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The Problem of Context in the Analysis of Social Action: The Case of Implicit Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

While the specification of situating context(s) is commonly treated as an indispensable part of social scientific research, the choices this involves are rarely directly explicated. An exception is conversation analysis (CA), which differs from many other approaches in its privileging of participants' orientations as a basis for empirically grounding analytic specifications of context. In this paper, I demonstrate how this approach to context, along with CA methods and findings, can be employed in addressing challenges associated with identifying and analyzing (possible) instances of the implicit relevance of racial categories in everyday social interaction. Using the case of implicit whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa as a site for considering these challenges, I examine a collection of interactions in which race becomes (possibly) relevant during the course of complaints about violent crime. I begin with an ambiguous case of a speaker's possible implicit orientation to whiteness, demonstrating the use of CA for the close examination of available evidence for this orientation. I then describe how an approach based on a collection of cases, constituted by similar sequential and action environments to those that characterize the ambiguous case, can be employed to strengthen the analysis of the ambiguous case. The analysis thereby demonstrates the powerful resources CA offers for addressing ambiguity with respect to social categories, and the value of detailed examinations of interactional practices for documenting how participants manage, and thereby reproduce, the consequentiality of their position in a racialized social order.

Keywords

Context, conversation analysis, ambiguity, race, whiteness

The specification of various types of context is commonly treated as an indispensable feature of social scientific analyses of social actions, with this contextualization providing a set of situating resources that readers are invited—whether explicitly or tacitly—to apply in interpreting and evaluating findings. Contexts typically invoked to this end may include descriptions of existing literature, theory, and debates; particular historical periods or moments; physical, geographical, or institutional structures, settings, and activities; and prevailing socio-political or cultural conditions, including particular social categories and category-based relations or inequalities (also see, e.g., Maynard 2003; Schegloff 1987, 1996a).

While the importance of these contextualizing resources is largely taken for granted, the bases for treating some particular aspect(s) of the context of a social action as analytically relevant, given the range of potentially salient contexts in any given case, are rarely directly explicated or problematized (also see, e.g., Mandelbaum 1990/1991; Maynard 2003; Schegloff 1997b). One notable exception, developed with particular reference to research on talk-in-interaction, but with evident implications for examinations of social action more broadly, is the approach to context associated with conversation analysis (CA) and convergent with other ethnomethodologically-informed studies of social interaction. In this paper, I demonstrate how this approach to context, applied along with conversation analytic methods and findings, can be employed in addressing the challenges associated with identifying and analyzing (possible) instances of the implicit relevance of racial categories in everyday interactions. I begin by describing the central features of CA's approach to context, its main distinctions from those associated with other social scientific paradigms, and some key analytic challenges it involves.

THE CONVERSATION ANALYTIC APPROACH TO CONTEXT

A centerpiece of CA's approach to context is privileging the orientations of participants in interactions as a primary basis for characterizing the context(s) for some conduct under examination. The central question asked by CA—"why that now?" (Schegloff and Sacks 1973:299)—is therefore posed not in the first instance by analysts, but is central to CA by virtue of being pervasively relevant for participants in interactions (Schegloff 1998; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). When considered in relation to context, this involves detailed examination of the practices through which participants use context as an interactional resource and, in doing so, publicly and observably display for one another—and hence for analysts—which elements of context are relevant for their conduct at any given moment. The problem of context—and thus the relationship between talk-in-interaction and other aspects of social structure—is thereby placed in the hands of the participants, with context treated as endogenously produced in interactions in and through participants' talk and other conduct (Schegloff 1987, 1991; 1997b; cf. Mandelbaum 1990/1991; Maynard, 2003). CA therefore rejects what Goodwin and Heritage (1990:286) call "the 'bucket' theory of context, in which the situation of action is treated as anterior to—as 'enfolding' and determining—the action that takes place within it" (cf. Garfinkel 1967). As such, CA differs fundamentally from approaches that treat context as an exogenous influence on participants' conduct, and/or contextualizing descriptions as resources primarily for analysts, and/or "why that now?" as a question asked first and foremost by analysts.

Schegloff (1987, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1997b, 1998) offers an extensive series of descriptions of why and how CA privileges participants' orientations in its treatment of context. A central point of departure is what Schegloff calls the "problem of multiple description," based on the observation that "the set of ways of describing any setting is indefinitely expandable"

(Schegloff 1987:218). That is, one can “accurately” include in a description of a setting any number of features, including its institutional characteristics (e.g., a professional or business meeting), the immediate physical environment (e.g., a type of building), its broader geographical location (e.g., a city, region, or country), and the people present (Schegloff 1997b). Extending this observation, Schegloff (1997b), following Sacks (1972a), notes that members of society can be “accurately” characterized in terms of multiple different categories.

In the face of this “embarrassment of truths” (Schegloff 1997b:166), a key analytic task is to identify not just which possible characterizations are *true*, but which are *relevantly* so. Schegloff (1997b) identifies two main ways in which social scientists may address this problem. The first, “explanatory adequacy,” proposes, “that way is best which most reliably yields ‘findings’—repeatable, reliable, objective, significant (for some statistically significant) observations about the world” (Schegloff 1997b:166). This approach is thus grounded in methodological and/or theoretical principles that yield what are seen as meaningful research findings, thereby privileging the concerns of the analyst over those of the participants whose conduct is being examined (Schegloff 1997b). The second way—which Schegloff identifies with CA, as described above—involves grounding analyses in participants’ orientations.

