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Omni-relevant and contingent membership categories in research interview and focus group openings

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Abstract

Research based on interviews and focus groups has been characterized by a shift toward treating them as objects of inquiry in their own right, rather than simply as data collection instruments for the purposes of providing insights into other phenomena of interest. In this paper, we contribute to research in this area by examining phenomena at the intersection of openings of interactions and membership categorization, specifically in the context of interviews and focus group interactions. We do so by examining a set of recorded interview and focus group interactions, considering how categories belonging to different types of membership categorization devices (omni-relevant, contingently omni-relevant, and contingent) are treated as relevant and procedurally consequential, observably shaping participants' conduct in the openings of the interactions. Our findings demonstrate some ways in which these different types of membership categories surface in the moment-by-moment unfolding of these parts of the interactions.

Keywords

Research interviews, focus groups, membership categorization, conversation analysis, interaction openings

Introduction

Research interviews (including group interviews and focus groups¹) have traditionally occupied, and continue to occupy, a dominant place in qualitative social science research, being largely taken-for-granted as the default method of generating data for a range of research approaches (Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Roulston, 2006). The data generated through these methods have commonly been treated as a means for providing insights into a range of phenomena of interest that are treated as having import beyond the interview or focus group interaction, including participants' experiences, emotions, beliefs, and so on (see, e.g., Holstein and Gubrium, 2004; Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Silverman, 2004). Beginning around the early 1980s, however, attention increasingly turned to the features of the interactions themselves as objects of inquiry (see Roulston [2006] for a review; also see, e.g., Irvine et al. [2013]; Robles & Ho [2014]; and Roulston [2014] for more recent work along these lines). There has thus been a shift from the treatment of interviews and focus groups as research instruments, to instead treating them as social practices (Talmy, 2011). In this paper, we contribute to this body of research by examining a relatively unexplored area (membership categories in the openings of interview and focus group interactions) that lies at the intersection of two relatively well-explored areas (openings of interactions and membership categories in interviews and focus groups). In the section that follows, we briefly describe the significance of these two areas, and thus of their intersection.

Why openings? Why categories?

Conversation analysts have long recognized the importance of openings, with some of the earliest published conversation analytic research (e.g., Schegloff, 1968) addressing features of

the opening sequences of talk at the onset of interactions (also see, e.g., Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, 1986; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987). Schegloff (1986: 112) notes that openings are ‘extremely compact, interactionally dense, and avail themselves of relatively few, generally simple resources’ through which substantial interactional work is accomplished. This work includes establishing whether an incipient state of interaction will be developed into a more sustained one, and what the nature of the more sustained interaction (if it takes place) will be, particularly with respect to the identities of the participants, their relationships to one another, and the types of things that can or should be talked about (Schegloff, 1986; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, although these matters remain subject to potential shifts or renegotiation on a moment-by-moment basis throughout any interaction, openings serve as important places for the initial negotiation of a range of factors that shape the trajectory of the interaction that follows.

Consistent with these analyses of interactional openings in general, the openings of research interviews and focus groups, which can be defined as everything that happens prior to the interviewer or moderator asking the first question or posing the first topic for discussion (cf. Puchta and Potter, 2004; Widdicombe, 2015), provide a place for establishing a number of features of the terms of engagement for the interaction. In their examination of interactional practices in focus groups, Puchta and Potter (2004) identify a number of activities in which moderators typically engage in openings, including displaying their independence or lack of stake in what the participants say, informing participants on what the interaction will involve and addressing any concerns they may have about it, guiding them on how to act during the course of the interaction, and producing a range of practices designed to facilitate the production of ‘disciplined informality’ (Puchta and Potter, 2004: 32).

Studies of membership categories in interview talk (e.g., Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Baker, 1984; 2004; Housley and Smith, 2011) have considered how they can be used to perform various kinds of interactional work at particular points in interviews, but no research of which we are aware has focused specifically on their relevance in the openings of these interactions. The practices in the openings of focus groups identified by Puchta and Potter (2004) relate primarily to the categories of ‘moderator’ (who, in many research focus groups, is also the researcher) and ‘research participant’, and the expectations and activities associated with each. These categories can be thought of as belonging to an ‘omni-relevant device’ (Sacks, 1992: 313) within the research settings in which these interactions take place. Sacks (1992) used the term ‘omni-relevance’ to refer to collections of categories and the ways in which they are used (or ‘membership categorization devices’) that are tied to particular settings (in this case research settings), such that they are always potentially relevant (hence ‘omni-relevant’) for organizing and interpreting the actions produced by the participants in the setting (also see Fitzgerald et al., 2009). This does not imply that other categories cannot, at specific moments, be relevant, nor that the omni-relevant device is necessarily relevant for everything that happens at every moment, but rather that it serves as an overall organizing set of categories for an interaction, such that any action performed by participants in the interaction could potentially be produced and interpreted by reference to their membership in one of these categories (Sacks, 1992; Fitzgerald et al., 2009). Thus, in the research settings in which interviews and focus groups take place, the categories ‘interviewer’ or ‘moderator’ and/or ‘researcher’, along with ‘research participant’, serve as an overall ‘research setting’ device, which is always potentially relevant for the production and interpretation of their conduct in the setting, but careful analysis is nonetheless required of whether and how they are realized as such at any particular moment.

