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Identifying and Responding to Possible *-isms* in Institutional Encounters: Alignment, Impartiality and the Implications for Communication Training

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Abstract

This paper examines sequences of interaction in which speakers utter a *possible -ism*; that is, something possibly racist, sexist, or otherwise prejudiced, in the course of making, warranting or defending against complaints. Recorded encounters between mediators and their (prospective) clients were analysed using conversation analysis. I show how participants orient to their own or recipients' talk as possibly prejudiced, occasionally explicitly characterising that talk as racist (sexist, etc.). Mediators' responses fell into one of two broad categories, either *deleting* (e.g., through reformulation) or *challenging* the -ism (e.g., through admonishment). Both involve misalignment or disaffiliation rather than the mediation-mandated *impartial* stance. Two upshots will be discussed. First, the fact that few instances of *-isms* are treated explicitly as such goes to the heart of debates in conversation analysis about warrants for particular kinds of observations, and the designed defeasibility of social action. Second, the paper discusses the way the data and analysis are used in communication training workshops with mediators, for whom such cases present challenges to their commitment to impartiality.

Keywords

Racism, sexism, mediation, complaints, conversation analysis, communication training, impartiality.

This paper presents findings from a study of initial inquiries to mediation services, and mediations between clients and mediators, focusing on sequences in which parties formulate potentially racist, sexist, ageist, or otherwise prejudiced turns: “possible *-isms*”. The institutionally prescribed challenge for mediators is to remain impartial to their clients *in general*; to neither affiliate nor disaffiliate with their stance towards other disputants or clients’ “world view”, but to focus on the “facts in hand” relevant to the action under way (complaining, accounting, etc.) and, crucially, what is “mediatable”.

The paper is located in a wider context of discourse-based studies of talk about “others” and the practices of prejudicial categorizations. Much of this work uses one of two kinds of data: “public” discourse such as television and radio call-in shows, political speeches and interviews, newspaper texts, in which the topic under discussion is racism, sexism, or other *-isms* (e.g., Romaniuk, 2014; Van Dijk, 1991; Whitehead, 2009) or interview accounts (Van den Berg, Wetherell, & Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2003; see also Dixon & Durrheim, 2003; Van Dijk, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). What this research leaves out is a focus on talk in “private” institutional and domestic settings, in which *-isms* creep into other interactional activities. As Hansen (2005) pointed out, focusing particularly on ethnicity, “there is a paucity of scholarship that expressly considers how [it] is utilized by participants as a resource in conducting the business of, and in attending to myriad exigencies in, social interaction” (p. 63).

However, a recent series of papers attends to precisely these issues and the subject of this special issue: how parties orient to their own and others’ talk as prejudiced. For instance, Whitehead (this issue), examining preference organization in sequences involving possibly racist talk, shows that when one party (a caller to a radio-show) utters a possible *-ism*, recipients’ responses provide “opportunities to withdraw or back down from them”. He argues that while the preferred response to an assessment or claim is generally *agreement*, in

the case of responding to possible *-isms* the preferences are “cross-cutting” because it is well-established that open expressions of racism “make speakers vulnerable to sanctioning or other interactional difficulties”. The challenge for all recipients, when faced with possible *-isms*, but particularly for mediators, is that to agree with the *-ism*, or just ignore it, can place “participants in a morally compromised position as a result of being seen as complicit with the action”. However, to disaffiliate threatens any rapport between participants and risks conflict. In the mediation setting, mediators have multiple interactional goals, at different stages of the process. In initial inquiries, their goal is to establish whether or not the caller is a potential mediation client. Services need clients to survive, and it is important that initial contact goes well. As we will see, disaffiliating with possibly prejudiced callers can lead to the caller refusing to mediate. So, there is another issue at stake for mediators: their business “bottom line”.

The current paper is also located in the context of conversation analytic work on complaints. Dewar (2011) and others have distinguished between direct complaints, in which the target of the complaint is party to the actions, and indirect complaints about third parties. In the current paper, the possible *-isms* appear mainly in indirect complaints to mediators about absent third parties, but in cases where all parties to the dispute are present, complaints are direct. Yet, by virtue of the institutional setting, the complaints are “mediated” by the mediator.

Data and method

The UK dataset comprises 400 audio-recorded encounters between mediators and (prospective) clients¹, including initial inquiries to services, and mediation meetings themselves. All participants consented to have their conversations recorded. The dataset was trawled for instances of possibly prejudiced talk. Cases were analysed using conversation

analysis, focusing on the turn design of possible *-isms*, their sequential location, the actions being done, and their subsequent trajectory.

