or another, all dupes of the comics industry. Sadly, then, whatever his intentions in trying to bring class back in, Barker ends up reproducing the basic problem of old-style theories of mass culture: analytical elitism with all its awkward implications.

The same basic problem applies to Brown, which on the face of it might seem odd as he (2001: 67) criticises Barker's view that 'fan' is an industry category arguing this overlooks the extent to which 'fandom was originally initiated by the readers, who then affected some of the elements of production, including systems of distribution, the resale market, and creator recognition.' Moreover, fandom operates in contexts removed from producers, such as in exchanges with friends and, as with other media, this can cause trouble for the industry (see, e.g., Jenkins 1992 on 'slash fiction').[2] Barker (1993: 163) does acknowledge this, mentioning producers' view of fans as 'a highly troublesome group', but downplays its significance by quoting industry sources that they are only a small minority of readers. However, it is neither made clear how the industry determined this nor considered that such a representation might work to delegitimise fans' attempts to claim ownership, however informal, over industry products. Viewed this way, the category 'fan' is indeed a 'real' site, but one of struggle and cultural contestation that far from being simply a 'cartoon' to be explained away by material practices provides resources of sense-making that invests those practices with particular meaning.

The view that fans employ 'informal' strategies of ownership is central to Brown's application of 'cultural capital', itself derived from Fiske's (1992) re-working of Bourdieu and it is this conception to which my own discussion is directed. Thus, whereas Bourdieu applied the concept chiefly to groups within the higher economic class distinguishing between, say, entrepreneurs and lawyers as the latter have superior cultural capital derived from higher levels of education and other determinants of taste, Fiske broadens it to include lower classes within which he positions fans. Further, in Bourdieu's conception, the tastes of such groups are 'subordinated', 'disempowered' and 'denigrate[d]' (Fiske 1992: 30) to the point, Brown (1997: 14) states, that they have 'no capital with which to negotiate' at all (cf. Smith 2011). Against this, Fiske (1992: 32-33) extends the metaphor to argue there are 'forms … produced outside and often against official cultural capital' as 'a sort of "moonlighting" in the cultural … sphere'. Thus, fans are said to produce their own cultural resources with their own symbolic exchange values relatively independent of the 'formal' cultural economy, although serving similar functions in 'unofficial'/ 'informal' ways. In accord with this, Brown (1997: 15) argues that, despite pursuing a devalued cultural activity that 'resists' the dominant culture, comics fans nonetheless 'mimic... bourgeois standards' in the 'rules for gaining prestige' within their community. Thus, comics fandom is both different from – indeed a rejection of – official culture, but also the same, because similar techniques are adopted to discriminate between cultural artefacts and determine social standing.

This casts many of the practices that Barker attributes to the industry in a quite contrasting light. Briefly reviewing the history of the campaign against American crime and horror comics of the early 1950s, Brown (1997: 22) argues this was essentially about policing the boundaries of 'good taste', which has left a legacy in 'the stereotype of comics as childish and the readers as immature "nerds",' problematising the achievement of cultural legitimacy. However, since the 1960s the pursuit of comics fandom, centred initially around the activities of collecting and dealing (Pustz 1999), has increasingly involved the

adoption of practices 'mirroring' official culture such as viewing comics in the manner of art critics assessing works of 'art' (see also Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). Accordingly, fans have developed a body of knowledge and standards of discrimination that define a set of 'canonical texts' and, in showing knowledge of these, they demonstrate 'good taste' and achieve social standing in the comics community, the more so if they own copies of these treasured items (cf. Tankel and Murphy 1998). A point to stress is that Brown (1997: 23) sees this as essentially 'compensatory' arguing that fans are attempting 'to raise their status in official culture by compensating for their lack of cultural capital and the economic capital that often comes with it.' Here, he mentions in particular one of the emergent practices that Barker views 'Committed' readers as reacting against, the shift in preferences from characters to 'auteurs'. For Brown (1997: 24) this has quite different significance showing that comics fans are adopting 'high culturesque preference' as the status of the medium itself improves following fans' championing of the cause of creators against the traditional industry practice of 'work for hire' (Harvey 1996; Hatfield 2005; Duncan and Smith 2009; Locke 2009). In addition, it shows that 'unofficial' cultural capital can have 'official' economic effects, as does the collector market fuelled by the demand for possession of copies of canonical texts, with the further consequence that cultural value crosses over into official culture providing a legitimising discourse as financial investment.[3] For Brown (1997: 27), however, this is merely ironic, an 'unintentional parody of high culture', as the 'real value of the comic is not monetary but cultural': real fans collect not for money, but for love of 'the medium and the stories it tells'; all the rest he asserts is 'posturing' (28).

