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Blame attributions and mitigated confessions: The discursive construction of guilty admissions in celebrity TV confessionals

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Blame Attributions and Mitigated Confessions: The Discursive Construction of Guilty Admissions in Celebrity TV Confessionals

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Abstract

Drawing on insights from conversation analysis, discursive psychology and social psychology, this paper describes some interactional features of two celebrity TV confessionals and the resources used by the TV interviewers and celebrity guests to attribute, accept or deny responsibility for their transgressions. The analytic interest lies in how confessions are locally and interactionally managed, i.e. how ‘doing confessing’ is achieved in the television interview context. We show how the host’s opening turn constrains the celebrity guest’s contribution and secures overt admission of guilt, whilst simultaneously inviting the celebrity guest to tell their side of the story. We also show how celebrity guests produce descriptions which minimise the extent and severity of their transgressions, reduce agency and transform the character of their transgression. In doing so, we argue that celebrity interviewees can convey mitigations and extenuations which diminish the extent of their responsibility - calling into question the very nature of their confession. We propose that our findings demonstrate the hybrid nature of interviewing in the celebrity TV confessional and contribute to our understanding of how ‘doing confessing’ in the public eye is discursively and interactionally negotiated.

Keywords

accusation, confession, admitting guilt, celebrity TV interview, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, broadcast talk, image repair/restoration, facework

Introduction

After decades of research into the structures and functions of talk in the TV news interview, recent research (Loeb, 2015, 2017) has ventured into previously underexplored areas of broadcast media, casting light on techniques and practices in more specialized, and increasingly hybridized, genres. In these contexts, the boundaries between norms and practices are becoming increasingly blurred as new interactional formats emerge, creating opportunities to explore a host of interactional resources (Hutchby, 2011; Martínez, 2003; Montgomery, 2010; Myers, 2000; Raymond, 2000; Rhys, 2016; Thornborrow, 2010; Xiang, 2012).

One genre which has received surprisingly little attention is the TV confessional interview – a revelatory sub-genre of the broadcast media interview (Bell and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Montgomery, 2008) in which high-profile celebrities publicly confess to, or admit to being guilty of, misdeeds or transgressions of an illegal, immoral or unethical nature. Confessions have been defined as speech acts which require explicit and factual recall of past events perceived as wrong according to some set of recognized norms shared by the parties involved (Shuy, 1998). We note that the high-stakes activity of eliciting and making a confession, whether partial or full, poses considerable risks for both speaker and hearer (Goffman, 1967) and, as such, calls for strategies of self-presentation, or *facework* (Goffman, 1967, 1971), designed to offset and mitigate against threats to image, identity and face.

We argue that confessional talk in the public eye constitutes a distinctive focus for the study of talk-in-interaction in the broadcast media. Specifically, our aim is to show how, based on data comprising segments from two televised interviews, admissions of guilt are negotiated in the semi-institutional context of celebrity TV confessionals and how celebrity interviewees seek to mitigate their admissions. We demonstrate how interviewers elicit an overt confession for a known offence, and we examine the resources celebrities use to construct a response which manages to both explicitly accept guilt and implicitly reject blame.

First, drawing on sociopsychological understandings of identity and self-presentation, we describe our theoretical framework. Second, we briefly review prior research on: a) interactional norms and practices in TV news and celebrity interviews; (b) interrogation and admissions in legal and judicial contexts; and (c) responses to interrogatives and ways of reducing one's accountability in responses and story-telling. Third, we present our analysis. Finally, we discuss the import, implications and limitations of this study.

Face, Identity and Self-Presentation

Defining *face* as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” (Goffman, 1967: 5),

Goffman (1967) observes that, in social interaction, speakers strive to maintain both their own face as well as that of their interlocutor. This is achieved through *facework* which entails the use of preventative strategies designed to avoid threats to one's own face (defensive), or to prevent or minimise threats to the face/s of others (protective). However, face can also be lost, or threatened. On such occasions, speakers can make use of redressive, or corrective, facework strategies (e.g. accounts or apologies) through which the meaning of an offensive act can be changed or transformed into something more acceptable (Goffman, 1971). Confessions and admissions of wrongdoing, arguably, constitute a key site for the performance of such redressive facework.

An area of sociopsychological research where these ideas have often been alluded to is self-presentation (Tracy, 1990). Drawing largely on Benoit's (1995, 2015) theory of image restoration (later, image repair), such research has shown that both corporate and non-corporate actors accused, or guilty, of wrongdoing will deploy self-presentation strategies to counter threats to image, reputation and face. These defensive strategies represent "persuasive attempts to reshape the audience's attitudes, creating or changing beliefs about the accused's responsibility for an act and/or creating or changing values about the offensiveness of those acts." (2015: 3). High-profile public figures have been found to make use of an image repair discourse consisting of practices including: 1) denial, 2) evasion of responsibility, 3) reducing offensiveness, 4) corrective action, and 5) mortification. In a series of late-night promotional TV interviews, British actor Hugh Grant, for example, defended his illicit liaison with a prostitute by attacking his accusers and using strategies of mortification, denial and bolstering in an attempt to restore his tarnished image (Benoit, 1997). More recently, comparative thematic analysis of US cyclist Lance Armstrong's image repair attempts in the wake of doping accusations (Hambrick et al., 2013) found clear contrasts between strategies he deployed on Twitter (attacking accusers, bolstering and stonewalling) and the contrition and remorse he displayed in interviews through strategies such as mortification, blame shifting, denial, provocation, victimization, conforming and retrospective regret. Such studies shed much light on the self-presentational techniques deployed by transgressors. But, as Tracy (1990: 215) points out, "self-presentation is conceived of and studied as a one-way phenomenon [which] largely ignores the fact that social situations involve at least two people." We demonstrate in our analysis that by taking an interactional approach which examines the practices of both celebrity interviewers and interviewees, it is possible to provide a richer understanding of confessional talk and the management of blame in relation to issues of face.