This privileging of participants’ orientations involves two analytic challenges that together give rise to the evidentiary requirements associated with the CA approach to context. The first is “the problem of relevance” (Schegloff 1992b:108), which concerns the need for empirical evidence that some sense of context was *relevant to the participants* at any given moment in an interaction in order to warrant analytic claims that invoke that sense of context (Schegloff 1991). The second involves establishing the “procedural consequentiality” (Schegloff 1992b:110) of a feature of context for the specific conduct on which the analysis is focusing.

That is, even if a particular context can be shown to be relevant to the participants, this does not imply that it is necessarily consequential for every possible detail of their conduct in some stretch of interaction, and thus there remains a need to empirically demonstrate whether or how it matters for the particular detail(s) of interest.

The approach to context Schegloff and other conversation analysts advance therefore involves a stringent evidentiary burden, involving not just apparently compelling (or “adequate”) explanations in terms of some set of contextual features, but analyses that identify details of participants’ own orientations to the relevance and procedural consequentiality of such features. Over the past three decades a wealth of research has implemented these principles, contributing to demonstrating their application to many domains of inquiry. The most well-established of these is research on “institutional talk” (Drew and Heritage 1992), including studies of courtrooms, emergency services lines, medical consultations, news interviews, political speeches, and classrooms, among other settings (for a review, see Heritage and Clayman 2010). Together these studies demonstrate how social institutions are “talked into being” (Heritage 1984:290), or constituted in and produced through institutionally oriented participants’ conduct (Drew and Heritage 1992). A further vibrant area of research has built on Sacks’s (1972a, 1972b, 1992) pioneering work on “membership categorization devices” or MCDs, examining how collections of social categories are used and administered by participants in interactions. Conversation analytic researchers guided by this work (e.g., Hansen 2005; Kitzinger 2005; Raymond 2019a; Raymond and Heritage 2006; Shrikant 2015; Stokoe 2010; Whitehead 2009) have examined interactional uses and management of a number of different MCDs, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and kinship. Also noteworthy is research by linguistic anthropologists (e.g., Enfield and Levinson 2006; Moerman 1988; Sidnell 2007), who have

worked to combine ethnographic fieldwork with conversation analytic methods and findings, thereby examining how culture-specific resources may be deployed to address generic interactional “problems,” and how particular aspects of culture are produced in and through action-in-interaction (also cf. Mandelbaum 1990/1991; Maynard 2003).

Despite these substantial and cumulative bodies of research, scholars representing various other approaches, particularly those associated with the forms of discourse analysis that Schegloff (1997b) identified as his primary audience, have criticized the analytic principles on which CA’s approach to context is built. These critiques question whether CA’s requirement for empirical grounding based on participants’ orientations applies too narrow or strong a constraint on analytic claims, and propose that analyst-supplied contextual descriptions are a necessary resource, particularly for analyses of the interactional consequentiality of politically infused contextual factors such as those associated with particular historical moments or periods, social and cultural conditions, and configurations of status and/or power relations (see, e.g., Billig 1999; Blommaert 2005; Cameron 2008; Wetherell 1998). While Schegloff (e.g., 1998, 1999) and others have strongly refuted the central elements of these critiques, conversation analysts have acknowledged the challenges associated with cases in which evidence of participants’ orientations to a context or category is implicit or ambiguous (see, e.g., Schegloff 2007b; Stokoe 2012). Although these challenges apply across a wide range of social scientific domains, I turn in the following section to research on implicit whiteness as a perspicuous case of their realization.

IMPLICIT WHITENESS IN LANGUAGE AND INTERACTION

Sociological scholarship on whiteness has, dating back as far as the groundbreaking work of Du Bois (2003 [1903]), emphasized the ways in which it is produced as an “invisible” or

“unmarked” category. This scholarship describes how whiteness tends to remain implicit, enabling white-identified people to benefit from the privileges associated with whiteness without explicitly acknowledging their racialized bases (see, e.g., Frankenberg 1993; Hill 2008; Lipsitz 2006). A related feature of whiteness identified in this research is what has been called “colorblindness,” referring to ostensibly race-neutral language and practices and, in some cases, active resistance against claims of the salience of race, even in the face of evidence to the contrary (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2017; Mueller 2017; Omi and Winant 2015). Similarly, Haney López (2015:ix) discusses “dog whistles,” or “coded racial appeals” that, superficially, “have nothing to do with race, yet they nevertheless powerfully communicate messages about threatening nonwhites.”

Race scholars have thus sought to document the practices through which whiteness is systematically produced as implicit or unspoken. These efforts, however, are associated with a potentially troublesome methodological challenge, particularly for researchers who wish to analyze the accomplishment of implicit whiteness at one of its most pervasive points of production—namely, in and through everyday actions-in-interaction (see, e.g., Omi and Winant 2015; Schegloff 2006a; Trechter and Bucholtz 2001). That is, if whiteness tends not to “speak its name” (Lipsitz 2006), and especially if participants may actively work to suppress displays of its salience, then how are analysts to identify when and how it is relevant for participants’ conduct?