Across the wider corpus, instances of possibly prejudiced talk occurred in approximately 10% of interactions. More common were reports of prejudice-based abuse (Stokoe & Edwards, 2007). Thus it was relatively rare for either the producer of the *-ism* or the recipient to explicitly characterise the talk as prejudiced (Robles, this issue). For these reasons, like Whitehead (this issue), I use the term “possible” *-ism* “in view of the way in which characterizations of actions as instances of [*-isms*], although they may be based on a range of common features that make them recognizable (and thus analyzable) as such, are subject to (re)negotiation by participants in the moment-by-moment unfolding of interactions” (cf. Schegloff, 2006). What we will see is that producers of possible *-isms* build turns that are *defeasible*; that is, they are accountably *not -isms* but “mere description”, or something else. Language is a system that permits speakers to *imply*, *infer* and *be opaque* about their actions (e.g., flirting, see Stokoe, 2012). In this way, they can “test out” their recipient to see whether they will align or affiliate, thus permitting speakers to open up or close down their current action.

Mediators’ responses fell into two broad categories, either deleting (e.g., reformulating the issue; a kind of embedded correction: cf. Jefferson, 1987) or challenging (e.g., admonishing the client) the *-ism*. Both sorts of responses *disalign* or *disaffiliate* with the client rather than remain *impartial* stance. Like Whitehead (this volume) observed in radio call-in hosts’ responses to possibly racist callers, mediators’ responses are dispreferred; some contain the classic markers of such turns, including delay. The analysis is organized into three sections, focusing on i) practices for *deleting the -ism*, in which the *-ism* is only minimally or not topicalized in subsequent turns, and ii) *challenging the -ism*, in which the *-ism* becomes the focus of subsequent turns. The final section focuses on possible *-isms* that take a different

trajectory. The data presented in this paper, and its analysis, underpin the training approach I have developed called the “Conversation Analytic Role-play Method” (Stokoe, 2011) which I have used to address issues of *-isms* and impartiality (amongst other topics) with mediators. The final section presents cases that generate particular difficulty for mediators in training workshops, in terms of identifying and responding to possible *-isms*.

Deleting the *-ism*

Excerpt 1 comes from an initial inquiry call to a mediation service. It is in such calls that problems are first formulated and offers of or requests for mediation are made. The mediator’s job is to elicit a summary of the problem from callers; explain what mediation is, and offer it to them. The caller lives in a high-rise block of flats and his complaint is about noisy neighbours. C has agreed to mediate; the call is nearly completed. C has been talking generally about the issue of high-rise living and the potential for noise disturbances.

Excerpt 1: EC-34

- 1 C: I mean: uh- (0.4) e- ha:lf the battle of- as you u- are aware of
2 hi:gh rise living (0.4) is to get on with your nei:ghbours,
3 [an’ generally we do in this] block,
4 M: [.hhh absolutely. °yeah.°]
5 (0.2)
6 M: I’m su:re.
7 C: There’re a couple of families and uh I- I shou:ldn’t sa:y
8 this.=but I’m go:in’ to say because it’s perfectly true:
9 M: £uh heh.£
10 C: They’re A:sian families who seem to ‘ave no control over their
11 children.
12 M: A:hh.
13 (0.7)

14 M: Y:eah.
 15 (0.3)
 16 M: .hh[hh
 17 C: [Unfor:tunate but th- it's a ↓fact.
 18 (0.5)
 19 M: .hhh (0.3) ye:ah so: w- well certainly whatever hh uh:- *any-
 20 any-* family if- if- if the children're .hhh out of control then
 21 obviously it's going to be difficult in a: (0.2) °in a° high rise
 22 flat.
 23 (0.6)
 24 M: .hhh Yh:eah: hh yeah.
 25 (1.3)
 26 M: [()
 27 C: [Mean I did. (0.5) I di:d as I spoke to Helen.