Discursive Features of the TV broadcast news interview

Until recently, discursive and conversation analytic research on broadcast media has largely focused on political interviewing. Concerned predominantly with the 'accountability' interview (Montgomery, 2008), this work has highlighted interactional strategies and techniques deployed by professional news journalists tasked with calling public figures to account for their actions. It has been shown that such interviews involve recurrent turn design features (e.g. systematic avoidance of receipt tokens and continuers, frequent overlap at turn boundaries, high incidence of multi-unit turns, critical and aggressive assessments) and action formats which ascribe agency, challenge evasiveness,

and neutralize and legitimize lines of inquiry through such devices as coercive, negative and accusatory questioning, reformulations, footing shifts, question prefaces and agenda-setting questions. These features have been linked to underlying norms of adversarialness and neutralism which, in turn, have been considered to underpin the contractual basis of professional journalism (Clayman and Heritage, 2002) – the idea that in exchange for impartial yet rigorous public scrutiny, political figures may benefit from opportunities to promote their interests, views and agendas.

Compared to political interviewing, practices and techniques deployed in alternative entertainment news genres have been less extensively investigated. Recent work by Loeb (2015, 2017), for example, has shown that, in contrast to more political contexts, celebrity TV talk shows are largely governed by a different set of interactional norms; in particular, personalization and congeniality. As Loeb (2015) notes, these give rise to recurrent questioning and response practices by hosts which demonstrate personal engagement and actively showcase celebrity guests and their achievements. Such practices include: the framing of questions in ways which draw upon the host's personal viewpoint and experiences; supportive responses through acknowledgement tokens and news receipts; and frequent use of positive assessments and evaluations. Subsequent research (Loeb, 2017) has shown that in mixed, or hybrid, genres, e.g. talk shows with politicians, the parties alternate between adherence to the norms of adversarialness/neutralism and personalization/congeniality with hosts showing sensitivity "to contextual variations in guest type as well as moment-to-moment variations in topical content." (Loeb, 2017: 154). Consequently, she argues that research should pay more attention to local interactional contingencies at any given point in time.

Soliciting a confession in legal and judicial contexts

Numerous researchers, from Atkinson and Drew (1979) onwards, have examined the linguistic and interactional features of legal and judicial settings such as police interrogation and trial courtrooms, where issues of accountability are, of course, omnipresent. Several studies have noted the collaborative nature of interaction in these settings, and the patterns of questioning used to secure admissions of guilt (Adelswärd et al., 1987; Auburn et al., 1995; Heydon, 2005; Komter, 2003; Linell et al., 1993; Stokoe and Edwards, 2008). Linell et al. (1993) compared courtroom examinations and police interrogations. They found that in Swedish courtroom contexts, admissions of guilt are collaboratively achieved, sequentially located immediately after the outline prosecution statement and recurrently feature three turns as shown in Extract 1: a formal and explicit accusatory question linked to the prosecution statement; a confirmation or denial offered by the defendant (D); and a follow-up acknowledgement by the judge (J):

Extract 1 Basic tripartite structure of courtroom admissions of guilt (Linell et al., 1993: 158)

01 J: ja, e de riktigt de här, John Eriksson?
02 D: ja, ja har erkänt de så
03 J: du erkänner

01 J: OK, is it correct, this, John Eriksson?
02 D: yes, I have admitted it, haven't I, so ...

03 J: you admit

The Judge's question *Is it correct, this, ...?* is tied to its preceding context (note use of the pronouns *it* and *this*) and occurs in the form of a Yes/No Interrogative (henceforth, YNI) designed using positive polarity with a preference for a type-conforming response (Raymond, 2006). This format constrains the witness to a 'yes' or 'no' response and is a powerful resource often relied upon in the construction of legal argument. Especially under cross-examination, nonconforming or extended responses may be sanctioned and used to demonstrate inappropriate responsive behaviour by the witness – although as Galatolo and Drew (2006) found in their study of an Italian murder trial, witnesses can, and often do, succeed in expanding on their minimal responses using narrative expansions as a defensive resource with which to navigate coercive forms of questioning and “change or mitigate the version of facts conveyed” (2006: 662).

In contrast to the patterns of coercive questioning displayed in the formal accusations found in Swedish courtrooms, the pursuit of guilty admissions in police interrogations has been shown to be considerably more conversation-like and informal, being negotiated and produced over the course of an entire interview (Linell et al., 1993; Watson, 1990). Linell et al. (1993), for example, noted that in police interrogations the suspect's guilt is rarely made explicit from the outset; instead, lines of questioning work to achieve tacit agreement and “an implicit summary of what the suspect says” (1993: 169) and rarely entail an explicitly formulated question about the accused's guilt. Indeed, as Watson (1990) has shown, questioning in such contexts may typically involve a more open-ended format which provides police suspects – unlike the courtroom witnesses discussed above – with early opportunities to tell their stories. An example is shown in Extract 2 where the murder suspect (S) is invited by the investigating police officer (P) to elaborate on what he knows about the murder of a young women at a disclosed location:

Extract 2 Invited story (Watson, 1990: 274)

01 P: Having these rights in mind, do you wish to talk to us now?
02 S: Well I signed the er card before, I might as well talk now.
03 P: All right, we're investigating the death at two-o-one
04 Patterson.
05 S: Two ten.
06 P: Two ten Patterson, whose body was found (dismembered) in the
07 tub
08 at that address. Would you tell me in your own words what you
09 know of this homicide?
09 S: Do you want me to start from the beginning?
10 P: Yes would you please -
11 S: [begins story/confession]

Watson (1990) notes that these *invited stories* enable police interrogators to obtain suspects' confessions in their own words whilst still retaining some control over the development of the narrative. This is achieved by using a more open-ended style of questioning and framing the question in ways which limit the focus and scope of the recipient's response to specific materials.

Responses to questioning in legal and judicial contexts

The invited story format characteristic of police confessional contexts shares commonalities with the interactive nature of storytelling and the assignment of responsibility in conversational contexts where recipients and storytellers collaboratively construct versions of reality in ways which assign or rebut blame to varying degrees (Mandelbaum, 1993). Following Goodwin (1981, 1986), Mandelbaum (1993) notes how story recipients move between passive or active recipient roles (via e.g. acknowledgement tokens, assessments or questioning turns), thereby influencing the progression and ‘aboutness’ of the storytelling and, ultimately, portraying responsibility for an offense. Storytellers, in turn, respond by recounting events in ways which shift responsibility, often exonerating themselves from wrongdoing by proposing alternative versions of reality through forms of mitigation and the inclusion of additional information.