This challenge is particularly significant in light of the concern in contemporary race scholarship with attending to the materially grounded and enduring nature of racialization, while avoiding essentializing accounts (see, e.g., Omi and Winant 2015; Trechter and Bucholtz 2001). This involves focusing on processes and practices through which whiteness is socially constructed in particular moments, places, and situations, and in relation to specific material or

social structural outcomes, while avoiding treating its features as essential and/or universally recognizable. Consequently, various aspects of context(s) may be treated as important analytic resources for developing non-essentializing analyses of the situated accomplishment of implicit whiteness (cf. Trechter and Bucholtz 2001).

Scholars studying implicit whiteness are thus faced with a specific version of the choice between explanatory adequacy and participant orientations that Schegloff describes. Applied in this domain, explanatory adequacy involves researchers' mobilization of contextual features that support claims regarding the relevance of whiteness for events or conduct being analyzed, with the authority of the analyst along with the apparent adequacy of the analytic account treated as warranting the introduction of these contexts. In contrast, privileging participant orientations involves identifying empirical evidence that participants are oriented to whiteness as (potentially) shaping the conduct at hand, despite not being explicitly mentioned. Importantly, cases in which such evidence is available offer the possibility of alignment between the concerns of analysts and those of interactional participants (also see Schegloff 1998:415–16). This in turn provides for analyses of the situated accomplishment of implicit whiteness that do not rest on analyst-supplied specifications of context of the sort that critics of CA claim are necessary when dealing with implicit or ambiguous phenomena. In light of these considerations, I consider in the analysis that follows how a CA approach, grounded in participants' orientations, can be applied to ambiguous (possible) cases of implicit whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.

DATA

The interactions I examine below are part of a collection of over 100 audio recorded exchanges featuring complaint sequences (see, e.g., Edwards 2005; Schegloff 2005) in which there is

evidence (either explicit or implicit) of participants' orientations to race. This collection is drawn from a data set consisting of approximately 120 hours of broadcasts from three radio stations in South Africa.

While theorizing and research on implicit whiteness have been most prominently produced in the United States, research examining post-apartheid South Africa (e.g., Teeger 2015) has reported similar features of whiteness, while also noting the ways in which whiteness has become stigmatized following the collapse of the white supremacist apartheid system (see Steyn 2004). One observed consequence of this is the systematic possibility of many politicized actions (including, as my analysis demonstrates, complaints about violent crime in the country and about the post-apartheid national government), if produced by white people, being vulnerable to being “explained away” (Sacks 1992:I:180) or discounted on the basis of the actor's whiteness. Although this runs counter to the “invisibility” of whiteness observed in the United States, it provides for a similarly systematic basis for white people to design their actions to be interpreted in race-neutral terms, including possibly actively resisting potential inferences that race may be relevant. This was confirmed by preliminary observations on the data during and after the production of the recordings, with the data set yielding numerous possible implicit allusions to race (cf. Whitehead 2009), and instances of speakers apparently working to resist racialized interpretations of their conduct. As a result, these data offer an ideal site for the demonstration of a CA approach to examining implicit whiteness, in light of the challenges described above.

A number of aspects of the radio-based institutional context of the interactions are evidently systematically oriented to by the participants throughout the data set, including in various places in the data I examine below, thus warranting briefly noting them in advance of the

analysis. Firstly, the participants, including hosts, callers from the listening public, and in-studio or telephonic guests, are speaking both to each other and to an overhearing audience. As a result, their talk may be oriented to the contingencies associated with addressing either their immediate recipient, or an audience of virtually unlimited possible characteristics, or both. Secondly, the participants (especially members of the public calling into the shows), are relatively unknown to most or all of the audience they are addressing, and do not have personal relationships or knowledge that they can use as resources for interpreting each other's actions. This may result in membership categories, including racial categories, and the common-sense or "category-bound" (Sacks 1972a, 1972b) knowledge associated with them, becoming a more prominent resource for such interpretations. Thirdly, the shows frequently included discussions of topics that could, directly or indirectly, implicate contexts relating to the matters on which the analysis below focuses—namely, intersections between race, crime, and the government. For example, if a show included instances of explicit racialization in relation to crime and/or the government, then discussions of these matters in subsequent interactions could potentially tacitly trade on their prior racialization without requiring further explicit mentions of race to do so. In light of this, in cases where such prior discussions were evidently relevant for the interactions being examined, I address them in the analyses.

The transcripts shown below were produced using the detailed transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (see Jefferson 2004). The original audio recordings from which the transcripts were produced can be accessed online.¹

AN INITIAL (AMBIGUOUS) CASE

I begin with an exchange, shown in extract 1 below, that offers equivocal evidence with respect to a speaker's possible implicit orientations to whiteness, and thus constitutes a key case in light of the foregoing discussion. Violent crime, and the difficulties in effectively addressing it, have been complained about earlier on the show (approximately 32 minutes prior to this exchange), and the call shown in extract 1 may thus have been occasioned by this prior call—although the caller does not explicitly specify whether this is the case. The complaints in the prior call, however, were not treated by the participants as racialized in any evident way, and the possible (but ambiguous) orientation to race exhibited by the caller in extract 1 is thus the first candidate instance of this type of orientation on the show. Following an expanded (non-transcribed) opening sequence in which the caller and host exchange greetings, and the caller compliments the host and the radio station, the caller moves to what she treats as her reason for calling (line 1)—a complaint about crime (line 2), and about a lack of action with respect to “taking it in ha:nd” (lines 5–6). This complaint thus apparently targets the government or state law enforcement agencies charged with addressing such matters.²

(1) [156, SAfm 4/25/08]