Our target lines are 10-11, in which C introduces something new (“They’re Asian families”) into his complaint about the neighbours, enhancing the complainability of the problem with the introduction of a membership category (see Schegloff, 2005). Coming at the end of the call, after hearing an ostensible (and very typical) noise complaint, it seems that M has no reason to suspect that a possible *-ism* is coming. M affiliates strongly with C’s assertion about the challenges of high-rise living (lines 1-6). Note C’s management of M’s expertise about noise disputes (“as you u- are aware”) alongside his own experiential expertise as someone who lives in a high-rise block: they are talking less as mediator and client but more as co-members who know what life is like. At lines 7-8, C produces a classic disclaimer (“I shouldn’t say this but...”), which M receipts with a laughter particle (line 9). This is rather risky, given that disclaimers routinely precede talk that is hearable as (often) prejudicial (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987); it is a way of attending to the hearability of something one is

about to utter as a possible *-ism* and therefore of managing that hearability; managing what Edwards (2005) calls the “subject side” of complaining.

At lines 10-11, then, C claims that “They’re A:sian families who seem to ’ave no control over their children.” A first analytic question is what makes this a possible *-ism*? Unlike the racial abuse identified by Stokoe and Edwards (2007), C does not say that, for example, “f***ing Asian families”. “A:sian families” could be *description*, not racism; a direct challenge to C (e.g., “that’s racist”) might be too certain and strong an evaluation. But what makes it a possible *-ism* is the disclaimer and the making relevant something about a family as the basis for generalization; the complainability of the families who have no control is ramped up with “Asian”, attaching an attribute to a category as an explanation.

M’s initial response comes at line 12 (“Ah”), which has not only a “change of state” quality, warranting our earlier observation that M did not anticipate the narrative to follow such a trajectory, but it is delivered with a “discomforted” intonation. This nuance is itself ambiguous, but what M does not do is a strong alignment with C’s turn; he does not affiliate with C and therefore does not produce a preferred response. At line 13, there is an opportunity for C to withdraw from this utterance (see Whitehead, this issue), but C does not. M adds a further receipt “Y:eah.”, with similar intonation to line 12. In an environment where M does not progress the sequence in any other direction, C pursues affiliation by building on his prior turn, suggesting that his description is a matter of “fact” rather than his prejudice (“Unfor:tunate but th- it’s a ↓fact.”, line 17). After another gap, M reformulates C’s problem as being one for “any family”, swapping “Asian” for “any” (lines 19-22). At line 23, there is an opportunity for C to affiliate with M’s reformulation as a sequence-closing third turn, but he does not; M takes this turn and produces agreement tokens. These do close the sequence; C moves on to talk about procedural matters regarding the mediation (line 27). C remains a client of the service despite this turbulence; M’s ambiguous (with regards to the strength of

his disaffiliation) dispreferred responses, and his reformulation rather than direct challenge, have kept the intake call on course.

Excerpt 2 is another inquiry call. C's problem is his female neighbour's noise, exacerbated by her visiting boyfriend. Like Excerpt 1, we join the call as it moves towards closing; C has agreed to mediate. C is discussing the likelihood that the boyfriend has a family elsewhere.

Excerpt 2: EC-13

1 C: I wouldn't mi:nd the bloke's most probably got a
2 family of his own somewhere else. .hhh
3 (0.8)
4 C: You kno:w?
5 M: Mm
6 (0.4)
7 C: An' 'e's comin' down 'ere for a little bit of fa:ncy bit.
8 (1.0)
9 C: Heh heh .hhh d'you know what I me:an.
10 (0.5)
11 M: Ye:s I [understand] what you're saying yeah:
12 C: [Y'know?]
13 (0.2)
14 M: °Yeh°
15 (0.6)
16 C: Because [that's what she's li:ke.
17 M: [(Is it cos-)
18 (2.2)
19 M: Ye:::ah. hh okay.=so .hh w'll- w- [I'm going to contact]=
20 C: [((coughs))]
21 =um: contact her [...]

In contrast to the previous case of possible racism, Excerpt 2 presents a case of possible sexism. In further contrast to Excerpt 1, in which the caller articulates an explicit link between the category “Asian families” and the trait “no control over their children”, in Excerpt 2 the *-ism* is less overt. Nevertheless, we see similar trouble in responding that the mediators have in *both* cases.