These differential constructions are clearly evident in the accusatory contexts studied by Auburn et al. (1995). They found the event descriptions which warranted police accusations of violence were often constructed as ‘distinctively violent, ... noticeable ... out of the ordinary’ (1995: 365) and that this was achieved via upgrading and the use of extreme case formulations, close attention to detail and sequencing, and the characterisation of events as disorderly and uncontrolled. Moreover, they noted that interrogators were often seen to question perpetrators in ways which constructed them as persistently, almost pathologically, violent and aggressive using potentially damaging character attributions and substantiating such claims with reference to knowledgeable and authoritative sources. Conversely, suspects and perpetrators rebutted such accusations by constructing their behaviour and the events involved as reasonable, justifiable and unexceptional. Such constructions typically relied on defensive strategies which invoked the removal of agency (e.g. through use of downgrading modifiers, metaphorical action terms and careful sequencing of events) and the repositioning of self-as-victim.

As Komter (1994, 2013) has pointed out, the response strategies invoked by defendants in courtroom settings and similar to those discussed by Auburn et al. (1995) are defense-implicative in that they orient, and respond, to the blame-implicative nature of legal and judicial questioning in ways that are simultaneously cooperative, yet defensive. This occurs by virtue of the fact that legal and judicial questioning is often designed to gradually obtain agreement with the facts such that accusations are not directly enacted, but rather progressively built up over a series of turns (Atkinson and Drew, 1979). In this sense, interviewers gradually shift from open to closed forms of questioning (Edwards, 2008) and produce formulations, challenges and requests for clarification (Heydon, 2005; Komter, 1994, 2003; Linell and Jönsson, 1991; Stokoe and Edwards, 2008) which: a) imply (but not explicitly state) guilt; and b) work to deal with potential inconsistencies and contradictions between a suspect’s version of events and the available evidence. In this way, confessions are constructed collaboratively as we discuss further below.

Data

The data are taken from two 60-minute TV interviews transmitted on independent commercial TV networks in the US and the UK. The interviewers, Oprah Winfrey and Piers Morgan, hold celebrity status in their own right as popular journalists and television hosts, having interviewed numerous celebrities. The interviewees, US cyclist Lance Armstrong and British actor Dennis Waterman, are well-known, and each has provoked both national and international controversy throughout their careers for reasons we describe in brief below.

Celebrated for his cycling performance and charity work, Armstrong first became the subject of doping allegations by US government authorities in early 2012. Subsequently, he was officially charged (based on blood samples from 2009-10 and witness testimony) in October 2012 with using unauthorized performance-enhancing drugs and with leading “the most sophisticated, professionalized and successful doping program that sport has ever seen.” (USADA, 2012). Stripped of his seven *Tour de France* titles and given a lifetime professional cycling ban in December 2012, Armstrong maintained his innocence until January 2013 when, in a live interview with Oprah Winfrey, he admitted to serial misuse and supply of performance-enhancing drugs. In contrast to Armstrong, Waterman’s offence relates to allegations made by his ex-wife Rula Lenska who, upon their 1998 divorce, claimed he was violent towards her during their short, turbulent marriage. Although never officially investigated in law, Waterman’s alleged violent behavior was topicalised in a 2012 interview with Piers Morgan. During this interview, Waterman confessed to two incidents in which he beat Lenska. We examine the confessional sequences occurring in these two interviews in detail below.

Given the controversy resulting from these two interviews and the widespread coverage and criticism that followed in the written press, we selected these instances on account of our focus on the interactionally negotiated nature of public confessions and as analytically interesting examples of public confessions where much was at stake for the celebrities involved. We therefore examine a seven-minute extract from each recording wherein each celebrity is questioned specifically about the offences involved. The analysis starts from the point at which reference to the offence having been committed is made for the first time. We transcribed the data using conventions from the conversation analytic transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson (Hepburn and Bolden, 2017). Full transcripts of each 7-minute extract (including voiceover segments) were created and are available upon request.

Analysis

We first examine practices the hosts use to elicit confessions from guests, showing how the interviewer secures a confession over a series of utterances which consist, minimally, of an accusation in question form and a story solicitation. We then show how guests take explicit responsibility for offences or transgressions whilst implicitly rejecting blame through use of defensive resources which seek to mitigate and exonerate them from wrongdoing. Extracts are numbered as they appear in the text, with line numbers corresponding to the full transcripts.

Celebrity interviewers' devices for soliciting an admission of guilt

In both interviews, the hosts' opening turns comprised questions seeking confirmation or denial of publicly-suspected transgressions. In each case, these questions occurred following a short video-montage in which details of the alleged celebrity transgression were made available for the overhearing audience. We begin with Extract 3 from Morgan/Waterman which immediately follows a short video segment wherein Waterman's turbulent marriage to, and separation from, his wife Rula Lenska is described. In its final moments, details of a subsequent allegation of domestic abuse made by Lenska are given. Following this, Morgan then begins his questioning:

Extract [3] Morgan/Waterman

Morgan: Mo; Waterman: Wa

01 Mo: .hhhh (0.8) <I=s'po:se the obvious (0.2) <first question i:s
02 → (.) did you hi:t Rula:.
03 (1.1)
04 Wa: .Shhhih
05 (0.8)
06 Wa: Yeah=I mean=uh- Yess.
07 (0.2)
08 Wa: I think twi:ce.
09 Mo: An what were the ci:rcumstances.
10 Wa: .pt ↑Quite honestly: I ca:n't remember.<We wuh goin
11 through=uh- through a horrible horrible ti:me (.) a::nd u::h
12 .hhhh we wuh- <as they sa:id we were=arguing a great deal
13 a:nd >you cou(ldn't) w-< you know >if y-< The problem
14 wi=stro:ng intelligent women °if° (0.2) ((cough/laugh)) some
15 people=might disa:gree: bout that >but=(uh/I'll)< .hhh i:s
16 thet(h) (0.5) they-ca:n-a:rgue.
17 (0.2)
18 Wa: We:ll