- 1 C: .hhh What I would like to say is that u:m:: uh (y-) the-
2 the crime is bad, (.) >very bad, we< all know it.=hh
3 H: Ya.
4 (.)
5 C: But you don't hear a lot being said about taking it in
6 ha:nd. .hh[h
7 H: [Mm:::
8 C: [Un]fortunately. .hhh An:d uh: my- uh=hhh

A key piece of evidence in this regard is the caller's claim, "we all know it" (line 2). Sequentially, this claim is produced as a "parenthetical insert" (Mazeland 2007; Schegloff 2007a; also see Whitehead 2011) between two components of the caller's complaint, the first being an upgraded assessment ("the crime is bad, (.) >very bad," line 2) and the second an observation of an absence ("you don't hear a lot being said about taking it in ha:nd," lines 5–6). These two components together form a contrast structure (cf. Heritage and Greatbatch 1986), marked by the word "But" at the beginning of the second component (line 5). Through this contrast, the caller treats the absence of action she observes as "complainable" (Schegloff 2005) in light of the assessment of crime it follows.

As Mazeland (2007:1818) notes, speakers can use parentheticals to inform recipients "metacommunicatively and in real time how to listen to the turn in progress," and parentheticals thus temporarily interrupt the progressivity of the turn in order to perform "a subsidiary interactional activity" that elaborates and supports the action produced by the unit of talk into which they are inserted. Consistent with this analysis, the claim, "we all know it," inserted by the caller in this case suspends the progressivity of her complaint-in-progress in order to perform the subsidiary activity of managing how recipients might take it up, inviting alignment with it while reinforcing and buttressing it against potentially dissenting responses. This is evident both in its appeal to common knowledge, which serves to treat the claim as unquestioned and uncontroversial (cf. Stokoe 2012), and in the caller's production (through the use of the emphasized word "all") of what Pomerantz (1986:219) calls an "extreme case formulation," referring to semantically extreme formulations that can be used "to defend against or to counter challenges to the legitimacy of complaints." In light of this, it is significant that, as in the cases analyzed by Mazeland (2007) and Schegloff (2007a), the recipient (the host) responds to the

insertion, producing an agreeing “Ya” (line 3). As a result, the caller can resume her complaint having secured her recipient’s alignment with her claim that what she has said thus far is beyond dispute.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, by making this claim, the caller treats her complaint as being potentially vulnerable to challenge, since it would not be necessary to defend the legitimacy of a complaint whose legitimacy could be taken for granted. Moreover, although the host has agreed with the caller, there remains the systematic possibility that members of the overhearing audience may not. In light of these evident orientations to potential challenges to her complaint, the caller’s emphasis on the word “all” (line 2) is evidence for an orientation to the possibility of her complaint being heard as reflecting the interests of just *some* (rather than *all*) people, and being discounted on that basis. Thus, she works to pre-empt a hearing of this complaint as being produced on behalf of, and indexing her membership in, a particular sub-set (or category) of people, rather than as one of the broader “all” she subsequently invokes (cf. Schegloff’s [2007a:241–42] analysis of a parenthetical insertion as “a prophylactic to pre-empt the possibility of failure”). The design of the caller’s utterance is thus evidence for both the relevance of the caller’s membership in a category and its procedural consequentiality for the details of her conduct. Crucially, however, it remains unclear which category/ies she may be orienting to, since her membership in a racial category is just one plausible possibility among the multiple ways she could “accurately” be categorized.

As the caller continues, she mentions a specific recent instance of a “farm murder” in the town of Lichtenberg (line 9). In addition to the mention of this town constituting explicit evidence of the caller’s orientation to the relevance of this part of South Africa as a context for her utterances, the term “farm murder” invokes a set of geographical, institutional, and

categorical contexts associated with farms. This term also potentially carries a further set of implications relating to the post-apartheid South African context, which can be explicated by providing ethnographic details of what it may convey in this context.³ In this regard, it is noteworthy that this term refers in South Africa to attacks against farmers on their land, which became increasingly prevalent and prominently reported-upon during the post-apartheid period. The caller's use of this term thus implicates the post-apartheid socio-political context in which "farm murders" became a recognizable type of incident.⁴ Farm murders are also commonly described in racialized terms, with victims referred to as "white farmers," and perpetrators thereby implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) identified as black (see, e.g., Bradshaw 2008). As such, the caller's use of the term may serve (for these participants, including members of the overhearing audience) to invoke the compound categories "white victim" and "black perpetrator." By extension, the caller's subsequent self-categorization ("We are also farmers," line 12), in addition to displaying her personal stake in the incident she has just previously referred to, may implicitly identify her as specifically a "white farmer."

There is thus evidence in this part of the call for the caller's possible orientation to her racial identity, and to its relationship to a social context beyond the immediate interaction. Crucially, however, this evidence remains implicit, ambiguous, and thus defeasible: Neither the caller nor her immediate recipient has explicitly mentioned race, and the caller's actions could plausibly have been oriented to face-value, non-racialized senses of "farm murder," "victims," "farmers," and so on. As Stokoe (2012) notes, this type of ambiguity can be addressed as something that participants, rather than analysts, are responsible for resolving, if they see fit to do so. Moreover, in some cases ambiguity may be a resource for participants, providing for deniability with respect to actions and categories that may be delicate or potentially problematic

if formulated more explicitly (Stokoe 2012). In this case, if the caller is indeed oriented to a vulnerability to being heard as representing a particular, racialized, set of interests, then the ambiguity of this orientation may provide her with deniability should she subsequently be challenged on such a basis (also see, e.g., Hansen 2005; Shrikant 2015; Whitehead 2009).