Sacks (1992: 315) notes further that ‘it may well be the case that there are other devices [in an interaction] that are omni-relevant’. One systematic potential source of further omni-relevant devices in research interview and focus group settings lies in researchers’ practices for sampling and recruiting research participants. As Potter and Hepburn (2005: 290) note, ‘interview research typically recruits participants under categories’ related to a chosen sampling approach, with participants thereby ‘taking part in the research on the basis that they are [for example] a “lesbian mother”, an “adolescent male”, a “recreational drug user”, or something less explicit’. Members of particular pre-specified membership categorization devices (MCDs) such as (in the above examples) ‘sexuality’, ‘parenthood status’, ‘age’, ‘gender’, and so on, are thus treated as being ideally positioned to speak about the topics of interest for the research project at hand. Once these devices have been specified as being of interest, and to the extent that the participants in the interactions are aware of their specification as such, they constitute omni-relevant devices within those interactions. In a broader (cross-study) sense, however, devices such as these may more fittingly be considered ‘contingently omni-relevant’, since there is virtually limitless variation between different research studies with respect to which MCDs are identified as being of interest. Thus, unlike the ‘research setting’ device described above, MCDs based on ‘recruitment categories’ are not relevant to *all* research interactions (and are therefore contingent on the topic of the research at hand), but recruitment and sampling practices tend to make specific devices omni-relevant for the interactions conducted in the service of a given project.

In addition to the omni-relevant and contingently omni-relevant membership categorization devices we have described thus far, it is possible for any number of further categories (and associated MCDs) to become contingently relevant during the course of an

interaction. That is, notwithstanding their omni-relevant membership in categories such as ‘researcher’, ‘research participant’, and their contingently omni-relevant membership in categories such as ‘lesbian mother’, ‘adolescent male’, etc., participants in these interactions may at any moment introduce any of a potentially large number of other categories in which they could ‘accurately’ claim membership (cf. Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1997; Potter and Hepburn, 2005). As a result, the potential ambiguity with respect to precisely which category a participant is speaking from poses a significant challenge for the analysis of interview and focus group data (Potter and Hepburn, 2005), and the ways in which categories can become contingently relevant has accordingly emerged as a source of interest for analyses focusing on the situated interactions taking place in these types of data (see, e.g., Widdicombe, 2015).

Despite increasing attention to the importance of membership categories, both with respect to processes such as recruitment that take place prior to the occasion on which the interview or focus group takes place, and with respect to the situated interactions in the course of the ‘main business’ of these interactions, there are (to our awareness) no existing studies that have systematically examined them specifically in the openings of interviews or focus groups. Following from the foregoing discussion, and as we demonstrate in our analysis below, the openings of these interactions serve as the proximate place in which the relevance of particular categories for the interaction that follows can be (re-)established, and in which they are treated as ‘procedurally consequential’ (Schegloff, 1992: 196) in observably shaping the conduct of the participants. We thereby demonstrate how the examination of these phenomena may be a potentially enlightening endeavor both for analysts who use these forms of data collection as research instruments, and those who approach them as situated social practices.

Data and method

The data corpus on which our analysis is based consists of a total of 40 semi-structured and open-ended individual interviews and 43 focus group discussions, all of which were conducted for the purposes of other research projects. All of the interactions were audio recorded, with the majority also being video recorded². Approximately 80% of the interactions were conducted by graduate students as part of the requirements for a graduate Qualitative Methods course taught by the first author between 2011 and 2015. The students were permitted to choose which questions or topics to include, how to select and recruit participants, and the details of how to conduct the interviews and focus groups (times, venues, recording devices, etc.), but were required to situate their data within an over-arching theme of ‘Social Life on Campus’. The remaining 20% of the interactions were conducted by a colleague between 2008 and 2011 for the purposes of a project broadly examining experiences and challenges faced by students in two South African universities.

The data thus share a common topical focus, relating to university-based settings and participants, and as such it was not surprising that many (although not all) of the membership categories that became relevant in the interviews were university-related. While this may have shaped some details of the analysis we are able to offer, our focus is primarily on the generic interactional processes through which various categories, and types of categories, become relevant in the data, rather than on the specific categories that happen to populate these processes in particular cases.