Capital confusions

Despite their differences, however, Brown's account has a similar difficulty to Barker's, which can be brought out by considering two points of confusion concerning rules and motivations. Regarding rules, Brown (1997: 13) states at the outset that 'comic book fandom is a complex system *with its own rules* for determining the worth and stature of popular texts', but in conclusion asserts the very opposite, describing fandom as 'a milieu-specific culture that operates *by the same rules* as official culture' (28, emphases added). This is compounded by his treatment of comics fans' motivations, presenting at least three – 'compensation', 'finance', and 'love' – but treating them asymmetrically with regard to their authenticity. Thus, financial motivation is viewed as essentially false, mere 'posturing' in contrast to the 'real' motivation of love. This is supported by statements from fans including Steve Geppi (Brown 1997: 28, 2001: 77), President of Diamond Comics Distributors, who, as a businessman we might assume does have some genuine financial interest[4] and he is far from alone in this as Brown points out, since many comics fans have become involved in the industry as dealers, retailers and even publishers. Indeed, one of Brown's (2001: 103) interviewees from a selection described as 'fairly representative of the audience for mainstream superhero comics' stated his ambition to start a comics business stocked from

his own collection (105). The question is then why one motivation is treated as more authentic than the other.

More fully, this is a question about how we treat interviewees' statements: why should we treat one set about 'finance' as being any less 'real', or authentic, than another set about 'love'? To treat *either* as more 'real' is asymmetrical as it privileges one set over another (Gilbert and Mulkay 1983). In calling statements about investment 'posturing', Brown is in effect judging them false, but the only grounds for so doing come from other statements provided by interviewees; the selection therefore is arbitrary. We should no more assume fans are being honest in the one case than the other – although, I hasten to add, neither should we assume they are being dishonest. Rather, both types of statement should be treated equivalently in terms of their presence as social phenomena and a full sociological understanding demands we not arbitrarily assign some greater validity than others (Locke 2004).

This asymmetry is compounded by another, when Brown argues that comics fans are seeking 'compensation' for their lack of official cultural capital. However, some of his data suggests otherwise when interviewees refer to what seems to be 'official' cultural capital as grounds for supporting comic book reading – and not just the financial value of comics. For example, one interviewee, Thomas, claims that comics helped him to develop educationally by assisting his reading at school:

> It's not that I was stupid or anything, I just wasn't all that great a reader. I think I was bored by all those little kiddie books they made us read most of the time. …. By the end of the year I tested the highest in the class for reading skills. I was reading stuff that was meant for kids in the fifth grade. While all the other kids were just playing video games or listening to music, I was *reading* things. I don't care what people may say about comics being stupid, they're not. In fact, they're a lot more sophisticated than some of the stuff they used to make us read. If I'm a good student, and I am, it's 'cause of comics. (Brown, 2001: 107)

In a not dissimilar way, one of Barker's interviewees, Michael, refers to his 'intelligence', mobilizing this to distinguish himself from 'the average comics fan':

> I think an important question you [i.e., Barker] haven't asked about the "average comics fan" is mental state. I wouldn't class myself as being in the peak of physical fitness. I smoke, I eat lots of foreign foods, I drink a lot of alcohol – but I don't class myself as below average intelligence. I'm predicted 3 Bs at A-levels, and I've had offers of University places. I don't know if that fits with the idea of the average comics fan, but I think it's important. (Barker, 1993: 172)

These statements trouble Brown's notion of 'unofficial cultural capital', because not only do they both link 'official' cultural capital with an interest in comics, but Thomas does so with specific reference to superhero comics, whereas Michael sees them as 'puerile' and 'insult[ing] your intelligence'. Further, Michael contrasts readers of American comics and of *2000 AD*, saying the former are 'younger, shallower, real Townies' (a term Barker interprets as an 'Oxford-undergraduate word' that 'seems to represent "class"'), while the latter are 'all 18 or over, all pretty intelligent, going to University, all pretty much like me really!' Pertinently, Barker suggests Michael's view is 'protected by "high culture" aspirations' (173); thus, he is mobilising 'high cultural' criteria – in Brown's terms 'official cultural capital' – as a resource to legitimise his taste in comics, *despite* them being a 'denigrated' product of popular culture. Thomas does the same. It is not clear, then, in what sense this constitutes compensation as both are claiming *success* in developing their bank of 'official cultural capital' – and Thomas at least ascribes this directly to comics. For neither, then, is there anything to compensate.