Leaving the ambiguity unresolved can therefore fit CA's focus on participants' (rather than analysts') concerns, providing a basis for suggesting that it is not necessary to analytically settle whether whiteness is relevant in this exchange (and others like it). Those seeking a more conclusive analysis may, however, take this position as further evidence that, in order to adequately analyze cases such as this, it is necessary to go beyond participants' orientations. In light of this possibility, it is noteworthy that applying CA methods and findings in this case has at least provided analysis of *some* evidence of the participants' orientations to whiteness, however inconclusive this evidence is deemed to be. Whatever further approaches might then be applied could be built, at worst, on a plausible analysis grounded in the participants' orientations (Schegloff 1997b). Importantly, however, a hallmark of conversation analytic research is basing findings on multi-case collections, rather than single cases (see, e.g., Clift and Raymond 2018; Schegloff 1996a, 2006b). I therefore turn in the following section to a consideration of how this collection-based approach could proceed in light of the ambiguity of extract 1.

BUILDING A COLLECTION

The development of collections in CA proceeds by gathering instances of an identified phenomenon (e.g., an interactionally produced practice, action, or feature of participants' talk or other conduct), also including, if possible, apparent "deviant cases" that potentially offer comparative bases for "testing" claims made about other cases (Schegloff 1996a). Schegloff's

(e.g., 1996a; 1996b, 1997a, 2006b, 2007b) discussions of this collection-based approach indicate its value for analyses addressing implicit or ambiguous instances of participants' orientations. That is, the analysis can initially be based on describable features of practices produced in cases in which the participants clearly orient to them as recognizable in terms of some interactional outcome, which provides a basis for claiming that a particular practice is a recognizable method for producing such an outcome independently of whether the participants observably treat it as such on some particular occasion (Schegloff 1996b, 2006b).

In employing this approach with reference to extract 1, I built a collection of cases constituted by similar sequential and action environments to those that characterize extract 1, namely, complaint sequences in which the speaker explicitly identifies or implicitly treats violent crime in South Africa, and the government's failure to adequately address it, as the objects of the complaint. Below I examine three further cases from this collection that share features in common with extract 1, while providing more explicit evidence of participants' orientations to the relevance and procedural consequentiality of whiteness.

In extract 2, a caller contributes to a discussion of a recent outbreak of apparently xenophobically motivated violence against residents of South Africa from other African countries. After initially complaining about "government. (.) Denial" (line 4), the caller goes on to specify that the denial he is referring to concerns the severity of violence as a problem in South Africa (lines 10–11, 14, 16, and 18), thereby more explicitly connecting his complaint to the preceding discussion. Although no mention has been made in this preceding discussion of the potential or actual culpability of white South Africans for this violence, the caller parenthetically inserts into his complaint a concession (see Antaki and Wetherell 1999) that "the whites are to blame," along with an explicit link of this blame to "the apartheid system" (lines 17–18).

(2) [255, SAfm 5/19/08]

- 1 C: I- I- I do:n't want to sound like I'm beating a drum
2 here but=h (0.5) the government. (.) Denial. hh Geez,
3 I tell you man.
4 (.)
5 C: (I-) It sickens me to my stomach. .h[h Because last week
6 H: [Mm.
7 C: we had the minister saying, .hhh (0.5) uh:: you know, (.)
8 n- "South Africans are not like this," I mean we w- live
9 in one of the most violent (.) countries in the world.
10 H: Mm[:.
11 C: [Okay. .h Now I'm not saying all South Africans are
12 violent [(but)
13 H: [No most of u[s are Alec.
14 C: [(but) But- [but the fact is
15 H: [Fact.
16 C: is that we have a (.) terribly violent society and- and
17 yes::, (.) you know, >th- th-< the whites are to blame for
18 that, (.) uh: under the apartheid [system. But the fact
19 H: [Mm:: mm=hhhh
20 C: of the matter is it continues. .hh And people do have a
21 choice to stop. [.hh
22 H: [Mm::

As in extract 1, the caller in this case temporarily suspends the progressivity of a complaint-in-progress to produce a subsidiary action designed to manage potential responses to the complaint, specifically with respect to the complaint potentially being discounted on the basis

of the speaker's membership in a particular category.⁵ That is, by beginning his inserted concession with an emphasized "yes," the caller formulates it as pre-emptively responsive to a counter-complaint. He then (in contrast to the caller in extract 1) specifies the precise categorical basis for the potential counter-complaint to which he is oriented, namely, that, as a white person and therefore a member of the category by and on behalf of whom the apartheid system was created and sustained, he is implicated in blame for the genesis of the very conditions about which he is now complaining.

The parenthetical insertion in this case is thus explicitly designed to manage the caller's whiteness-based vulnerability to having his complaint turned back on him, with his orientation to this vulnerability thereby becoming observably procedurally consequential for the design of his actions. In addition, the caller both explicitly and implicitly situates his actions in terms of a number of contexts that he thereby treats as relevant, including the national context of South Africa, its status as a "violent society" (line 18), the historical context of the apartheid system and its foundational role in the contemporary violence he is complaining about, and his resulting context-based diminished entitlement as a white person to produce such a complaint.