Our procedure involved producing detailed Jeffersonian (see Jefferson, 2004) transcripts³ of the openings of all of the recordings in the data corpus, although in 38 cases (approximately 46% of the recordings) this was not possible as the recording device was only

turned on just before the first question or topic was posed to the participant(s), and in a number of other cases only partial recordings of the openings were produced. In addition to the category-relevant talk that may have occurred prior to the recording devices being turned on, it is also important to note that (as alluded to above) a number of activities that may serve to establish the relevance of membership categories may have been performed prior to the actual occasion on which the recordings were produced, including recruitment and informed consent-related activities (see, e.g., Kristensen and Ravn, 2015; McCormack et al., 2013). While our lack of recorded access to these activities may thus limit our ability to pinpoint the precise moments in the research process at which particular categories first become relevant, our data nonetheless enable us to consider some ways in which they are (re)established in the talk that immediately precedes the onset of interview and focus group interactions. Specifically, following from our discussion above, we draw on principles of conversation analysis (e.g., Schegloff, 2007a; Sacks et al., 1974; Sacks, 1992), with a particular focus on membership categorization (e.g., Schegloff, 2007b; Sacks, 1972a; 1972b; Stokoe, 2012), to describe some ways in which omni-relevant, contingently omni-relevant, and contingent membership categorization devices were made relevant in the openings of the interactions, either through explicit mentions or categorizations, or as a result of ‘category-resonant descriptions’ (see, e.g., Stokoe, 2012) or other more implicit means.

Omni-relevant categories

Consistent with Puchta and Potter’s (2004) findings, the openings were characterized by a range of activities through which the omni-relevant categories of ‘researcher’ and ‘research participant’ were treated as relevant and procedurally consequential. These included greeting,

welcoming and thanking participants; describing and/or reiterating the nature and purposes of the research; addressing spatial arrangements in the venue (e.g., positioning of participants and recording devices); and administering informed consent procedures. Some examples of these are shown in Excerpts 1 and 2 below.

Excerpt 1: [2013/I/22, 00:00-00:26]

1 I: Hello:, (.) thank you for:: participating in my research,
2 (.)
3 P: It's a pleasure.=
4 I: =I do really appreciate it, (0.8) .hhh an::d I've t- I've explained
5 to you why we're here,
6 (.)
7 P: Yes,
8 I: and what the interview's ↑about,
9 (.)
10 P: [Yes?
11 I: [.hhh so I would just like to start off by asking the first question
12 then, (1.0) ((continues with question))

Excerpt 1 begins with the researcher greeting the participant and thanking her for participating in the research (line 1). The characterization of the activity at hand as 'participating in my research' serves to explicitly invoke the interactants' respective membership in the 'researcher' and 'research participant' categories. In addition the researcher's display of appreciation treats the forthcoming interaction as having an instrumental (research-based) purpose, with the participant having voluntarily chosen to participate and the researcher a

beneficiary of this choice. The participant's response (line 3) aligns with this treatment of the researcher as a beneficiary of her participation, which is then further reinforced by the researcher's upgraded (as shown by the emphasis on the word 'do' and the use of the intensifier 'really') display of appreciation in line 4.

The researcher then (lines 4-5 and 8) refers to an exchange of information conducted at some point before this exchange (presumably during the process of recruiting the participant in a prior interaction, and/or before turning on the recording device in this interaction), and the participant confirms her prior receipt of this information (lines 7 and 9), after which the researcher moves toward asking the first question of the interview (lines 11-12). This sequence further displays the participants' orientations to their respective membership in categories in the 'research setting' MCD, with the researcher moving from an orientation to being a beneficiary of the interaction to one of being in control of its purpose and topical agenda and being responsible for ensuring that the participant is adequately informed in this regard, and the participant aligning with these orientations through her affirmative responses. In addition, this possibly serves to re-activate additional (albeit not explicitly specified during this exchange) contingently omni-relevant MCDs (see the following section below), relating to the topic of the research and/or the basis for the recruitment of the participant.

A number of these features can also be seen in Excerpt 2, in which the researcher begins by thanking the participant (line 1), thereby (as in Excerpt 1) orienting to the benefactor-beneficiary relationship associated with the researcher-participant dyad, and the participant aligns with this display of appreciation and thus the associated relationship (line 3).

Excerpt 2: [2011/I/37, 00:16-00:44]

1 I: >Cool, thanks for coming.<

2 (0.6)

3 P: It's no ↑pro↓blem.

4 (1.0) ((P putting backpack down on a chair))

5 I: Kay so, (.) ↑basically what's gonna happ↓en, i:s I'm j's gonna

6 show you a couple of ↑pictures, .hh (.) an::d we're j's gonna talk

7 about them.

8 (.)