In Excerpt 2, by suggesting that his neighbour’s “bloke” is already married, C implies she is “probably” his “fa:ncy bit” (for non-native speakers, his “mistress”, line 7). He introduces the possibility at lines 1-2, perhaps testing M to see if he will join in with his guess-work. After a gap develops in which M says nothing (line 3), Like Excerpt 1, C pursues a co-member response from M, talking as two “men” not “mediator-client” (line 4). M responds with a continuer (“mm”), which aligns minimally with C’s general project of characterizing his neighbour but does not *affiliate* with it (for example, “oh yes, I know!”: see Stivers, 2008). C then continues with the upshot of his categorizing his neighbour as a “fa:ncy bit”, M stays silent (line 8). This is enough for C to hear that M is not aligning with C; this is his opportunity to withdraw. Like Excerpt 1, in the face of dispreferred responses from the mediator, C does not withdraw from his position. Also like Excerpt 1, C pursues agreement from M, asking him to display shared knowledge of, and a shared stance towards, what (possibly) “adulterous” people are like, thus negatively characterizing the woman’s “bloke” *as well as* characterizing the woman as the kind of woman who associates with, or initiates associations with, such a bloke (line 9).

Although C does not explicitly withdraw from his possibly sexist stance towards his neighbour, the laughter particles at the start of line 9, following M’s non-alignment, modify his stance as humorous rather than malicious and perhaps easier to affiliate with. Here is more evidence, then, of the work speakers do to “test out” their recipient when making

possibly prejudiced remarks. Like Excerpt 1, M does not affiliate with C. At line 12, he states that he understands what C is “saying”, but not that he agrees with what C “means”. Neither does he reciprocate C’s laughter. And, following further pursuit from C (line 16), in which, like Excerpt 1, C claims evidence in “fact” (what the woman is like) rather than in his prejudice, M returns to procedural issues (lines 17, 19).

Excerpt 3 comes from an initial meeting between a mediator (M) and four clients who, together, are describing a complaint about one of their neighbours and are “Party 1” to the dispute. C1, C2 and C3 allege that their neighbour, a single mother with several children, goes out at night leaving her children unattended. M has not met the woman, “Party 2”, and may not, if Party 2 does not agree to participate in mediation. Here, the clients are talking together about the problematic character of their neighbour, as someone who does not talk to them or other neighbours.

Excerpt 3: DM-C02

- 1 C1: D’y-↑I don’t think she ca:res actually she’s not spoken to any
- 2 of all of us has she in [all the time she[’s be]en here[.
- 3 C2: [No:, [No,] [never
- 4 spoke.
- 5 (0.8)
- 6 C3: Never spoke.
- 7 (.)
- 8 C3: She jus’ dresses up, (1.4) [(What’s it,)]
- 9 C1: [Like a tart.]
- 10 (0.4)
- 11 C2: °Ye:[h.°
- 12 C3: [Heh hah heh.
- 13 (0.2)
- 14 C3: Yeh.

15 (2.4)

16 C3: .hhh ↑but it's::

17 (0.9)

18 M: So i- is- is that the same response that everybody- y'know.

19 =I'mean y-y'say that other people (0.2) [in the street, I'mean

20 C2: [Yeh.

21 C3: [() talk t'you

22 though.

23 M: Ri::ght.=an' o(c)- do they say anything he:r.

Following a long complaint, Excerpt 3 introduces a category (“tart”) that characterizes how the neighbour in question dresses, in ways that fit with, and perhaps formulate as a conclusion, much of what C1, C2 and C3 have been saying about her. Similar to previous excerpts, the clients’ characterizations are based in “factual” observation, rather than prejudice. There are several gaps (line 10, 13, 15) in which M does not orient or respond to C3 and C1’s collaborative categorization of their neighbour as being “like a tart”; nor does she join in with their laughter. M does not, therefore, affiliate with their stance towards the woman. Rather, like Excerpt 2, she produces a “so-“ initiated turn and moves to other matters, asking a question about the woman’s interactions with other neighbours (line 18). As mediation is a process which involves bringing together disputing parties to talk about possible solutions, it is pertinent that M asks a mediation-relevant question about the woman’s likeliness to participate in mediation. Note that, like Excerpt 2, C3 modifies their actions by adding laughter particles which soften or downgrade the *-ism* (line 12), which produces a kind of withdrawal in response to no affiliation from M. Unlike previous excerpts, however, the clients do not pursue a response from M; indeed, at line 16 C3, who produced the laughter particles, also begins a turn that seems designed to trail off: “↑but it’s::”, initiating a move away from trouble.

In Excerpt 4, the caller's neighbour has accused her of making noise and also being racially abusive. Here, the caller is defending herself against this "false allegation".