Extract 3⁶ shows part of an interview with a guest, prior to which crime has not been mentioned on the show. Just prior to the transcribed section of the interview, the host has asked about the murder of the guest's father, formulating this question with reference to "crime in this country." After the guest's (non-transcribed) confirmation of the occurrence of this event 19 years earlier, the host asks a follow-up question regarding the possibility of the guest leaving South Africa in response to such an event (lines 1–2), and in the course of answering the guest produces a complaint that (as in extract 2) includes an explicitly racialized parenthetical insertion.

(3) [213, SAfm 5/7/08]

1 H: .hh And u:m:, (.) some people would say "well, (.) that's a good
2 reason to leave," (.) .hh go live in Australia or somewhere.

3 (1.5)

4 H: Did it ever occur to you?

5 (0.2)

6 G: ↑Ya:, um I mean ye- I must be honest and say yeah, I've
7 thought about it, (.) um:: (.) I think everybody thinks
8 about it.

9 (.)

10 H: M[m.

11 G: [Um: (.) .hhh (0.2) ya, so it- it is a- (.) it is always an
12 option to leave, (.) and I don't blame people who leave
13 because (.) especially if y- if you have young children you
14 are always (0.2) always fearful of: (0.7) of them (u-)
15 (0.2) their their future ya=hh

16 (0.2)

17 G: °Ya.° But it's- it's a difficult decision to make an:d (0.7)
18 um:: (0.8) I don't think any South African: (.) um: (0.2)
19 mm: doesn't matter which color they are or which race they
20 are .h um: (.) should actually be put in a d- (.) in a
21 position to: (.) (n-) (.) to have to make that. °W::° we
22 should all feel safe at home an- an- and feel (we-) (0.2)
23 feel safe here.

24 (0.3)

25 H: Mm.

26 (.)

27 H: And it's hard to do that. You know I was in uh .hhh in

28 Paris walking arou:nd late at ni:ght, and women walking
29 alone, (.) at night. Safe. .hhh And I remember thinking
30 “God I wish I could walk this much back home.” You know?
31 Just walk.

The host’s question in lines 1–2 invokes contexts that potentially (albeit implicitly) implicate the guest’s whiteness. Specifically, by introducing the possibility of leaving South Africa, the host alludes to the prevalence of emigration, particularly by white South Africans, during the same time period (from the 1980s onward) in which the guest’s father was reportedly murdered, and for which concerns relating to violent crime are recurrently reported as motivators. The host’s mention of Australia as a possible destination provides further evidence in this regard, given Australia’s popularity as a destination for those leaving South Africa during this period. Moreover, by asking whether the possibility of emigration has “ever occur[red] to” the guest (line 4), the host treats her as having the material means to make this a viable choice, and thus as a relatively privileged person in the national context and historical period at hand, thereby possibly further alluding to her whiteness.

In responding to this question, after beginning to claim that she does not think “any South African” should be placed in the position of making such a decision, the guest suspends the progressivity of the claim to insert a specification that what she is saying applies regardless of “color” or “race” (line 19). Her subsequent completion of the claim implements a complaint by contrasting what “should actually” (line 20) be the case with what she has noted *is* the case (cf. Clift’s [2001] analysis of the use of “actually” in producing contrasts). By producing this parenthetical insertion in the course of her complaint, the guest treats the complaint as vulnerable to being heard as reflecting a particular, racialized, set of interests, and being discounted on that

basis. In addition to both exposing and working to pre-empt this racialized possible hearing of her complaint, the guest's explicit mention of race also retrospectively provides additional evidence in support of the foregoing analysis of the host's possible allusions to her whiteness.

A number of other features of the guest's response provide additional evidence of the relevance and procedural consequentiality of her position of privilege, and possibly implicitly her whiteness, for her actions. These include her alignment with the host's presupposition of her material ability to consider emigration, shown in her affirmative response to the question (lines 6–7). Also noteworthy are the suggestion that “everybody thinks about it” (lines 7–8) and the claim that “it is always an option to leave” (lines 11–12), produced as extreme case formulations by the emphasized “everybody” and the “always” (preceded by an emphasized “is”) respectively. The degree to which these claims are ill-fitted to the large majority of South Africans who, although they may *think* about leaving for a country like Australia, are in no financial position to have a genuine *option* to do so, is indicative of the privileged material position she takes for granted in this stretch of her response—with her subsequent production of the parenthetical insertion linking this privilege to race.

While the government is not explicitly named as the target of the complaint in this case, it is implicated as blameworthy through the guest's consecutive proposals of what “should” (lines 20 and 22) be the case, which index a failure of whichever agent(s) (of which government is one) may be responsible for facilitating the realization of such aspirations. The host's aligning response (lines 27–31), in which he complains on his own behalf about crime-related issues, similarly implicates the government's failure to create the type of “safe” (line 29) conditions he attributes to Paris.

The host's reciprocal complaint also constitutes a deviant case relative those shown above. In producing this complaint, the host displays no observable orientation to the possible vulnerability to discounting of complaints or counter-complaints to which the speakers in the other cases oriented. Given that the host has earlier during the same interview explicitly self-identified as black, his formulation of his complaint in this way provides contrastive evidence for the treatment of the other speakers' vulnerabilities in producing complaints of this sort as specifically associated with their whiteness. This can be considered in relation to extract 4, in which a caller effectively reveals that she is white while simultaneously claiming membership in a category of people of color, apparently in the service of managing a similar type of vulnerability to whiteness-based discounting of a complaint.