9 P: [Okay.

10 I: [>But first I j's need you to read< the consent ↑form, (0.2) make

11 sure you under↑stand everything, (.) and sign it if you're

12 comfortable.

13 P: Okay.

14 (0.2)

15 I: Um: >j's also< the pictures might (.) have some explicit .hh

16 content, so if you are offended, you can just °stop at any time.°

17 (.) ((P nodding))

18 P: Okay.

Also as in Excerpt 1, the researcher orients to being in control of the agenda and procedure for the interview, and to being responsible for informing the participant about it, by instructing the participant on 'what's gonna happen' (see lines 5-7), although in this case the informing is captured in the recording of the opening, rather than being treated as having been previously conducted. In response, the participant displays acceptance of the agenda established

by the researcher (line 9), thereby (as in Excerpt 1) aligning with her status as a willing contributor to the interactional trajectory the researcher has foreshadowed.

In addition, Excerpt 2 provides an example of the administration of informed consent procedures, with the researcher treating the participant's reading and signing of the consent form as a pre-condition for continuing with the interview (lines 10-12), and alerting the participant to the 'explicit content' of some of the pictures to be used as prompts in the interview, and her right to withdraw from the interview should she feel 'offended' (lines 15-16). The researcher thereby continues to act in accordance with the 'researcher' category by maintaining her control over the trajectory of the interaction and assuming responsibility for informing and protecting the participant. Similarly, as she has done previously, the participant displays acceptance of the researcher's actions (lines 13 and 17-18), thereby continuing to orient to the researcher's control of the agenda while accepting the rights being accorded to her through the informed consent procedure. She thereby continues to act as a member of the category 'research participant'.

Also noteworthy in this case is the positioning of the recording device (a video camera, in contrast to the audio-only recorder used in Excerpt 1), which is placed to capture a direct, front-on view of the participant while showing only a partial view of the left side of the researcher's face. By positioning the camera (and herself) in this way, the researcher treats the participant, and the talk she is to produce, as the primary focal points of the interaction, while treating her own contributions as relatively peripheral (cf. Goodwin, 1994; Macbeth, 1999). This is consistent with the orientations described above to the participant's presence and actions in the setting as being for the benefit of the researcher, and in the service of the research project of which the interaction is a part.

These excerpts demonstrate a range of ways, both explicit and tacit, in which the interactants in the openings of these interactions systematically orient to and act in accordance with their respective membership in the categories ‘researcher’ and ‘research participant’. These categories together resemble what Sacks (1972a: 37) calls a ‘standardized relational pair’, referring to a pair of categories that ‘constitutes a locus for a set of rights and obligations’ associated with the relationship between the members of each category and the actions each is expected to produce. In all of the openings in our data, some kind of observable joint orientation to this pair of categories was produced as a pre-requisite for the commencement of the interview or focus group. It thus appears virtually unavoidable that these categories, and hence the ‘research setting’ MCD of which they are constituent parts, are (re-)established from the outset as an omni-relevant organizing device for the interactions that follow.

Contingently omni-relevant categories

In addition to the ever-present ‘research setting’ MCD described in the previous section, the majority of the openings also exhibited participants orientations to at least one of a range of contingently omni-relevant categories associated with the research topic and sampling procedures. In addition to recurrently being mentioned in writing on the participant information sheets and/or consent forms distributed to the participants in many of the openings, these categories tended to be introduced in the openings in the course of researchers’ verbal instructions, and their characterizations or reiterations of the nature of the research. An example of this can be seen in Excerpt 3, in which the participant’s membership in a number of categories is introduced either explicitly or tacitly.

Excerpt 3: [2012/I/19, 00:19-00:40]

1 I: Okay so it's basically about student health behaviors, at
2 university, (.) on or off campus just as a student how you
3 feel i- (0.2) hu- your health is, and your health behavior is.
4 .hh You can talk about this year specifically, (.) or you can
5 go: back through: to first year, (0.5) u:m: and talk about that.
6 (.)
7 I: [Kay?
8 P: [(Mm.)
9 (.)
10 I: So:, (.) how do you feel about smoking?

In lines 1-3 the researcher produces a brief description of the topic of the interview in which the formulations ‘student health behaviors’ (line 1) and ‘as a student’ (line 2) explicitly treat the participant as a member of the category ‘student’. In addition, her repeated mentions of ‘health’ and ‘health behaviors’ (lines 1 and 3) may implicitly resonate with a range of further possible health-related categories, such as those relating to smoking (‘smoker’ versus ‘non-smoker’), drinking (‘drinker’ versus ‘tee-totaller’), and so on. (Some of these categories are subsequently made more explicitly relevant by the specific questions the interviewer goes on to ask, as shown, for example, by the first question in line 10.) Then, as she goes on to provide further instructions to the participant with respect to how she should answer the questions (lines 4-5), the researcher implicitly introduces a finer-grained specification of the category ‘student’ by instructing the participant that she can either ‘talk about this year specifically’ (line 4) or ‘go: back through: to first year’ (line 5). This pair of options makes relevant the specific year level (first versus subsequent years) of the student-participant, with the contrast between ‘this year’

and ‘back...to first year’ locating her in a (not further specified) category of ‘post-first year student’.