Excerpt 4: EC-21

1 C: (...) she's already been down to the council >offices< .hh made
2 false allegations about- sayin' I've- (0.3) give her a lot of
3 raci:sm, (0.6) [an' I have ne:ver call- I did admit t- months=
4 M: [°Mm:m.°
5 =and months ago I had a big barney with her an' I did call 'er a
6 loud- mouthed fuckin' *le(h)s:bian.
7 (0.3)
8 C: .hhh but that is all I have ever called 'er.
9 (0.6)
10 C: Once.
11 (0.4)
12 C: Out of temper.
13 (0.3)
14 C: But she's been down there: (0.2) an' said I've called 'er this
15 that an' the other I don't know what she's said,
16 (0.5)
17 C: But I know she's been down there: an' made (.) race allegations
18 against me,
19 (0.7)
20 C: Right- because I: went down'ere the next day an' I've done
21 exactly the same.=because she ha:s made racial abuse to me. she's
22 called me a wh:ite this a whi:te that, .hhhh
23 (0.2)
24 C: An' stuff:.
25 (.)
26 C: Right.=an' no:w I think it's gone too fa:r.

27 (.)

28 C: Because they said about the mediation an' that a- an' I'm

29 [not int]erested no more.

26 M: [Mmm]

In this call, C's denial of racial abuse is shored up by her admission of another *-ism*: calling her neighbour "a loud- mouthed fuckin' *le(h)s:bian" (lines 1-6). The logic of this admission is that, if C is the kind of person to admit when she makes prejudiced comments, then she would also admit the racism. This also establishes the neighbour as one who makes false accusations; that she could have (truthfully) accused C of calling her "a loud- mouthed fuckin' *le(h)s:bian", and C would have admitted to having done so, but instead she has (falsely) accused her of racial abuse.

Like in Excerpt 3, M does not respond at TRPs; M remains silent and does not align with the caller at all. We can see that, again like previous excerpts, the use of laughter particles – here, precisely on the problematic *-ism* category "le(h)s:bian" (cf. Potter & Hepburn, 2010) – works to display C's stance towards her actions, as not entirely serious and not malicious. Further, C withdraws across subsequent turns (lines 8-12), minimizing and delimiting her prejudiced action as one-off and done in temper, rather than as systematic and done to reveal a dispositional bias against lesbian women. The excerpt is striking in the lack of any spoken turns from M, including no alignment with C's counter allegations (lines 14-24). Indeed, M only aligns again after C starts to talk about withdrawing from the mediation process. C talks herself out of mediation, possibly because she treats M's silence as *partial*; as explicit disalignment.

Finally, Excerpt 5 comes from multi-party mediation. Three clients (Henry, Gary and Macy) and two mediators (Lucy and Joe) are present. The clients live in accommodation for elderly residents and share a garden. Gary, has complained that Macy has "colonized" the

garden with “dangerous” plants including pampas grass. He would like her to destroy it, along with various other plants and pots. We join the session as Lucy summarizes what Macy has previously been saying in response to Gary’s complaint; Client 2, Henry, says very little throughout the mediation.

Excerpt 5: KM-1

- 1 Lu: You’re still coming from that same perspe:ctive an’ saying, (0.8)
2 w’ll you- you’re not really happy t’move it because ↑you like it
3 the way it is [an’ you’ve done all the wo::rk.]
4 Ma: [We::ll no:: I ↑wi:ll] I will agree:
5 t’move it,
6 (0.7)
7 Ma: But I don’t think it’s:: goin’ *to uh:::* (0.4) so:lve:
8 mu[ch].
9 J: [No.= that’s right, but Gary an’ () that would be something
10 that he would ↓find useful.=if the pampas grass [was moved.
11 Ma: [But uh: can I
12 say this[:: uh: when we[:: moved- first move]d i:n, and uh:=
13 J: [Yeh?
14 Ga: [Um: it’s DANgerous Joe.]
15 Ma: =(1.2) I:: remember (0.3) ~uh::~ having a word with Gary about
16 something he accu:sed me of being uh- (0.5) like a Barbra
17 <Strei:sand.> [...] which meant I must be aggressive: (0.5)
18 Jewish, (0.3) which I am neither, (0.4) um::
19 (0.4)
20 Lu: I- I think- [I’m not- I’m not sure that this is:
21 J: [Is this helpful?
22 Ga: Is helpful,

At lines 15-18, Macy makes a direct complaint about Gary, who she says has “accu:sed me of being uh- (0.5) like a Barbra <Strei:sand.>”. Note the use of the indefinite article “a”, which formulates the name as a category (Stokoe & Attenborough, 2014). At this point, we know from the word “accu:sed” that C3 intends her description to be hearable as an *insult*. But what kind of “insult” is it? “Barbra <Strei:sand.>” might be a compliment: Barbra Streisand is, after all, “famous”, a “singer”, an “actor”, and so on. But C3 goes on to locate the categorial features she takes C1 to have implied through the use of “Barbra <Strei:sand.>” as a category that carries specific inferences – “aggressive and Jewish”.