Crime has not been mentioned on the show prior to the call shown in extract 4, and the host has (in the non-transcribed opening of the call, presumably based on information provided by the station's call-screener) treated it as a new topic, asking the caller, "you'd like to talk about crime?" The transcript begins around 20 seconds into the call, following a (non-transcribed) sequence in which the caller establishes that she is on the air, and exchanges greetings with the host. After beginning to formulate her reason for calling (line 1), the caller temporarily suspends this action to parenthetically insert an elaborated racial self-categorization (lines 2, 4, and 6), then returns to her reason for calling with a slightly modified repetition of the formulation she began with (line 8). Thus, as in extracts 2 and 3, the parenthetical insertion implements an explicitly racialized action.

(4) [561, 702 4/23/08]

1 C: Now actually what I wanted to say is that um (0.7) (pt)

2 (0.2) >uh- I ro- I'm a< coloured.

3 (.)

4 C: Mixed. Irish, English:, (0.3) Portugues:e.

5 (.)

6 C: .hh So that makes me a coloured.

7 (0.5)

8 C: .hhh So what I actually wanted to say that um, (0.5) .hh

9 (0.5) I was raised in apartheid (1.2) uh era, h (0.5) .h and

10 I've rais:ed my four sons and my daughter, (0.8) also in

11 thuh: (.) apartheid era, (.) .hh and we weren't uh (0.7)

12 afr[↑]aid to go out, (0.8) we didn't live in fear, (.) as we

13 are living now, (0.5) .hh (.) are you listening to me?

14 H: [↑]Yes, yes, I'm h[ere.

15 C: [Ya. .hh So, (0.2) actually, (0.8) um: (.)

16 [↑]my sons (been rioting/writing,) (0.2) they ha- (.) they-

17 they have been in the struggle, (0.5) .hh but=hh (1.0) they

18 are very very disappointed with this [↑]government, (.) and

19 they left the country, (0.2) .hh and there are [↑]some that

20 could come on air and says, .hhh (.) um:: (0.2) "if they

21 [↑]don't like to live here they can leave," .hh That's not a

22 issue, the issue is this Clint, (.) .hh we are living in

23 fear, (.) and that's a fact.

This action by the caller warrants further ethnographic background for readers who may be unfamiliar with South African usage of the categories she mentions. The category ("coloured") in which she claims membership was adopted by the apartheid government, and is still widely used during the post-apartheid period, as a residual "catch-all" mixed-race category including all people who were not categorized as members of other formally-defined racial

categories (Posel 2001). “Coloured” is thus, both in official government use and in the everyday South African lexicon, a category of people of color. This is significant when juxtaposed with the other three categories (“Irish,” “English,” and “Portuguese”) the caller notes as bases for her “mixed” self-categorization (line 4): Members of all three of these categories are (again, both formally and informally, and both historically and in contemporary South Africa) considered to be white. It thus appears that the caller is subverting what would commonly be understood as providing for membership in the category “coloured”—and indeed she orients to her membership as potentially contestable by specifying the reasoning she is applying, as well as by concluding the parenthetical insertion with the claim, “that makes me a coloured” (line 6), neither of which would warrant spelling out in this way if they could be taken for granted (see Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984). Moreover, the host’s silence at two places (lines 5 and 7) at which a response on his part was possibly relevant may be evidence for his treatment of the caller’s claims as potentially problematic or contestable (see, e.g., Heritage 1984; Pomerantz 1984; Whitehead 2015).

While the caller provides no further explication of what this apparently contestable racial self-categorization was designed to accomplish, her subsequent actions provide strong evidence in this regard. Most centrally, and similarly to the previous cases, she complains about violent crime (particularly through the repeated formulation, “living in fear,” lines 12–13 and 22–23), and she explicitly identifies the government as being to blame for this (line 18). Also significant is the way she builds this complaint as a contrast between the “apartheid era,” during which she claims that she and her family did not experience fear (lines 9–12), and “now,” when they do. Her introduction of these contrasting periods and experiences as relevant contexts for her complaint serve to heighten the complainability of her reported experiences by pointing out that

even a system as deplorable as apartheid did not produce such experiences, making it particularly unacceptable that she should presently be experiencing them. Her use of this contrast may, however, also put her at risk of being heard as a beneficiary of the apartheid system, and thus as defending or even glorifying the system—a risk that she both orients to and manages by noting her sons’ anti-apartheid activism (lines 16–17) prior to describing their disappointment with the post-apartheid government (line 18) and their decision to leave the country (line 19; cf. the association between South African emigration and whiteness discussed in relation to extract 3). In addition, the caller’s reference to “some that could come on air” (lines 19–21) to counter her complaint, followed by her reiteration of the complaint (lines 21–23) while defending it as grounded in “fact” (line 23) (see Edwards 2005), display her orientation to the possibility of hostile responses from members of the overhearing audience, and work to pre-empt such responses. The caller’s orientations to the risks associated with her complaint thus indicate that her parenthetically inserted racial self-categorization was designed to manage the possibility of the complaint, in the absence of an explicit claim to the contrary, being heard and discounted as reflecting her whiteness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the collection illustrated by extracts 2–4 reveals a number of systematic patterns across these cases. Firstly, all three involve complaints about violent crime in South Africa that implicate the government as a target of the complaint. Secondly, in all three a speaker produces a parenthetical insertion in the course of complaining, and although the action implemented by the insertion (concession, disclaimer, or self-categorization) varies, it is designed in all cases to manage the possibility of the complaint being discounted on the basis of the speaker’s whiteness.