Excerpt 4 shows a further example of the introduction of the contingently omni-relevant category ‘student’, but in a less explicit way than was seen in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 4: [2013/F/21, 00:00-00:36]

1 I: ↑Hi, my name is Char↓maine, .hh a:nd basically today we’re gonna:
2 speak about security on cam↑pus, .hh=pt I’m gonna read you: three
3 newspaper articles from the Foghorn, .hh um: I’ll read you article
4 one, we’ll answer questions, article two, (0.3) ask you questions,
5 article three, (0.2) ask you questions, and then just general (1.2)
6 questions.
7 (0.6)
8 I: °Okay.°
9 (5.5) ((sounds of pages being turned))
10 I: Tch okay, this article ((I proceeds to introduce and read article))

In this case, the researcher begins (after introducing herself) with a description of the topic of the discussion (‘security on cam↑pus’ – see line 2) that implicitly orients to the participants’ incumbency in an institution-related category that would place them in a position to speak about such a topic. This stated topic thus resonates with the broad category ‘student’ under which participants for this particular study were recruited. This is further reinforced when the researcher goes on to describe the procedure that is to be undertaken, stating that she will read three articles from a campus-based, student-run newspaper (lines 2-3), which presupposes that

the participants are sufficiently familiar with the newspaper to recognize it based purely on this mention of its name. In addition (and similarly to Excerpt 3), the stated topic of the research in this case also implicitly makes the participants' memberships in a range of other associated MCDs potentially relevant, with 'security on campus' possibly resonating with categories such as 'victim' and 'perpetrator' (with respect to incidents resulting from campus-based security issues).

Introducing the participants' membership in contingently omni-relevant categories such as 'student', as in Excerpts 3 and 4, may be sufficient on its own to implicitly make relevant the researcher's membership in categories from these same MCDs (see Sacks' [1992] discussion of the 'consistency rule')⁴. However, in some cases the researcher's category incumbency in this regard was also more explicitly introduced, as illustrated by Excerpt 5 below.

Excerpt 5 [2008/F/02, 00:00-00:25]

1 I: ↑All right, so like we ↓said we're both u:m: we're both
2 students, (0.6) um: >from the University of< the West, and
3 (0.4) what I'm doing specifically is educa↑tion? .hh Higher
4 education, so I'm interested in: .hh knowing the experiences
5 of stude:nts, and how um the varsity works in South Africa,
6 .hh a:nd really asking you: (.) general questions about your
7 experiences here °and what they've been like.°

In this case, the researcher explicitly states that 'we' (referring to herself and her co-researcher, who is operating the video camera) are 'both students' (lines 1-2), thereby (since the participants have been recruited on the basis of being students) claiming the co-incumbency of

all the people present in the setting in the over-arching category ‘student’. However, she then goes on to state the specific institution at which herself and the other researcher are students (‘the University of the West’ – see line 2). While the name of the university has been replaced with a pseudonym in order to anonymize the data, the name actually uttered by the researcher here unambiguously refers to a university from a different continent to that with which she subsequently associates the participants’ institution (see her reference to the country in which this focus group was being conducted in line 5). As a result, as well as foregrounding her co-membership with the participants in the category ‘student’, she also distinguishes herself from them in terms of other possibly relevant and more specific categories relating to geographical location and other features of the respective institutions of which the participants may have knowledge. The use of categories in this way may reflect a set of possibly competing priorities for the researcher, relating to what has been called ‘the insider/outsider’ dilemma in qualitative data collection (see, e.g., Widdicombe, 2015; also cf. Abell et al., 2006; Garton and Copland, 2010). That is, claiming co-membership in a common ‘insider’ category (in this case, ‘student’) may be a means through which the researcher can work to build rapport with participants. Conversely, foregrounding the more fine-grained geographical categorical distinctions between herself and the participants may serve to alert them to what kind of local knowledge they can(not) take for granted as shared in common, thereby orienting them to her as in some ways an ‘outsider’ for the purposes of how they subsequently formulate their answers to her questions.

Contingent categories

In the previous two sections, we have considered MCDs, and associated categories, that may be expected to routinely be treated as relevant and procedurally consequential in the openings of the interactions we have examined, by virtue of their clear connections to the research setting in which the interactions took place and to the specific topics or purposes of the research in any given case. In contrast, in this third and final section of our analysis, we turn our attention to the surfacing of a range of MCDs whose relevance may not necessarily be easily inferable from the omni-relevant institutional features of the interactions.