There is a broader point here, too. Brown (2001: 70) himself states that many comics readers, including Thomas, are from 'middle-class backgrounds', which seems to conflict with the theory since middle-class kids, presumably, do not need compensation from alternative cultural capital as they already have the 'official' stuff. However, he argues that 'most of the younger comic book readers are disempowered within their families by virtue of their age, and ... also complained of being social outcasts at school', adding in parantheses, 'certainly not an uncommon trait among adolescents'. There are two different kinds of problem here. First, if we accept the claim that youngsters are 'disempowered', the question then becomes how this is to be understood in terms of 'cultural capital': is 'age' disempowerment the same as 'class' disempowerment? Is cultural discrimination between age groups the same as cultural discrimination between economic groups? Brown seems simply to assume they are equivalents, but in the case of comic books this is questionable because of differences in taste between younger and older readers – for example, Brown (2001: 109-110) tells us that Thomas's taste shifted to 'mature' titles as he got older. This then raises a question about the 'canonical texts' Brown takes to be a shared feature of comics fans' cultural capital: *whose* canon are we talking about? If it is the canon of older readers, then why does this not disempower younger readers as much as their disempowerment in the home? In which case, why is comic book culture any different for them and why do they pursue it? If, on the other hand, it is the canon of younger readers, then in what sense is it shared with older readers as part of a supposed single culture? In neither case does this make much sense and points again to a fundamental problem with the notion of 'compensation'.

The second problem brings us back to how we treat interviewees' statements. Brown's parenthetical remark might be taken as an oblique suggestion that adolescents' self-description as 'social outcasts' should not be taken at face value – it might not be authentic. But this then must raise some query over our acceptance of the description of young people as 'disempowered by virtue of their age'. Why should we take this at face

value either? This is a much wider issue than can be addressed here, but it does point to the crux of the problem with Brown's explanation, that it is not only based on asymmetrical treatment of interviewees' statements, but does so in a manner that serves the theoretical framework assumed to apply. In consequence, just as Barker's explanation had the unfortunate consequence of undermining or delegitimising fans' own accounts, so too does Brown's notion of 'compensation'. It is introduced because it is needed by the explanatory framework built from the metaphor of 'cultural capital' to account for why fans generate their 'unofficial' alternative, even though fans themselves say things on at least some occasions to the contrary. Thus, there is a second asymmetry in this imposition of an analyst's explanation to meet the needs of a metaphor – and, like Barker's explanation, it effectively reinstates the very division between cultural valuations it is intended to challenge. Comics fans' tastes come off as second rate, a 'compensation' for their lack of 'proper' taste and their absence of what amount to either (or both) middle class and adult evaluative capacities; thus, comics fans are both impoverished and retarded.

The cases of Thomas and Michael, however, refute this and do so in a way that raises a further problem with the notion of 'cultural capital' from which an alternative can begin to be developed. A fascinating feature of their views is that the former ascribes to superhero comics the very qualities the latter asserts they lack in favour of *2000 AD*. Further, Thomas compares himself favourably with other kids whom he describes as 'playing video games or listening to music', which are the same kinds of activities Barker's other interviewee above associates with fans, except where he or she rejects this category as a self-description, Thomas does not even though he also 'detests the stereotype of fans as "geeky losers"' (Brown 2001: 109). Meanwhile, where Thomas contrasts comics positively to music as they involve reading, another of Brown's interviewees, Todd, connects *Milestone* comics and hip-hop describing them as 'really about the same things ... making your way in a racist world' (119). These kinds of variations in readers' accounts are by no means exhaustive – for example, Jordan prefers *Milestone* to *Image* (116), whereas for Tony and his friends it is the reverse (125). Brown is aware of this, but his conception of cultural capital requires a shared set of 'rules' governing criteria of collecting a 'canon' of texts. As seen, however, whether these rules come from the 'unofficial' or the 'official' culture is unclear. The cases of Thomas and Michael show up the extent of the difficulty here, because although both draw on 'official cultural capital', each does so in defence of quite different tastes in comics with Michael describing Thomas's in the very opposite terms to Thomas's own. So which of them is using the 'rules' of comic book consumption and whose taste is 'canonical' and whose not? There are no obvious grounds for us to say that one is right and the other wrong – it is after all *their* tastes they are describing. We cannot even attribute their differences to national context, as although one is a British comics reader and one an American, the kinds of distinctions they make are also made by different sections of the American comics audience (Pustz 1999). Nor do their differences seem to be because one is a 'real' fan and the other not, since not only do Barker and Brown both use the term 'fan' in describing them, but they themselves use the term in self-description. Thus, although Thomas dislikes

the 'stereotype' of fans, Brown (2001: 109) tells us 'he will also admit to being a fairly hard-core fan.' Similarly, Barker (1993: 171) states of Michael that 'you would judge [him] a "typical fan"' and quotes him as saying: 'I am not sure if being a comics fan is going to play an important part in my future – it doesn't play an important part now, apart from getting enjoyment. I don't think being a comics fan has got anything to do with the kind of person you are' (173). Thus, although he downplays its importance, he does seem to suggest that the term once applied to him even if it no longer does.