Morgan begins (Lll. 1-2) with a lengthy inbreath, a 0.8-second pause and the epistemic marker *I=s'po:se*, all projecting difficulty in asking the question and conveying some degree of reluctance to ask. Morgan's question *did you hi:t Rula:.* (l.2) forms a downgraded accusation in that it is not a claim, but rather a proposition querying events based on available evidence (Auburn et al., 1995). His prefacing that this is an *obvious first* question works not only to project further questioning, but also to normalize and legitimate the line of questioning and account for its being asked as a matter of routine (Stokoe and Edwards, 2008) and public interest. The question itself is an agenda-setting question (Heritage, 2002, 2010) which narrows the topic to the details of the alleged incident and makes relevant assent or denial in the form of a Yes/No response, and is grammatically formatted to prefer a type-conforming *yes* (Raymond, 2006). In action terms, however, a *yes* response would constitute a highly dispreferred admission of guilt (Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 112–113) with potentially damaging implications for the celebrity guest. Waterman's response is delayed (Ll. 3-5) via extended silences and also a sniff which suggests some (temporary) interactional incapacity. The eventual *yeah* response acts as an admission of guilt but is produced as dispreferred via the delay, sniffing, hesitation and self-repair. After a brief silence, a narrative expansion (Galatolo

and Drew, 2006) at 1.8, *I think twice*., works both to show willingness to provide more information whilst also beginning to downgrade the seriousness of the action by limiting its extent on the basis that twice rules out a habitual, repetitive behaviour.

Turning to the opening turns in the Winfrey/Armstrong case, see Extract 4 which follows a short montage of video and newspaper coverage of Armstrong's ban from cycling following his doping conviction. Winfrey's questioning is similarly designed to secure overt confession, using the same downgraded accusation in question format. However, in this case the host produces several questions about his behaviours, and furthermore accompanies them with moves which successfully encourage Armstrong to constrain himself to solely *yes* or *no* responses.

Extract [4] Winfrey/Armstrong

Winfrey: Wi; Armstrong: Ar

01 Wi: So here we go:. (.) Open file:ld.
02 (0.5)
03 Wi .t .hhh So: ↑le:t's sta:rt with the questions thet people
04 around the wo::rld have been waiting for you to answe::r,
05 a::nd for no:w I'd just like a .hh ye:sss (0.8) or no::.
06 Ar: M-kay(p) .
07 Wi: <Oka:y(h) .hhh This who:le conversa:tio:n (0.2) >we=have a
08 lotta ti:me< .h will be about the de:tails.
09 Ar: .Shhi[h
10 Wi: → [↑Yes or no:. (0.2) Did yy:ou: ever take ba:nned
11 substances to enha:nce your cycling perfo:rmance.
12 Ar: Ye:s.
13 Wi: .hhhh Yes or no:. (0.2) Wuz one of those ba:nned substance:s
14 (.) ee pee o:h.>
15 Ar: Ye:s.
16 Wi: → .hhh did you eve:r blood do::pe o::r use blood trans↑fusions
17 to enha:nce your cycling perfo:rma:nce.
18 Ar: Ye:s.
19 Wi: → Did you ever u:se any ↑other banned substances <like
20 testostero:ne #u::h cortiso:ne or human growth hormo:ne.
21 (1.0)
22 Ar: Ye:s.
23 Wi: .hhh ↑Yes or no:. .hh In <a::ll seve::n> of your: Tour: de
24 → Fra:nce victories .hh did you eve:r take ba:nned substances
25 or blood do:pe.
26 Ar: Ye:s.
27 Wi: .hhh In your opinion was it (.) hu:manly possible .hhh to
28 win the Tour de Fra:nce.
29 (0.4)
30 Wi: Without doping.
31 (1.0)
32 Wi: <Seven times in a ro:w.
33 (2.0)
34 Ar: ↑Not in my opinio:n
35 (0.7)
36 Ar: Shhih
37 Wi: → .hhh So when did you fi:rst sta:rt.
38 (0.6)
39 Doping.

Winfrey's five questions (indicated by arrows at L1.10, 16, 19, 24 and 37) are preceded by activity prefaces (Kidwell and Martínez, 2010) in L1.1, 3-5 and 7-8 which foreshadow her upcoming questions and propose, as Clayman (1994) has shown, that they are socially – and indeed globally – mandated (*So: ↑le:t's sta:rt with the questions thet people around the wo::rld have been waiting for you to answe::r*). In much the same manner as Morgan (see extract 3), Winfrey's question here is framed so as to underscore its legitimacy and validity as a matter of public interest and concern. Continuing her turn, she takes up a directive stance explicitly requesting and constraining Armstrong to minimal responses, at least for now: *a::nd for no:w I'd just like a .hh ye:sss (0.8) or no::*.

Winfrey's four YNIs – beginning on L1.10, 16, 19, and 24 – function as challenges to Armstrong's behaviour. By placing him as subject in relation to the action verbs *take*, *dope* and *use*, his agency is at the fore, and each question is grammatically designed for a *yes* response. These design features, the recurring directives *↑Yes or no:* (L1.5, 10, 13, and 23) and Armstrong's type conforming responses allow Winfrey to retain control over the topical agenda and achieve straightforward admissions of guilt.

These instances demonstrate how, prior to openly soliciting details about the alleged events, the celebrity interviewers used accusatory questioning to obtain overt admissions of guilt. Moreover, they placed 'on record' the elicitation of the celebrity confession as a matter of public concern though use of question prefaces and YNIs which sought to constrain the interviewees' responses and head off possible mitigation techniques such as those identified by Galatolo and Drew (2006). In so doing, we argue that the interviewers could be seen to orient to the sensitivities involved in eliciting a confession through use of devices designed to mitigate the inherent face threat to self and other embodied within the question.