One place in which contingent categories of this sort seem to emerge particularly systematically is in the course of introductions, and especially those produced in focus group settings in which researchers used them as a means of familiarizing the participants with each other prior to commencing with the main business at hand. This can be seen in Excerpt 6, in which the researcher initiates the exchange of introductions by providing an example of how they might be delivered (lines 1-4). This model of an introduction provided by the researcher includes the category ‘first year student’, which reflects this study’s explicitly-stated focus on first year students’ adjustment to university life, and therefore constitutes a contingently omni-relevant category for the purposes of this study. In addition, it introduces the high school attended by the participants, while also allowing for the participants to decline to say their names on camera (lines 1-2). While they follow the structure provided by this example in some respects (cf. Sacks, 1992, vol. 1: 313), the participants’ responses also introduce a number of additional categories not explicitly provided for by the details of the research.

Excerpt 6 [2012/F/19, 01:36-02:30]

1 I: So .h maybe do you just- if you don't wanna say your name (on)
2 the video re↑cord↓er you don't have to, like .hh you can just
3 say 'hi, I'm a first year student, and I came from this schoo:l,'
4 whatever. °Like (a thing.)°

5 (0.3)

6 P1: Okay.

7 (0.2)

8 P1: Do we have to introduce ours(h)elv(h)es?

9 I: ↑You don't ↓have to if you don't want to, just s[ay (I-)

10 P1: [Okay. .hh Okay,

11 I'll start, um: I'm Chloe,

12 I: Mm h[m?

13 P1: [Tch I came from a Muslim school, first year psych student.

14 (0.5)

15 P1: °Yeah.°

16 (0.7)

17 P2: Hi, my name is uh: Joseph?

18 (1.0) ((I nodding))

19 P2: I:'m currently doing: uh psychology first year, (0.2) I'm

20 actually doing BSc, (.) biomedical, (0.2) with intentions in

21 getting into: medicine one day.

22 (0.2) ((I nodding))

23 I: °Okay.°

24 P3: .hh I'm Khanyile, uh:: I come from: Malbor High,

25 I: Mmh[m.

26 P3: [a multi: racial school. .hhh An:d first year psycho:logy.

The first participant (after checking her understanding of what is being required – lines 8-10) begins by stating her name (line 11), despite the researcher having now on two occasions (lines 1-2 and 9) indicated that doing so is not required. Then, following a ‘continuer’ from the researcher (line 12) that treats her response as not yet complete (Schegloff, 1982) and thus prompts her to elaborate, the participant states the type or category of school she attended (‘a Muslim school’) and self-categorizes as a ‘first year psych student’ (line 13). The participant’s identification of the category of school she attended departs from the example provided by the researcher, which (as shown by the formulation ‘this school’ in line 3) called for the naming of a specific school rather than a category of school (cf. an alternative formulation such as ‘this *type* of school’). In addition, the participant’s self-categorization is more specific than the one provided for in the researcher’s example, by virtue of inserting the additional disciplinary category ‘psych’ into the ‘first year student’ category mentioned by the researcher. The effect of these departures is thus to introduce both a religious category (‘Muslim’, which, in the South African context, may also imply an ethnic or racial category), and a disciplinary category (‘psych’).

The second participant to respond begins by following a similar structure to that adopted by the first as he provides his name (line 17), but then (following a non-verbal continuer in the form of a head nod by the researcher in line 18) deviates from this structure as he omits any mention of his school and instead moves to an elaborated description of his disciplinary location and intentions (lines 19-21). This serves to reinforce the relevance of the discipline MCD introduced by the previous participant. The third participant then responds using a structure that

blends those offered by the researcher and the first participant, as she begins with her name (line 24), before naming the specific school she attended (line 24), then (after another continuer by the researcher in line 25) categorizes the school in terms of the race MCD ('a multi: racial school' – line 26) before finishing with a 'year level + discipline' category (line 26) similar to that introduced by the first participant, although with the omission of the explicit mention of the category 'student'. Thus, in addition to reinforcing the discipline MCD that the previous participants (but not the researcher) have deployed, this participant explicitly introduces the race MCD that had previously only been possibly alluded to (see also Whitehead, 2009) by the first participant.

In sum, as a result of this exchange (and in line with Sacks' consistency rule, as noted above), religious, ethnic, racial and disciplinary MCDs have now potentially been made relevant as ways of categorizing any of the participants in the interaction, even though none of these MCDs were identified as such in designing the study of which this focus group was a part. This, in turn, provides for the possibility that these MCDs, in addition to the omni-relevant devices already established for this interaction (as described in the foregoing sections), could serve as bases for participants' design of their actions and/or interpretations and inferences with respect to the actions of others, in the subsequent unfolding of the interaction.