So, there is a further problem with the notion of 'cultural capital' in that it assumes a more coherent set of tastes and greater conformity to a set of behavioural rules governing comics-based activities such as collecting than comics fans actually show. The above discussion, then, has helped bring out some specific issues that an alternative approach needs to consider. These include how to make sense of the diversity of self-descriptions offered by comics readers in relation to the category 'fan', how these relate to matters of motivation and authenticity, and tied to this the question of conformity to the rules of a larger social and cultural group. To begin to deal with these matters, I now turn to MCA.

Membership Categorisation Analysis

At one level, the difficulty with both Barker's and Brown's arguments is a matter of categories: *whose* categories count, those of social analysts or the people we study? Both Barker and Brown advance their own category constructs: Barker distinguishes between readers as 'Committed', 'Regular' or 'Casual' and, although largely implicit in his paper (1993), makes explicit elsewhere that he (1989) associates these with the broader category of class (simplifying a little, 'Committeds' are working class). Brown, on the other hand, draws chiefly on what I think of as the 'usual suspects' of social and cultural analysis: class, gender, race and age. But, as I have sought to show, these categorisations create problems for their analyses and I now suggest that this is because they are imposed without sufficient attention to the categories employed by the interviewees themselves – especially the category 'fan'. But this category is central to how the interviewees make sense of and organise their activity. If, then, we wish to understand them properly, we must attend to their usage of this category and give this priority in our accounts of what these comics readers are about.

This is the approach advocated by MCA: to study ordinary people's ('members') categories and how they use them. Fundamental to this is Sacks's (1995: 113-125) observation of a constitutive link between the descriptive terms ordinarily used to classify actors and explanations of their action. For example, if we see a woman picking up a crying baby, we might assume she is the mother as this is what mothers ordinarily do – just as babies ordinarily cry. The descriptive categories, 'mother' and 'baby', provide warrants for the actions, but equally the actions warrant the categories: babies cry; mothers pick them up – it is simply what such categories of person do. As Sacks put it, categories are 'inference rich' allowing action to be understood in relation to ordinary, taken for granted social and cultural knowledge of categories and the actions they undertake; hence, he refers to

'Category Bound Activities'. However, the use of categories also generates new knowledge, by opening up a wide variety of additional potential understandings that are in some way linked to or derivable from the category. Categories have 'bound' to them not just activities, but wider sets of attributes or 'predicates' (Hester and Eglin 1997) that include qualities such as moral assessments (Jayyusi 1984). So, mothers pick up crying babies and they also, as a matter of ordinary moral expectation, perform a host of other caring and catering duties, as feminists have worked hard to excavate about our traditional gender views. For MCA, however, the point is not to advance criticism of ordinary categories and their usage as such, but to study *how* they are used and the cultural work that is done with them. This is not because analysts are not alert to the ways in which categories are used to advance and maintain forms of social and cultural division (e.g., Day 1998), but because of the danger that if we proceed with preconceived notions of which categories are relevant, then we risk overlooking the complexity of ordinary categorisation and the subtle cultural work it enables (Schegloff 2007). This, I suggest, is the case with Barker and Brown and the category 'fan': because they both see the category in relatively sharp either/or terms as an industry or readers' category, they overlook the subtleties of its use to negotiate the dilemma of the cultural dupe.

An important consideration here is that, while membership categories are a highly efficient method for us to locate people and actions in social space this can also cause us trouble, because the range of predicates associated with a category may include potential negative moral evaluations. Once someone's actions are made sense of through a category, then all the other predicates associated with it become *potentially* inferrable and the individual may find themselves being read through the label. But although there are ever present dangers in the use of categories, we cannot avoid them – as Sacks (1972) points out, at least two categories, gender and age, are always potentially applicable – and nor would we want to, because categorisation works for us, even though it can be used against us. For example, the category 'academic' works for the producers and readers of this *Special Issue* in a variety of ways not least of which is legitimising our spending time at public expense writing and reading about the medium we love, comics. On the other hand, it also carries potentially negative predicates, such as 'ivory-towerism' and being detached from ordinary reality – which the particular activity of spending time at public expense writing and reading about comics might provide a warrant for especially at a time of economic austerity. This shows that individuals confront an ever-present dilemma of both the need for and likelihood of having their actions interpreted through a category, but also the potential of certain attributes associated with that category being ascribed whether or not they like or wish it. So categories are good for us, but they are also very often troublesome.