What follows Macy’s complaint is interesting; Gary neither admits nor denies her accusation, and it is not topicalized by either mediator. Therefore, the mediators disalign with Macy’s project to discuss his abuse of her. Instead, they treat her complaint as not relevant to the current mediation (“I’m not sure that this is:”; “Is this helpful?”), using “procedure” as a route out of the *-ism* sequence. Gary provides a candidate completion of M2’s turn at line 22, which is not challenged by the mediators. Thus not only do they not handle Macy’s complaint, they do not challenge Gary when he takes aligns with them. At this point, the mediators’ impartiality is seriously compromised.

In this section, we have seen that and how callers and clients formulate possible *-isms*, as a way of enhancing the complainability of the conduct of other parties. So, by calling the family “Asian”, the caller implies that the noisy conduct is tied to category membership; by calling their neighbours a “fancy bit” or “tart”, the callers and clients imply that their neighbour is the “kind of woman” who may be disposed to also be a bad neighbour. But, of course, by producing such descriptions, the callers and clients become accountable themselves, as possibly prejudiced kinds of people. We have seen one clear participants’ orientation to their talk as possibly prejudiced (“I shouldn’t say this...”), and one clear admission of saying something homophobic. In the light of no affiliation or alignment from

mediators, callers and clients often withdraw, by adopting an ironic/humorous stance (Excerpts 2, 3 and 4), or by (re)formulating the *-ism* as based in empirical fact rather than in their prejudiced disposition (Excerpts 1, 2, 3 and 4). A clear route out of these sequences is to return to procedural matters, with both clients and mediators using this practice (Excerpts 1, 3, 4 and 5).

Challenging the *-ism*

In the second section, mediators' engage with the *-ism* in by topicalizing it directly. In Excerpt 6, we return to the mediation session introduced in Excerpt 5. This is what happens leading up to Macy's complaint about Gary. We join the session as the mediators summarize what is happening; Macy is sticking to her position about changes to the garden.

Excerpt 6: KM-1 (contd.)

- 1 Ma: The ↑pa:mpas gra:ss should be ke:pt.
- 2 (0.3)
- 3 Lu: But ba:sically [what you're saying Macy is that-]
- 4 Ga: [Stick y'pampas gra:ss back] in the ↑pampas
- 5 [Macy, you know?]
- 6 Lu: [You're sti:ll-] com[ing from that perspective.]=
- 7 Ga: [We want ordinary Bri:ish grass. in the]=
- 8 J: =[So Gary] pau:se for a minute please.
- 9 Ga: =[back garden,]
- 10 (0.4)
- 11 Ga: Gonna have [grass.= ↑not (0.2) pampas gr[ass, not RAzor gra:ss,
- 12 Lu: [° (Um-) °. [So-
- 13 Lu: Gary.
- 14 (1.5)
- 15 J: So-=-

Here, Gary enhances the complainability of Macy's conduct by introducing the notion of a "national" grass, and that she has introduced non-"ordinary" non-"British" grass into their communal garden (line 7). Before this, however, an environment for this possible *-ism* is produced in Gary's earlier turn in which he directs Macy to "Stick y'pampas grass back in the ↑pampas". The word "back" indicates a possible *-ism*, because of its routine use in reports of racial abuse (e.g., "fuck off *back* to your own country", see Stokoe & Edwards, 2007). Furthermore, Gary partitions Macy from a collective "we" who want "ordinary British grass." versus her who wants something else. Taken together, this sequence produces the context for Macy's later complaint about Gary's accusation of her being a "Barbra Streisand". So it is hearable, though not explicit, that Gary's complaint is not just about the garden, but about Macy's American-Jewish category membership.