Celebrity interviewees' devices for 'doing confessing'

In this section we show how, in response to interviewers' questions and story solicitations, celebrity guests rely on descriptions which seek to minimise the extent and severity of their transgressions, reduce agency, and transform the character of their transgression. We show how these devices invoke mitigations and extenuations that diminish their responsibility and call into question the very nature of their confession.

Minimising the extent and severity of the transgression

Descriptions which minimise the extent and severity of their actions whilst still treating them as transgressions can be used to reduce the offensiveness of their actions whilst retaining responsibility for them. In examining Extract (3), we pointed out that Waterman's turn at line 8 *I think twi:ce* worked to minimise the extent of his hitting. Moving further into the Morgan/Waterman interview, when Waterman is pressed by Morgan to describe the circumstances in which the alleged offence(s) took place we see minimising descriptions of the extent and severity (Extract 5).

Extract [5] Morgan/Waterman

09 Mo: An what were the ci:rcumstances.
10 Wa: .pt ↑Quite honestly: I ca:n't remember.<We wuh goin

11 through=uh- through a horrible horrible ti:me (.) a::nd u::h
 12 .hhhh we wuh- <as they sa:ɪd we were=arguing a great deal
 13 a:nd >you cou(ɪdn't) w-< you know >if y-< The problem
 14 wi=stro:ng intelligent women °if° (0.2) ((cough/laugh)) some
 15 people=might disa:gree: bout that >but=(uh/I'll)< .hhh i:s.
 16 thet(h) (0.5) they-ca:n-a:rgue
 17 (0.2)
 18 Wa: We:ll
 19 Mo: °Mm°
 20 Wa: .pt .h <An=iff (0.5) yeh kno:w (.) there (.) is a ti:me
 21 when you can't get a word in a:nd (.) .hhh you kinda lash-
 22 → I'd- I lashed out.
 23 (0.8)
 24 Wa: → There wuz no- I couldn't end the argument so I (0.4) I lashed
 25 out at her.
 26 Mo: → Di'you punch her?
 27 (0.4)
 28 Wa: Yeah.
 29 (0.8)
 30 Wa: No=I think I- <D-Don't think I punched her. I sla:pped her.
 31 (1.0)
 32 Mo: How did you fe:ɪel (.) °a:fter doing that.°
 33 (1.5)
 34 Wa: .t <Actually I must have punched her one ti:me cuz she di:d
 35 have a black eye so I must °(of/have)° s.hh <u:hm
 36 (1.6)
 37 Wa: ↑O:h I'm- I'm unbelievably asha:med thet it ever=ha:ppened.
 38 (0.5) #I mean r#e::ally asha:med.# An it's never=happened
 39 befo:re an it's never happened si:nce so:: .hhh u::hmm
 40 .hhhhhhh Jhust a te:rribleuhhh (0.6) ↑h#a:ppening in my
 41 otherwi:se (0.4) <q#uite exciti:ng li:fe.

In response to a request to describe the circumstances surrounding his actions, Waterman recounts in a stepwise manner a period of time involving a number of arguments between himself and his ex-wife: *we were going through ... we were arguing* (L1.10-12). These framings provide the background to his comments at 1.21/22, and further at 1.23/24, serving to foreground, as spontaneous and unplanned, the one-off incident he reports: *I lashed out*. As Potter (1996: 193) has pointed out, the term *lashing out* carries an implication of unplanned, almost reflex behaviour and offers a vague description of the actual physical character of Waterman's action towards Lenska. In a subsequent turn (at 1.26), Morgan's choice of the term *punch* – embedded within a YNI with positive polarity – specifically targets this, placing Waterman as grammatical subject and constructing him as the putative agent of a (more) forceful action-type which is, arguably, more deliberative and less reactive in character than *lashing out*. After a 0.4-second silence, Waterman responds minimally with *yeah* at 1.28 but, after a delay, explicitly rejects this at 1.30: *No=I think I- <D-Don't think I punched her*. He then re-characterises his action as *slapping* (1.30). This retains his agency, whilst downgrading the forcefulness of his action and could be heard as once more invoking the reactive, non-deliberative character of what is being confessed to. Thus, whilst hearably admitting overtly to some form of physical transgression, his description works to minimise its forcefulness and deliberative character.

As the sequence continues, Waterman produces a concession in 1.34 which serves as a repair to his turn at 1.30 and a renewed response to Morgan's earlier question at 1.26. Here, he notes: *I must have punched her one ti:me cuz she di:d have a black eye*. Aligning with Morgan's characterisation of the offence through use of the term *punch*, Waterman once more constructs himself as agent of the offending incident. Two features of note, however, seem to operate as devices which undermine his admission and downplay the severity of the incident. Firstly, his admission is formulated with the modal construction *must have*. This works to portray the incident as unmemorable, insignificant and unnoticeable in ways which serve to exonerate his actions (Drew, 1992) – a device found to be commonly associated with descriptions and accounts of violent behaviour (Auburn et al., 1995; Goodman and Walker, 2016). Secondly, he explicitly notes that this was an isolated incident which occurred *one ti:me* (1.34) only and which has never happened on other occasions either before or since.

Just as Waterman works to minimize his actions and convey them as unexceptional, Armstrong's descriptions work to camouflage his own agency with regards to his transgressions. To illustrate, in Extract 6, Winfrey asks Armstrong to explain, step-by-step, how doping took place. Her questioning follows a short video montage of witness reports by Travis Tygart (CEO of USADA) and Tyler Hamilton (a former teammate). This montage conveys the routinised, systematic and secretive abuses exposed by USADA's investigation into Armstrong's behaviour and involvement in what is referred to as 'an international doping ring':