This can be seen with the category 'fan'. Although this is sometimes represented in academic literature as a 'scandalous' category (Jenkins 1992; Jenson 1992), it is not always used this way by ordinary people, most obviously perhaps, sports fans. Even in the case of comics, readers of *EC* in the early 1950s took up the term, albeit with an interesting self-ironising appendage as 'fan-addicts'. The problem for fans is not with the category as such,

which can work for them in a variety of ways such as forging putative communities through alignments with others involved with the same cultural form; rather, the problem is to negotiate their way around whatever potential negative predicates associated with it that others might then ascribe to them. Fans, then, are often involved in finding ways of deflecting these potential inferences so that they are not seen wholly as a person in those terms, as nothing more than a 'fan' in whatever negative sense may be attached. This can be drawn out from some further consideration of the above interview extracts.

In the first example, as Barker rightly states, the reader presents an image of fans drawn from a repertoire of other images, but the specifics of this repertoire and how it is used to construct a contrastive image of self deserve closer attention. In particular, the reader presents a sense of 'fan' as implying a 'fad' or 'phase', which is contrasted with a description of their own activity as long-standing. Just such a feature was identified by Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995: 143-145), which they link to a concern with authenticity as a highly valued quality for members of modern societies. It is important to us that our actions are thought of as matters of personal choice and a genuine expression of inner feeling or belief. This does not mean that we may not act inauthentically, but that there is ordinarily a negative cultural evaluation for so doing. This applies to members of subcultural groups as much as anyone else, except they confront the additional problem that their subcultural activities are widely represented as inauthentic in both professional academic discussions and lay sources such as newspapers. For example, both professional and lay sources often express concern about the extent to which subcultural group members are subject to external pressures whether from other young people ('peer pressure') or from other groups in society, such as the producers of popular cultural products (as in notions of 'media effects', or indeed 'ideological incorporation') – in a word, members of subcultural groups are often viewed as dupes of some form of external cultural influence. But as Widdicombe and Wooffitt point out, we should not assume that young people are unaware of this attribution – just the opposite in fact since they may well find it applied to them. As a consequence, Widdicombe and Wooffitt suggest, part of the process of becoming a member of a subcultural group is to acquire knowledge of and competency in applying a range of resources for resisting the inference, including techniques for representing activity as authentic amongst which is to describe it as 'long-standing'. This can be used to counter the potential inference that the activity is not something genuinely part of a member's personality or identity and has only little depth or significance for them, that they are not somebody else's dupe.

This, I suggest, is what Barker's reader is doing. The image of the 'fan' they construct is in part one of inauthenticity; by describing it as a 'fad' or 'phase', they are inviting the inference that it is both short-lived and lacking real grounding in the individual personality. This also provides a link to their ensuing description of the types of activity they associate with fans, role-playing games and paint-balling, which are described in terms suggesting they are puerile, as 'little boys getting a buzz out of guns and splat and kerpow'. Notably, the onomatopoeia here are terms that could be taken from superhero comic book sound

effects with the potential implication that fan activity equates to faintly sad adolescent male power fantasies. As such, they would be viewed as part of a 'phase' that 'little boys' grow out of – or at least are supposed to. So, yes, this reader is drawing on a repertoire of images of the 'fan', but they do so in a very particular way designed to advance a specific sense of immaturity and inauthenticity against which their own activity is contrasted. Thus, their comics' involvement appears genuine, deep and mature – truly a part of them rather than anything less substantial. They, then, are nobody's dupe.

A similar point applies to Michael, who actually uses the word 'shallow' (cf. Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995: 52) in his description of fans of American comics as 'younger, shallow, real Townies'. Again, then, there is a similar repertoire of features drawn on involving age and depth – and Michael also explicitly uses the word 'puerile' to refer to superhero comics. However, Michael's usage involves a somewhat stronger judgement of personality than the first reader. For the first reader, 'fan' is presented as a stage of life that people (can and should) grow out of, added to which there is, as Barker notes, some mollification of the image as perhaps being an unwarranted 'stereotype'. In Michael's case evidently this is not so; rather, 'fan' is a type of person, a 'real Towny'. Now whether or not we accept Barker's view that this is a reference to class, what is notable is that having linked 'superhero fan' to this type of person, when Michael applies the category 'fan' to himself, he minimises its personal significance saying explicitly, 'I don't think being a comics fan has got anything to do with the kind of person you are.' So whereas 'fans' of superhero comics are represented as types of person – in Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1995: 104) terms it is of 'criterial relevance' to their identity – for Michael himself this is not the case. Thus, there is an interesting difference here from the first reader: where the first reader represents being a fan as a superficial passing phase, Michael represents it as something indicative of a type of person; and where the first reader presented their involvement with comics as authentically part of them by downgrading fan activity, Michael downgrades fan activity by making it a measure of the individual person. The inauthenticity of fans then comes about because they are shallow people, but he, by contrast, is not and so neither is his involvement with comics. The upshot, however, is the same: he also is nobody's dupe.