The excerpt is complicated by multiple overlapping turns, which makes it difficult to pin down what the mediators' responses are precisely responsive *to*. So, at line 13, M1's "Gary pause for a minute please" could be directed to the fact that his turns are interruptive (lines 9-12) or to the possible *-ism* contained within it – or both. Similarly, M2's admonishing use of Gary's name (line 13) may be about breaking mediation rules ("one party speaks at a time") and/or about invoking the national provenance of pampas grass. So there is a challenge, here, but an ambiguous one. Neither of the mediators makes the target of their admonishment explicit, and they move on without topicalizing "British grass" any further.

Excerpt 7 comes from the start of a call to a mediation service.

Excerpt 7: DC-65

1 C: Next door neighbour.
2 (0.7)

3 C: Um:: (0.2) .hhhhh is:: >Indian.<
4 (1.6)
5 C: I've no: problem with Indians: bu' unfortunately he's>lower
6 caste< so he doesn't do any work.
7 (0.2)
8 C: An' that's not ra:cist.
9 (0.4)
10 M: pt. What so: (0.6) wha' has him [being Indian got to- do: with]=
11 C: [W- the prob- the problem is,]=
12 M =[it then.]
13 C: =[I mean,]
14 (.)
15 C: Sorry?
16 (.)
17 M: .hhh well I'm jus- wond' [ring why:,]
18 C: [(Yeh.) well]
19 (0.2)
20 C: The pro:blem is (0.6) uh:: (some/seven) years ago:, [...]

C's opening turn contains several interesting features: "Um:: (0.2) .hhhhh is:: >Indian.<".

The hesitation, pause, in-breath and punched-deliver of the category "Indian" all indicate C's orientation to this as problematic, and its hearability as a possible *-ism*. At line 4, M makes no response and a long gap develops. This permits C to develop his complaint, starting with a disclaimer ("I've no: problem with Indians:") to ward off possible evaluations of his as racist. He also provides, as we have seen previously, empirical evidence about the relevance of his neighbour's Indian-ness and description based in fact rather than prejudice ("he's>lower caste< so he doesn't do any work."). Note the use of "unfortunately", as in Except 1: the callers are not predisposed to seek out negative things about "Indians" or "Asian families",

but observe them as a matter of fact. The disclaimer also operates as a modifier, similar to our earlier observations about practices of withdrawal or stance alteration.

In response to a further lack of alignment from M (line 7), C denies that he is saying racist things (line 8), showing that he is treating M's silence as an unspoken accusation of precisely that. However, having secured a withdrawal from C, M does not move onto procedural matters but challenges C's use of the category "Indian" (line 10) and its relevance to the on-going action of complaining about a neighbour. Because it is in overlap, it seems that C has not heard the (full) challenge (note the repair initiator at line 15). M does not repeat her challenge directly in her follow-up (line 17) and C then begins to describe the problem (which is about maintenance of a shared driveway). This call ended without the caller becoming a client of the mediation service. The early turbulence and explicit challenge by M may partly account for this, because the parties were misaligned from the start of the call.

Mediators may challenge more overt *-isms* produced by callers and clients, through dispreferred turns that mark disalignment (e.g., staying silent), challenging the basis of what callers say, and admonishing clients through the use of their name. However, we have also seen that mediators do not maintain their challenges across several turns and that at least some part of their responses are as designedly ambiguous as *-isms* themselves can be. The final section takes the case of a possible *-ism*, and how the data presented in this paper form the basis of workshops for mediators about handling prejudice.

Possible *-isms* that turn out not to be

My analysis of mediation practice has been turned into practical outcomes for "users", using the "Conversation Analytic Role-play Method" (CARM). I have delivered numerous workshops to mediators in the UK, Ireland, Finland, and USA, funded initially by the UK

Economic and Social Research Council²'s grants for knowledge exchange and creating 'impact' (Stokoe, 2011). Conversation analysts have a strong track record in delivering interventions in many institutional settings (Antaki, 2011). In the context of applied CA, CARM has been described as "the most significant ... development" (Emmison, 2012). In contrast to traditional role-play, which is steeped in problems of inauthenticity (see Stokoe, 2013b), CARM uses research about actual interaction, and the identification of practices that comprise the setting under investigation, as a basis for training. Workshops focus on, for example, how to convert callers to services to clients of services, as well as other issues including "dealing with *-isms*". Audio/video files and transcript are presented synchronously, such that participants "live through" encounters without knowing what will happen next. They "role-play" what they might do to handle particular interactional situations. After presenting excerpts with different interactional outcomes, participants glean what works on the basis of what practitioners actually do and say.