Extract [6] Winfrey/Armstrong

217 Wi: mm hmm But my question is:
 218 Ar: >It's=it's<
 219 Wi: I'd like you to wa:lk me through it. Were the:re <yuh know:
 220 .h ↑pill deliveri:es: an:: #u:h blood(h) #uh- i-in secret
 221 re↑frigerat#o:rs:. Wu:z: the:re- <H(h)ow did it ↑wo:rk.
 222 Ar: .shhih hh hh ↑heh .hhh O::h you'd need a lo:ng ti:me. (.) Uh
 223 hmmm [really
 224 Wi: [↑How did it a:ll wo:rk.
 225 Ar: .hhhh (1.0) ((scratches head)) I(h): ↑I: viewed it as ve:ry
 226 simple. (0.4) >I mean you had< (1.0) .hhhhh thi:ngs: (0.3)
 227 that #we:re (.) u::h (.) oxygen boosting drugs for lack >of
 228 a better wo:rd [or (.) >way=
 229 Wi: [mm hmm=
 230 Ar: =to describe i:t,< .hhhh #u::h >that wuh< (.) <incredibly
 231 beneficial for perfo:rmance or endu:rance spo:rts, >whether
 232 it's cycling or running or (.) whatever. <.hhh #u:hm An
 233 that's a:ll you ↑neede:d. (0.8) >I mean< my my my: (1.2)
 234 my=u:hm (0.8) ↑co:cktail so to speak wuz w- <wuz o:nly: .hh
 235 #u:hm ee pe o:h, >but not a lo:t,< .hhh tra:nsfusion:s, (.)
 236 an testosterone.
 237 (0.8)
 238 Ar: <Which in a weird wa:y I almost justified because o:f .hhhh
 239 (cuz-) because of my history <obviously °with having°
 240 testicular cancer an losi:ng[

Winfrey's request at 1.219 (*I'd like you to wa:lk me through it.*) and her YNI at 1.219-221 (*Were the:re <yuh know: .h ↑pill deliveri:es: an:: #u:h blood(h) #uh- i-in secret*

re↑frigerat#o:rs) seek confirmation for the claims raised in the preceding montage. The impersonal design (*Were the:re*), pluralisations (↑pill deliveri:es:; blood(h) #uh- i-in secret re↑frigerat#o:rs:) and an extreme case formulation at 1.224 (↑How did it a:ll wo:rk..) represent Armstrong's actions (and those of his team) as large scale, recurrent and supported by substantial infrastructure.

Armstrong's response (beginning at 1.225) is extensive. First, he proposes that he viewed the process as *very simple* (contradicting the complexity implied in his initial response 1.222: *O::h you'd need a lo:ng ti:me. (.) Uh hmmm [really.]*). The next segment of his response is characterised by non-specificity, ambiguity and a lack of agency: generic entities, or *things* (1.226), are represented as existing or being possessed (*had* 1.226, but not specifically taken or consumed) and subsequently identified as *oxygen boosting drugs* (1.227) using noticeably non-technical and non-expert phraseology. He then goes on to cite the endurance-enhancing effects in relation to various sports, doing so via a 3-part list (>*whether it's cycling or running or (.) whatever.*) – a device which can convey a sense of the routine and commonplace (Potter, 1996: 197). Further minimising terms and phrases follow: firstly, *that's all you needed*, and then, a more personalised description in which the collective noun *my uhm cocktail* is further minimised as *only uhm EPO, but not a lot*. Such characterisations invoke a “maximal” quality (Drew, 1992: 495–502) to his description by constructing the extent of his doping and agency as minimal, and limited to not more than that which he has explicitly stated. In this sense, they work to contradict the illicit, large-scale and recurrent nature of activity implied in Winfrey's version by minimising, obscuring and, arguably, even glamourizing or trivialising, the complexities involved in blood doping¹.

Reducing or attributing agency to others

Towards the end of the analysis of Extract 6, we began to examine how interviewees, within their responses and descriptions, can construct themselves as other than the sole agent of their transgressions. We now further examine how an interviewee can construct their own agency and reductions thereof.

Firstly, interviewees can construct themselves as joint agents – rather than solely responsible for the transgressive acts. Earlier, in Extract 3 (1.8), we saw how Waterman admitted to hitting his ex-wife: *I think twice*. Following this, Morgan invites a telling of the circumstances (1.9), and Waterman's response works to imply that responsibility is at least shared by, if not attributable to, his ex-wife:

[7] Morgan/Waterman

09 Mo: An what were the ci:rcumstances.
 10 Wa: .pt ↑Quite honestly: I ca:n't remember.<We wuh goin
 11 through=uh- through a horrible horrible ti:me (.) a::nd u::h
 12 .hhhh we wuh- <as they sa:id we were=arguing a great deal
 13 a:nd >you cou(ldn't) w-< you know >if y-< The problem
 14 wi=stro:ng intelligent women °if° (0.2) ((cough/laugh)) some
 15 people=might disa:gree: bout that >but=(uh/I'll)< .hhh i:s
 16 thet(h) (0.5) they-ca:n-a:rgue.
 17 (0.2)
 18 Wa: We:ll
 19 Mo: °Mm°
 20 Wa: .pt .h <An=ifff (0.5) yeh kno:w (.) there (.) is a ti:me

21 when you can't get a word in a:nd (.) .hhh you kinda lash-
22 I'd- I lashed out.

After implying the event was non-memorable (note use of the honesty phrase l.10 ↑*Quite honestly*, see Edwards and Fasulo, 2006), Waterman describes – using the pronoun *we* – a joint state of affairs as *a horrible horrible ti:me*. He then points to behaviours such as *arguing a great deal* drawing on corroborative evidence from the video montage: <*as they sa:id we were=arguing a great deal*. Further, he implicates his wife's role and responsibility by invoking the category description of *stro:ng intelligent women* and their capacity to argue (l.14). Although never explicitly referring to his ex-wife, the nature and sequential location of the category description works to attribute blame to her – and this is not contradicted by Morgan who 'merely' receipts with a softly produced *mm* at l.19. In this, Waterman manages to represent the occurrence of domestic violence as a product of joint behaviour and of his ex-wife's character – a move he subsequently follows by switching to a more generic stance, *you* (at l.20), which normalizes his own behavior and further obscures his agency, before switching back to the first person confessional (at l.22).