Thus, these kinds of contrastive constructions are different ways of managing the dilemma of the cultural dupe and there are comparable kinds of negotiations in the accounts of subcultural membership documented by Widdicombe and Wooffitt, who found members distinguishing themselves from others who might be seen as part of the subculture by referring to the depth of their involvement. Just as with the comics fans, subcultural members constructed contrasts between their own and others' activity by describing them as shallow and hence inauthentic. However, they also distanced themselves from subcultural membership in order, Widdicombe and Wooffitt suggest, to resist the potential inference that their own involvement was brought about by such inauthentic sources as peer pressure and the like. In other words, they sought to avoid any inference that their involvement was a result of them being duped by external social pressures, whether from their peers or from producers of subcultural materials. Accordingly, although

members sometimes did describe themselves as part of the subculture, when they did they also undertook category work to resist any inference that their involvement was inauthentic; and at other times they distanced themselves from the subculture for the same basic reason. Likewise, comics fans may describe themselves as such, but when they do they also do category work to resist the potential inference that they are merely dupes – such as Michael differentiating himself as a person from his fannish comics activity and thereby enabling the possibility that he may choose to leave it behind. Or they may distance themselves from the category for the same basic reason – such as the first reader contrasting their long-standing involvement with the puerile, passing 'fads' of fans.

Now, it needs to be acknowledged that this kind of phenomenon is more widely recognised in the literature on fans (e.g., Hills 2002). However, it has been seen as fans adopting the terms of the 'dominant' culture and thereby reproducing it within the subculture despite themselves, so they end up being ideologically incorporated dupes even though they are supposedly resisting (Jenkins 1992). I have already suggested in the case of Brown's attempt to understand comics fans in terms of 'unofficial cultural capital' that this kind of view is problematic. Fundamentally, the problem arises because the explanatory framework assumes the existence of a sharp differentiation between dominant/official and subordinate/unofficial cultures and postulates a power disparity between them. Both Barker and Brown represent comics readers as disempowered and, although there are some differences, both ascribe some importance at least to class divisions. But this category is far too blunt a tool to capture the subtle and sophisticated negotiations of self-identity presented by their interviewees in which notions of 'class' seem to be given little, if any, explicit reference. The danger, then, if we insist on the applicability of this analytical construct is that we are forced to argue – as I have suggested both Barker and Brown end up doing – that comics fans *are* ideological dupes unable to recognise their 'real' social and cultural position as members of class categories. I find this deeply unsatisfactory for a range of reasons, but for present purposes chiefly because it fails to listen closely to what fans are saying; moreover, if we do so something very interesting and challenging becomes audible – that the category 'fanboy' is used by comics readers with revolutionary intent. To show this, I will conclude with a re-examination of two further extracts from Brown's interviews.

Fanboy as a revolutionary category
Here are the relevant quotations:

> Maybe I'm a stereotypical fanboy …. Personally, I don't see that as a bad thing, and if others do, so what? Fuck 'em. It's what I like to do and if they have a problem with it tough luck …. I at least have the convictions to like what I like and not care what everyone else thinks. A lot of people at school aren't really into the music they buy or the movies they go to; they just do it because their friends do, 'cause they think it will make them look cool. I buy comics cause [sic] I like them – end of story. (Bruce, quoted Brown 2001: 106)

Just call me a geeky fanboy. I don't care. People assume that anyway, so why not flaunt it? I admit I'm not one of the jocks at school, but so what? I've got friends and I'm proud to be known as the biggest comics fan around. (Will, quoted Brown 2001: 123)

Bruce and Will, then, are rather different cases to those already considered because they actively describe themselves not just as 'fans', but as 'fanboys' – a category that seems to have originated within the comics community as a means of referring to some comics readers in a derogatory way (Sabin 1993: 68). Thus, in terms of the argument above, 'fanboy' would be a category carrying some sense of inauthenticity; indeed, Sabin states it came to be used to refer to what he calls 'fan capitalism', i.e., readers purchasing comics specifically for their assumed investment value rather than as part of a 'hobby' (67). So, we come back to the contrast Brown refers to between 'investment' and 'love', the implication being that it is important for comics fans to be seen as not just in it for the money since this carries an implication of inauthenticity.