In Excerpt 7, the researcher's request for introductions from two participants, who have entered the room after the four already-present participants had introduced themselves, provides an occasion for one of the participants to use the relational category 'friend'. His use of this category here may be designed to provide an account for his presence, displaying that he is there because he is accompanying his friend despite (as confirmed by ethnographic information provided by the researcher who conducted this focus group) not having signed up in advance, as

the other participants present had done. Whatever the warrant for his use of the category, its deployment in this way makes it available to be taken up by other participants subsequently in the interaction (cf. Whitehead and Lerner, 2009).

Excerpt 7 [2013/F/24, 09:34–10:17]

1 I: So who are you guys? ((to P5 and P6, who have just sat down))
2 P5: Tch I'm Annette,
3 (0.8)
4 P6: I'm her friend, Sheldon.
5 I: Oh, okay, hi Sheldon.
6 P5: Huh huh [huh .hh Hi! Huh huh .hhh
7 P6: [Huh huh huh
8 (0.5)
9 I: We've got a boy, finally, in the last focus group I didn't have a
10 boy.
11 P6: Huh [huh huh huh huh huh huh .hhh
12 I: [This will be interesting.

Following these introductions, however, rather than taking up the category 'friend', the researcher categorizes P6 in terms of gender in observing that 'We've got a boy' (line 9), before accounting for the significance of this in contrast to the focus group she had conducted the previous day (lines 9-10). Then, in overlap with P6's laughter at this observation (line 11), the researcher proposes that his presence in the group 'will be interesting' (line 12). As a result, although gender had not previously been specified as a topic of interest for this study, and nor had it been used as a basis for recruitment of participants, by evaluating this participant's

presence in this way the researcher introduces gender as a potentially relevant basis for anything that not just this (male) participant, but all the other (female) participants, may subsequently say.

In addition to being occasioned by the relatively formal activity of doing introductions, contingent categories such as these can also be deployed in the course of less formal talk that was produced in some of the openings, as seen in the surfacing of the researcher's membership in the category 'masters student' and subsequently her age category ('young') in Excerpt 8. This exchange occurs after several minutes of a relatively informal exchange occasioned by the researcher and four participants awaiting the arrival of a number of additional participants who had signed up for the focus group but had not yet arrived. A lapse in this exchange (shown by the lengthy pause in line 1) occasions an observation by the researcher regarding the participants' 'subdued' appearance, followed by a question as to whether this is a result of them being 'tired' (line 2).

Excerpt 8 [2013/F/24, 07:54-08:43]

1 (14.5)

2 I: You guys look quite subdued, are you tired?

3 P2: Hh ((chuckle) [Ye:s.

4 P1: [Mm hm. [Uh huh ((chuckle))

5 I: [Or are you anxious about the fact that (.)

6 P4: It's being recorded.

7 (1.0)

8 I: Are you anxious about it being recorded?

9 (1.7)

10 P4: Well, it's definitely made me more aware of things.

11 (0.2)

12 P2: Uh hhh huh ((chuckle)) .hh

13 I: Okay.

14 (1.7)

15 I: ((gazing at P3)) R'you anxious about the fact that I am a

16 masters student, <please say no.

17 P1: Huh huh huh n[o!

18 P3: [N[o. ((smiling))

19 P1: [Yes. ((nods)) Huh [huh hh .hh

20 I: [Yes?

21 I: Are you really?

22 P4: hhh ((chuckle)) No.

23 P3: Uh [huh huh (Man, it's [chilled!]) Huh [huh

24 P1: [No.

25 I: [Okay, good.

26 P4: [You look so young, though,

27 (very very.)

28 (.)

29 I: [Mm.

30 P4: [(For)

31 (0.5)

32 I: I do look pretty young.

While two of the participants respond affirmatively to this question (see lines 3 and 4), the other two offer no response (either verbal or non-verbal), and the researcher begins to ask a question tied to an alternative account relating to their feeling 'anxious' (line 5). Before she is able to bring this question to completion, P4 (one of the two participants who has not yet responded) produces a candidate completion (see, e.g., Lerner, 2004) that also possibly serves as

an affirmative answer (line 6), thereby being possibly hearable as a claim by this participant that she is in fact anxious about the recording device. Following a pause (line 7), the researcher displays that she has indeed heard P4's utterance as such, as she asks for confirmation that P4 is 'anxious about it being recorded' (line 8). While P4's response is delayed by a relatively lengthy pause (line 9) and is mitigated by her use of the word 'aware' rather than the proposed 'anxious', it is treated (following another pause and a chuckle by P2 – lines 11-12) by the researcher's 'Okay' (line 13) as an adequate response to her question.