Secondly, interviewees can use formats that camouflage their own agency. In Extract 8, Waterman's admission to offensive action against his ex-wife is followed by questioning from Morgan about his feelings after the event:

[8] Morgan/Waterman

25 Mo: Di'you punch her?
26 (0.4)
27 Wa: Yeah.
28 (0.8)
29 Wa: No=I think I- <D-Don't think I punched her. I sla:pped her.
30 (1.0)
31 Mo: How did you fe:↓el (.) °a:fter doing that.°
32 (1.5)
33 Wa: .t <Actually I must have punched her one ti:me cuz she di:d
34 have a black eye so I must °(of/have)° s.hh <u:hm
35 (1.6)
36 Wa: → ↑O:h I'm- I'm unbelievably asha:med thet it ever=ha:ppened.
37 → (0.5) #I mean r#e::ally asha:med.# An it's never=happened
38 → befo:re an it's never happened si:nce so:: .hhh u::hmm
39 .hhhhhh Jhust a te:rribleuhhh (0.6) ↑h#a:ppening in my
40 otherwi:se (0.4) <q#uite exciti:ng li:fe.
41 Mo: You've never hi:t (.) any other woman ever.
42 Wa: No:(hh).
43 Mo: .hh Ru:la: (0.7) dispu:ted the number of times thet this had
44 happened. She (.) .hh her version was that you often beat
45 her, she ran trembli:ng from the marital ho:me blinded by
46 te:ars and fe:ar
47 (0.9)
48 Wa: #I:: That's a:ctually not true. I mean it's not tr- Yyou'd-
49 → it it happened within a t- ti:me (0.7) I(hh)- (0.7) Alright I
50 ca:- I can't a:ctually remember how many if I did- I I
51 certainly didn't beat her. [.hh
52 [°Mm°
53 Wa: There would be a:rguments where I'd say >"oh °feh°< (0.8)

54 #Shut up# (.) a:nd la:sh ou:t. The:re wuz (.) probly drink
 55 involved an- but there wuz (0.8) na:stiness from (0.7)
 56 everybody's mo:u:th.

After a concession in which the act of punching is not stated as a fact, but as an action inferred from some consequential state of affairs that is stated as a matter of fact (.t <Actually I must have punched her one ti:me cuz she di:d have a black eye.), Waterman's agency is further obscured by omission from the description in Ll.36-40, and again at l.49. This occurs via use of the intransitive verb *happened* on four occasions (indicated by arrows), and the formulation of the event as *a te:rribleuhhh (0.6) ↑h#a:ppening.*, the insignificance of which is further underlined by Waterman's admission (at Ll.49-50) that he cannot remember the details of the alleged incidence - if it did indeed take place in the manner described by Morgan. As Drew (1992: 483) notes, "not remembering" something attributes to it a kind of status, as unmemorable because it was unnoticed." Thus, Waterman removes agency and transforms the offending incident from action into activity. Also evident in Extract 9 are minimising and delimiting terms and formulations similar to those examined above.

Armstrong's interview also includes formulations that downplay and obscure his own agency. These can be seen in Extract 9 in Armstrong's response when questioned about the timing of the offence:

[9] Winfrey/Armstrong

40 Wi: .hhh So when did you first start.
 41 (1.0)
 42 Wi: Doping.
 43 Ar: We're done with the yes and nos
 44 Wi: Hmm We' (he)re d(h)one with the yes and n(h)os [eh heh
 45 Ar: [U::hm (.) you
 46 know I suppose earlier in my career there wuz (.) u::h
 47 cortisone an then u::hm (0.6) u:h the EPO generation bega:n
 48 and u:hh
 49 Wi: Began when
 50 Ar: Fer me or fe::r[hhh
 51 Wi: [for you
 52 Ar: U::hm uh mid nineties
 53 Wi: Mid nineties .hhh for thirteen years you didn't just deny it
 54 (.) you brazenly and defiantly .hh denied (.) everything you
 55 just admitted just now so why now (.) admit it

Focusing in on Ll.45-47, after the vague time reference *earlier in my career*, Armstrong's response describes the development of his drug-taking using agentless, depersonalized statements which obscure his role in the transgression: *there wuz (.) u::h cortisone an then u::hm (0.6) u:h the EPO generation bega:n*. In this way, he resists the constraints of the question, retroactively transforming its agenda (Stivers and Hayashi, 2010) from talk about something *he* did on some past occasion, to talk about events that occurred *in his life* at sometime prior to the current moment. Furthermore, the introduction of the phrase *the EPO generation* works to imply others' and indeed widespread involvement, thus implying a sharing of agency (see above), as well as conveying the use of EPO as being the norm, at least at that time.

Transforming the nature of the transgression

In analytic sections above, we have shown how, after their initial admissions of guilt, the interviewees deploy various grammatical and semantic practices that work to minimise

the extent and severity of their transgression; and to minimise, distribute, reallocate or camouflage their own agency in it. In this final section, we examine how, in responding to Winfrey's questions later in the segment, Armstrong manages to transform what his actual transgression was. He shifts from his initial admission of a sin of commission, i.e. taking banned drugs, to claiming a sin of omission, i.e. failing to try to stop the widespread taking of banned drugs amongst his cohort of athletes.

In Extract 10, Winfrey questions Armstrong about the feasibility of winning the *Tour de France* without doping. In responding, Armstrong goes on to recharacterise the whole nature of his confession:

[10] Winfrey/Armstrong

118 Ar: I c- I controlled (.) u::h every outcome (.) in my life
119 Wi: You've been doing that forever
120 Ar: Uh fer- (.) yeah especially when it comes to sport (.) tlk
121 but (.) th- jus the last thing I'll say is that now w- now
122 (.) this story is so (.) ba:d and so toxic (.) >an a lot of
123 it's true< (.) u::hm [i-
124 Wi: [You said to me earlier that you don't
125 think it was possible to win without doping
126 Ar: Not in that generation (.) a- an I'm not here to talk about
127 others in that genera[tion it's it's been well documented
128 Wi: [mm hmm]
129 Wi: Mm hmm
130 Ar: U:hm (.) I didn't invent the culture
131 Wi: Mm hmm
132 Ar: But I didn't try to stop the culture (.) an that's w- tha-
133 that's my mistake (.) and that's what I have to be sorry for
134 and that's what something- .hhh and the sport is now paying
135 (.) the price because of that and so (.) I am sorry for that
136 (.) uhm I don't think (.) u:hm (1.0) I had a- I didn't have
137 access to anything else (.) tha- tha- that >nobody else did<