Thirdly, all three include additional evidence of participants' orientations to the speaker's whiteness. Finally, all three include evidence, both implicit and explicit, of participants' orientations to a range of associated historical and socio-political contexts, providing further warrants for analytic claims regarding the relevance and procedural consequentiality of the speaker's whiteness. As such, the collection demonstrates the recurrent use—across a range of cases and speakers—of parenthetical insertions as a practice for managing, and thereby exposing the speaker's orientation to, this type of complaint as an action category-bound to whiteness.

With this in mind, we can return to the ambiguous candidate case shown in extract 1, to consider whether and how the features exhibited across the other cases are also evident in that case. In this regard, (1) the speaker in extract 1 produces a similar complaint to those in extracts 2–4, concerning violent crime and the government's ostensible failure to adequately address it; (2) in the course of producing this complaint, the speaker parenthetically inserts a claim designed to manage its uptake that, at least plausibly, implicates the speaker's whiteness; (3) there is additional evidence in the interaction, albeit implicit and thus equivocal, of the speaker's orientation to her whiteness; and (4) there is additional evidence of participants' orientations to contexts that overlap in various ways with those to which participants in the other cases were evidently oriented. Thus, although race becomes explicit in extracts 2–4 but not in extract 1, the other central features of extract 1 are strongly convergent with those of extracts 2–4. As such, the analysis of the extract 1 speaker's possible implicit orientation to her actions as implicating (i.e., as category-bound to) her whiteness can be strengthened by considering the features this case shares with those in which participants are similarly, but more explicitly, oriented. Working with collections in this way thus expands the context in which any given case can be examined, while

keeping this expanded context grounded in evidence of participants' orientations (cf. Clift and Raymond 2018; Mandelbaum 1990/1991; Whitehead 2012).

This analysis, and the collection-based approach it illustrates, has evident implications for the methodological and substantive issues discussed above. That is, it provides an empirical demonstration of the use of CA in developing non-essentializing analyses of the interactional production of implicit whiteness, thereby addressing the question of whether and how CA can be employed to analyze implicit or ambiguous orientations to social categories. In doing so, it describes a recurrent way in which participants, in the course of their situated production of everyday actions, encounter, manage, and thereby reproduce, the consequentiality of their position in a racialized social order.

It is important to acknowledge the limited scope of this analysis: It focuses on how a specific practice (parenthetical insertion) *may* expose participants' orientations to a specific racial category (white) in a specific action environment (complaints, particularly concerning crime and the government in South Africa). It is noteworthy, however, that the specific use of parentheticals as a practice for managing the potential category-based discounting of an action appears to be underpinned by a more general feature of the social organization of membership categories, observed by Sacks (1992:I:180–81) some 55 years ago, regarding the relative entitlement normatively associated with members of different categories in relation to the production of particular actions. This suggests numerous potentially fruitful avenues for future research: In addition to the broader goals of identifying other describable practices through which participants' implicit orientations to (racial) categories may become observable, and examining the deployment of such practices in other action environments beyond the one on which I have focused, future analyses could focus more specifically on other practices through

which participants, either explicitly or implicitly, manage the consequentiality of such category-based entitlement for their actions (also see, e.g., Heritage 2013; Raymond and Heritage 2006). This could include practices recurrently produced by participants in various settings and action environments in which these matters of entitlement may be systematically at stake—either with respect to racial categories, or other categories of traditional interest to social scientists. Such research would contribute not only to demonstrating further mechanisms through which these features of the social organization of categories are interactionally reproduced, but also to developing additional analytic resources that could subsequently be used by researchers working in related domains (cf. Schegloff 1997b; Schegloff 2007b).

As the primary locus for the production of human social action, and as an institution that figures centrally in most if not all other social institutions (Schegloff 2006a), talk-in-interaction is a crucial site with which sociologists must contend in describing mechanisms for the (re)production of social order. Consequently, many of the questions asked by scholars across a wide range of approaches involve the analysis of talk and other conduct-in-interaction, and conversation analytic methods and findings offer a powerful set of resources that can be brought to bear on answering them.

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NOTES

1

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1XYNZKM3au5EYpIASAiD0adRtfZu5aSpD?usp=sharing>

² Although the government is not explicitly mentioned here, it is named as the target of the complaint by both the caller and the host after this extract.

³ While this may appear to be an instance of an analyst supplying “talk extrinsic” contextual details, Schegloff (1992a:197; emphasis in original) notes that participants’ use of particular terminology “anchors within the interaction the relevance for the participants” of a setting, rather than being “independently invoked by the analyst on extrinsic ethnographic grounds” (also see Maynard 2003:74-75).

⁴ This is underscored by the host’s response (line 10), which tacitly conveys his recognition of the type of event being referred to, if not this specific case of it.

⁵ This orientation by the caller to pre-empting possible counter-complaints is also displayed in the other disclaimers he produces before and during the his complaint (see lines 1-2 and 11-12), as well as in the “do-construction” he subsequently produces (lines 20-21), which indexes the contrast between his complaint and the possible counter-complaint to which he is oriented (see Raymond 2017, 2019b).

⁶ Also see analysis of this case in Whitehead (2011:10-13).

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BIO

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