

“You’re sick in the head”

- when actions in interaction close and exclude

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This paper investigates how a group of teenage boys in naturally occurring disagreements make use of “mental” terms like “idiot” in the construction of evaluating actions (“you’re such an idiot”). It finds that these evaluations are systematically responded to with countering “mental state” evaluations. The evaluations close prior topics on social conduct and establish a relationship between social conduct and cognitive abilities. The paper describes how the action excludes the evaluated boy from interaction with the evaluating boy and potentially everybody else. Thus, countering the evaluation of his “mental state” is a local method for staying a possible participant in interaction. Finally, the paper discusses how “seriously” the boys’ insulting actions are to be understood. It holds that using the “mental state” terms in evaluation actions in these local contexts invoke a social category that implies social aspects such as not being a fully competent member of society which, in its turn implies possible social exclusion. This corresponds to the work that the participants accomplish through “mental state” evaluating actions. Hence, indexicality and conventionality are inter-related.