This leaves P3 as the only participant who has not yet responded to the researcher's initial question in line 1 regarding their 'subdued' appearance. Following a further pause (line 14) during which P3 still shows no sign of responding, the researcher pursues a response from her, gazing at her and using a self-categorization ('I am a masters student' – lines 15-16) as a further candidate account for anxiety on her part, and thereby proposing the possible relevance of her higher position (relative to the participants) in a hierarchically organized MCD of levels of study. This category thus appears to explicitly surface as a result of being deployed as a resource in pursuit of a response that had over a series of sequences repeatedly been made conditionally relevant (see Schegloff, 2007a), but had not been produced by one of the relevant responders (Whitehead, 2012).

The researcher quickly follows this proposed account with a plea to 'please say no' (line 16), apparently designed to introduce humor into the exchange, and taken up as such by P1 and P3, both of whom also produce the unequivocal negative responses the researcher has jokingly pursued (lines 17 and 18). Although P3 has now produced a response of sorts to the researcher's line of inquiry, the sequence is expanded by another (apparently joking) response from P1 (line 19), which occasions further requests for confirmation by the researcher (lines 20 and 21) and

further laughter and/or denials by three of the participants (lines 22-24). While the researcher's acceptance ('Okay') and positive evaluation ('good') of these denials move to bring the sequence to a close (Schegloff, 2007a), it is re-opened once again by P4's observation, 'You look so young, though' (line 26), thereby making a further (age) MCD explicit in the exchange. This assessment appears to be based on a treatment of the category 'masters student' that the researcher has just previously deployed as being incongruous with her 'young' appearance. It thereby demonstrates how the emergence of categories in the course of informal talk in openings can have a cascading effect leading to the contingent introduction of further categories, with the consequence of multiple MCDs being made potentially relevant, not just with respect to the person to whom they have now been applied (in this case the researcher), but also possibly to any of the other participants (Sacks, 1992).

Conclusions

Our analysis has demonstrated some ways in which different types of membership categorization devices can become relevant and procedurally consequential in the openings of research interview and focus group interactions. This can occur either explicitly or implicitly; in the course of a range of activities that may take place in openings; and through both direct categorization practices and category-resonant descriptions and other actions collaboratively produced by the researcher and the participants. It is noteworthy that, while the first two of types of MCDs we have considered (omni-relevant and contingently omni-relevant) may be viewed as expected, and perhaps even unavoidable, features of research settings (cf. Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Puchta and Potter, 2004), the third type (contingent) could not have been anticipated in advance based on the details of the research being conducted, instead surfacing in

the moment-by-moment unfolding of the interactions. The surfacing of these categories in our data occurred through participants' *in situ* elaborations of the contingently omni-relevant categories introduced by the researcher in accordance with the specified details of the research (see Excerpt 6), through more generic introduction sequences that were nonetheless recognizably associated with the research-related tasks at hand (Excerpt 7) or through informal “small talk” produced as preliminary to the onset of research-related tasks (Excerpt 8). These findings thus demonstrate some of the complex ways in which various MCDs can be (re-)established as organizing devices in the course of setting the stage for the interactions to follow.

Although an examination of whether and how the categories (and particularly contingent categories) introduced during the openings may be consequential in subsequent parts of the interactions is beyond the scope of our analysis in the present paper, our findings are suggestive of the potential for further research in this respect. This could involve examination of how these categories may be taken up by participants – both explicitly and implicitly – and the implications this may have for the analysis of interview and focus group data characterized by ambiguities with respect to the categories from which participants may be speaking at particular moments (Potter and Hepburn, 2005).

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Notes

¹ While there are important distinctions both within the broad category of interviews, and between interviews and focus groups (see, e.g., Widdicombe, 2015), the empirical phenomena we examine in this paper are in general common to both (see, e.g., Roulston, 2006). In specific cases in our analysis below in which distinctions do become relevant, we address them as analytic matters.

² In all cases, informed consent was obtained from the participants for recording, and for use of all parts of the recording in subsequent research publications, prior to turning on the recording devices.

³ All names and other identifying information in the transcripts have been replaced with pseudonyms. The talk of the interviewers/moderators is designated with 'I', while that of the participants is designated with 'P' in individual interviews or 'P1', 'P2', etc. in focus groups. Since the interviewer/moderator in all of our data was also the researcher for the project at hand, we use these terms interchangeably to refer to them in our analysis.

⁴ According to this rule, 'if a category from some [membership categorization] device's collection has been used to categorize a first Member of the population, then that category or other categories from the same collection *may* be used to categorize further Members of the population' (Sacks, 1992, vol. 1: 246; cf. Potter and Hepburn, 2005).

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