But here is the fascinating puzzle: despite the fact that 'fanboy' might invite such inferences, Bruce and Will adopt it as a self-description. Moreover, they represent themselves as being into comics for their own sake – as Bruce states, 'I buy comics 'cause I like them' – and use this to contrast themselves with other school-kids who follow other pursuits not because they are 'really into' them but due to peer pressure. In other words, Bruce and Will turn the tables completely on the sense attached to the term.

How are we to understand this? First, it needs to be stressed that neither Bruce nor Will can easily be thought of as not 'committed' in their involvement with comics, or not 'real' comics fans. Brown (2001: 103) describes Bruce as 'conform[ing] to the most cartoonish of fandom stereotypes: awkward, overweight, thick glasses, bad haircut, and dressed nearly head to toe in clothes featuring the likenesses of various superhero characters.' The description employs exaggerated terms, but it makes the point that Bruce is deeply involved with comics – indeed, Brown states he is 'passionate about his involvement with comics and doesn't care who knows it.' Bruce is a regular at several comic book shops, attends conventions and has a large collection; he is quoted as saying 'comics are my life' (105) and it is Bruce whose ambition it is to start his own comics 'megastore' using his collection. Similarly, Will is described by Brown as being a 'serious comic book fan', who 'knows more about the industry than most fans twice his age' (120 – both he and Bruce were fourteen at the time of the interviews). Like Bruce, Will is a regular at comics shops, collects a range of books and merchandise, hangs out with friends who are into comics and has been going to conventions since he was five because his dad took him. Will reads fanzines, bulletin boards and chat rooms as part of his interest in identifying what he considers to be 'the real meaning in each story' (123), by which he seems to mean principally its significance in terms of continuity and associated intertextual references.

It is difficult, then, to see Bruce and Will as anything other than genuine, hard-core comics fans. However, apart from their ages, they are otherwise quite different in social background: Bruce is African-American and lower class; Will is white and middle class. So, although a case might be made that Bruce is 'compensating' for a lack of 'official cultural capital', this is less easy to apply to Will. Further, Will is not only good at school, but his father is also a comics fan, so even if some kind of case could be made that he is age-disempowered at home, it is not clear how his involvement in comics fandom can be interpreted as 'compensation' in this respect. In short, Will and Bruce are a standing refutation of both Brown's thesis of 'cultural capital' and Barker's 'hypothesis' that readers' hostility to the term 'fan' is a function of their 'involvement' in comics.

So where do we go from here? I want to suggest that a way forward can be drawn out from Sacks's (1995: 396-403) suggestion that the membership category 'hotrodder' is, or was, a 'revolutionary category'. He proposed this as part of a discussion about why young people at the time generated a wide range of different categories of car and car-owner using the type of car someone drove as a shorthand for a category of person, such as a 'Bonneville driver'. He suggested that this was part of a strategy youngsters used to resist a potentially problematic set of inferences associated with the category 'teenager-in-a-car'. In the context Sacks was referring to – California in the early 1960s – if the police saw someone they took to be a teenager driving a car then this might have been treated as sufficient warrant to institute some form of sanction, such as issuing a ticket for some reason. Sacks then suggests that what youngsters were seeking to do was to 'shift [things] around' so it was they who controlled how things were seen rather than adult authorities. One way of doing this was to generate their own categories so that '*they* will recognise whether somebody is a member of one or another category, and what membership takes. And *they* can do the sanctioning' (399-400, emphases original). Hence, 'hotrodder': a young person's category that only they knew how to apply correctly (cf. Schegloff 2007). Sacks (1995: 400) then suggests that

> the important problems of social change … would involve laying out such things as the sets of categories, how they're used, what's known about any member, etc., and beginning to play with shifts in the properties of categories, and shifts in the rules for use.