In Ll.124-125, Winfrey formulates the gist of a prior comment by Armstrong returning the topic, and reattending, to the jointly negotiated admission that it was not possible for him to win the Tour de France without doping (*You said to me earlier that you don't think it was possible to win without doping*). At l.126, Armstrong's response neither confirms nor disconfirms her formulation but adds a qualification: *not in that generation*. His description here is interesting for the way in which it constructs doping as a sustained activity associated with a collective group of cyclists whose identities remain nonetheless obscure. This is achieved via the collective noun *generation* which remains vague and undefined. Moreover, through use of the impersonal description *that generation* (cf. *my generation*) (Stivers, 2007), he distances himself from the activities he describes and implicitly attributes responsibility for wrongdoing to others – a move he subsequently and explicitly claims to dismiss at Ll.126-127 with a description which, in helping to construct him as a non-informant, invokes positive character attributes (e.g. discretion) as a counter to the earlier accusation against his character of cheating and fraudulent activity (see e.g. extract 9, Ll.53-54).

Following his mention of *culture* at l.130, he builds a description of his wrongdoing as the result of his failure to proactively deal (as leader of the cycling pack)

with the culture of doping (Ll.132-133) before issuing an explicit apology at l.135. Working in a similar way to his characterisation of doping as a property of a generation, Armstrong's use of the vague category term *culture* enables him to indirectly attribute blame to unidentified others while leaving ambiguous the question of his own involvement. As his turn continues, he goes on to state that he didn't try to stop the culture in a move which implies knowledge of (rather than involvement in) doping activity. In conceding that he made no attempt to change or prevent the behaviour of which he was aware, Armstrong constructs his character as reasonable – a move which potentially bolsters the credibility of his confession.

Discussion

Taking a discourse and conversation analytic approach to the study of confessional talk show interviews, this paper contributes to the literature on broadcast talk in the relatively unexplored, hybrid environment of celebrity talk shows. Specifically, our interest has been in the local and interactional elicitation and management of confessions, and in the sensitivities oriented to by both interviewer and interviewee.

Drawing on episodes from two televised interviews between high-profile hosts and their celebrity guests, we have identified some key interactional features involved in the elicitation of confessions, as well as some of the practices and resources used by transgressors in 'doing confessing'. In our first analytic section, we showed that interviewers used accusatory questions designed with YNIs and question prefaces to obtain 'on-record' overt admissions of guilt before moving on to solicit, through open-ended questioning, details pertaining to the circumstances of alleged events. We note that this basic structural organization draws respectively upon, and bears likeness to, blame-implicative questioning strategies used in soliciting courtroom testimony (Komter, 1994, 2003, 2013) and more open-ended practices characteristic of murder interrogations (Watson, 1990). At the same time, our data show that, in the extracts we explored, celebrity interviewers framed their questions in ways which orient to the norms of adversarialness and neutralism in political interviews (Clayman and Heritage, 2002), but drew rarely on the norms of personalisation and congeniality more characteristic of celebrity TV shows (Loeb, 2015, 2017).

Subsequent analysis of the interviewees' responses showed that, in responding to accusatory questioning, they explicitly admitted guilt, accepting responsibility for their transgressions, before moving to a position in which responsibility and blame were then implicitly denied and rejected. This was achieved through vague descriptions and formulations, and through the construction of events as insignificant and limited in extent and severity. Personal agency was further diminished or obscured through descriptions which implied joint agency, implicated others and/or transformed concrete actions into abstract activities. Armstrong, in particular, took this to extremes, transforming the very nature of his transgression in ways which repositioned him as responsible not for action, but for inaction. Similar to the practices deployed by cross-examination witnesses and police interrogation suspects (Auburn et al., 1995; Komter, 1994), these responsive moves suggest strategy use largely consistent with image repair discourse (Benoit, 2015).

We propose, however, that such moves were achieved interactionally through a process akin to conversational storytelling (Mandelbaum, 1993) in which blame attributions are negotiated and renegotiated in the course of a telling.

Drawing on empirical evidence collected from a limited and selective sample of confessions made in the public eye, we argue our results may be partly explained with reference to issues of face (Goffman, 1967, 1971): both interviewers and interviewees orient to the sensitivities involved in eliciting and offering a confession in ways which are evidenced in: a) the interviewers' attempts to mitigate their accusations distancing themselves from and legitimating lines of questioning as matters of public concern; and b) the interviewees' efforts to extenuate and downgrade both the nature and the extent of their guilt. We also propose that, despite the restricted focus on confessions and admissions of guilt, and although our analysis is based on a small data sample, our findings go some way towards empirically substantiating Loeb's (2017) suggestion of the existential link between topic choice and adherence to the interactional norms found in the context of the contemporary media interview.

We suggest that further systematic analysis could explore the extent to which the practices we observe in this small, specific sample are replicated in a larger sample of cases and/or combined with other devices designed to construct alternative versions of reality. Moreover, we note that the interviews we examined were conducted at the request of the celebrities and thus are, arguably, promoting a particular agenda as part of a clearly-defined PR strategy. Thus, they are quite distinct from ordinary conversation. Yet, as instances of broadcast talk, we hope to have demonstrated how, in spite of its planned and scripted nature, the celebrity TV confessional constitutes a hybrid form of semi-institutionalised talk in which interaction is shaped, in locally-managed and 'situated' ways (Ten Have, 2007: 198), by some of the linguistic resources found in both political news interviews and in legal and judicial settings. By extending the work of discursive and conversation analytic scholars into the domain of the celebrity interview, we propose that our findings contribute to an understanding of how 'doing confessing' in the public eye is an interactionally and discursively-negotiated activity.

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Notes

¹ On its website, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA, 2019) defines blood doping as "the misuse of certain techniques and/or substances to increase one's red blood cell mass,

which allows the body to transport more oxygen to muscles and therefore increase stamina and performance.”

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