This, I think, is what needs to be done with the category 'fan'. To some extent, of course, studies of fans have already begun to do this in that they have pointed to the way in which fans have generated their own sets of meanings and activities from available cultural products. However, much of this work remains restricted because of the assumption that fans are resisting a dominant cultural industry in relation to which they are disempowered. What is attractive about Sacks's view is that, without assuming every act is an act of resistance, it does not treat young people as completely without capacities to resist authorities even to the extent of turning the tables on them. This is why the category

'hotrodder' was, at least potentially, revolutionary, because it sought to overthrow the existing membership category of 'teenager-in-a-car' by investing it with a contrasting set of predicates over which young people could claim ownership and control. There is good reason to think that such challenges are always possible, because membership categories are enthymematic, that is marked by a form of rhetorical reasoning that always leaves open the potential inferences to be drawn (Locke 2011).Thus, forms of turnabout are always possible as can be seen from a further example from Sacks (1995: 421) concerning an exchange that took place in a conversation amongst a therapy group in which two members formed a sub-group in a game of insults with another. The exchange went as follows:

Roger:	Ken, face it. You're a poor little rich kid.
Ken:	Yes Mommy. / / Thank you.
Roger:	Face the music.
Al:	Okay. Now you've got that er outta yer system. Now you're a poor little rich kid we've told you that.
Roger:	And we also decided you're a chicken shit.
Ken:	I decided that years ago to hell with you.'

The feature I want to draw to attention is Ken's response to Roger having called him 'a chicken shit'. Sacks argues that Ken's apparent agreement with this is not really an agreement at all, but an effective undermining. He compares it to the well-known paradox of the Cretan, who stated: 'All Cretans are liars.' The statement if true is, if not strictly false, then doubtable as it might be a lie – but if it is a lie, then it is confirming its truth. Sacks suggests that Ken's ostensible agreement with a charge of cowardice is not dissimilar: it is actually an act of courage and so refutes the charge even as it ostensibly agrees with it.

I want to suggest that something similar is going on with Bruce's and Will's self-descriptions as 'fanboy'. In ostensibly agreeing with a category that carries the inference of not really being authentic fans, they are actually managing to accomplish a sense of their deep commitment to comics – so deep that they are prepared to allow themselves to be viewed through a derogatory category, a stance that thereby quashes its derogatory charge. Viewed in this light, their action is revolutionary in its implications for 'shifting things around' to change the bases of cultural assessment and the right to determine criteria of taste. In this respect, there is a further suggestion to draw out that Will and Bruce are continuing a lengthy and continuing process of such revolutionary cultural change in which comics fans have been engaged since at least the 1950s.

Briefly sketched, this began with *EC* fans adopting the self-description as 'fan-addicts', which against the cultural background of concern about juvenile delinquency involving drug-taking and addiction enacted an ironical turn-about. In actively calling themselves 'addicts', *EC* fans brilliantly undermined this cultural concern by seeming to affirm it in respect of a medium that was under assault for its supposed role in encouraging such behaviour. Now, their action might be seen as a failure given the immediate impact of

the anti-comics campaign on the comics industry, but this is to take a very short-term view. Although comics readers were confronted by the systematic downgrading of their preferred medium – and one genre in particular, superheroes, came to be seen by many (including, sadly, many comics readers) to epitomise and confirm this downgrading – this was resisted from the early 1960s by what amounted to an alliance between superhero fans and the incipient counter-culture of the underground. However, whilst the latter pursued a strategy of seeking to legitimise comics in 'official' cultural terms through appeal to a rhetoric of 'art' (Locke 2009 and forthcoming), the real revolutionary action was being undertaken by the former in pursuing their fan interest with less regard for 'high cultural' markers of 'good taste'. In actively adopting the self-categorisation as 'fans', comics readers – especially of superheroes – presented an effective challenge to such markers by shifting around its predicated attributes. As has been seen from the interview material above, this activity did not go unchallenged even from within the comics community and fans have found themselves engaged in a lengthy struggle to accomplish the turnabout of meaning. Moreover, their very success in establishing comic book culture as a viable ongoing concern in economic terms through the collector market itself became a basis for constructing predicates that downgraded this activity – as duped 'fanboy' investment. Thus, a further stage in the struggle developed, exemplified here by Bruce and Will, who in their willingness to grasp the paradox and declare themselves 'fanboys' were – and maybe still are – continuing comics readers' revolutionary action. More power to them!

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Endnotes

[1] This discussion focuses on readers of superhero and science fiction comics; its applicability to readers of other comics is an open question. For discussions of readers of girls' comics, see Frazer (1987), Moss (1993), and Gibson (2000).

[2] Digital media has added to fans' capacities to engage in this kind of exchange, though whether this marks a qualitative shift in involvement is another matter.

[3] For a rather different view, see Tankel and Murphy (1998).

[4] Geppi's business practices have often been subject to criticism by comics fans and others in the industry, such as the decision by Diamond to raise the sales threshold of comics it will distribute – see 'Crisis at Claypool' (2006). See also McAllister (2001).