All of the data in this paper have been used in a "dealing with *-isms*" CARM workshop, to enable mediators to think about real, rather than hypothetical, situations in which they might find themselves having to respond to prejudiced clients. The identification of *-isms* themselves, before considering responses, can produce lively debate, with participants identifying similar sorts of things that analysts point out (e.g., silence, disclaimers, etc.). In our final inquiry call, a possible *-ism* takes a different trajectory. The caller is in the midst of describing a noise problem with his female neighbour.

Excerpt 8: EC-13

- 1 C: The people she was mixing with .hhh obviously I felt that they
- 2 were using her house as one of these um (0.2) .hh blues
- 3 parties.=you know that goes on, .hhhh
- 4 M: Oh ri:[ght.

5 C: [And she's West Indian so she'll have reggae parties an'
6 stuff like that an'
7 (1.3)

Participants are invited to consider whether or not C's turns "tweak their antennae" with regards to a possible *-ism*. Most focus on lines 5-6, although there may be an allusion to race at lines 1-3 (".hh blues parties") and many workshop participants do some immediate ethnographic work around what a "blues party" is. It seems clear from M's change of stake token, as well as his intonation throughout line 4, that *he* has never heard of "blues parties" (and does not know what they are). However, focusing on lines 5-6, workshop participants point out that making a category relevant ("she's West Indian") and tying it to a particular behaviour ("*so...*") might be racist (cf. Excerpt 1: "They're A:sian families who seem to 'ave no control over their children."). And, indeed, M's response is disaffiliative – note the silence at line 7.

The excerpt unfolds as follows.

Excerpt 8 contd.

8 C: >But u::m< (0.2) I mean she hasn't had one for some ti:me now.
9 (1.2)
10 C: But as [when she first initially .hh]hh when she first got in,=
11 M: [O::kay not recently.]
12 C: =.hhhhh but we did 'ave racial abuse in Jan- in December.
13 (0.3)
14 C: .hhh (0.2) an' a coupla times: since then. .pt. .hhh
15 M: Ye- racial abuse.
16 C: Yep.
17 M: °H:mm.°
18 (1.1)

19 C: Uh: >I- I-< I'm Asian:: my Wes- my [wi:fe is] West Indian.
 20 M: [Right.]
 21 M: ↑Oh: o- [okay. (Mm.)]
 22 C: [.hhhh um::]
 23 (0.9)
 24 C: Um: uh such as (.) Paki family: etcetera hhh
 25 M: O::h.= right.
 26 C: U:m (0.2) .Hgh not only from her but from 'er- one of her
 27 daughters [...] The music is still going on every day,
 28 (0.3)
 29 C: .hh I've report- it [last month-]
 30 M: [Is that- does that- that] happens every day,

C's response following M's silence is to downgrade his complaint ("she hasn't had one for some ti:me now"), which M formulates in response ("O::kay not recently"). Next, however, C reports that he is a victim of racial abuse. M responds only after C upgrades his complaint and pursues a response (lines 14-15). C's confirmation in fourth position (line 16) is hearably "irritated", yet M's response is still minimal. That is, M has made no affiliative response to C's report. After a 1.1-second silence, C provides an account for his accusation of racial abuse ("I'm Asian:: my Wes- my wi:fe is West Indian."). So C is in the position of having to spell out the basis on which he may be a victim of racial abuse. This tells us that C has treated M as not seeing him as the "victim" previously, possibly because M has assumed that it is C who is racist because of what came earlier in the conversation. Certainly, C's category membership (and his wife's) is news to M (line 21). An affiliative response is only forthcoming from M after C reports the "actual" abusive language ("Paki family:"); his "Oh::" is produced with a very different intonation to the news-mark "↑Oh:" at line 21.

This sequence is full of trouble, perhaps resulting from M's assumptions about the category membership of the caller at the start of the excerpt. At the end of the excerpt, C and M both return to discussing the *mediatable* issue – the noise – rather than the *-ism*, much like M in the first excerpt that we encountered.

Conclusions

I have presented an analysis of episodes of interaction in which speakers make possibly prejudiced descriptions, comments and other actions, and the responses they generate from professional mediators who are trained to be impartial. These are hard-to-capture cases in social life; they are the reason why many researchers choose to interview people about *-isms* rather than attempt to capture them as they happen. That the cases presented co-occur with subsequent withdrawal, downgrading, modification of stance, and so on; and that they are met with dispreferred responses from mediators, underlines the difficulty in capturing *-isms* for research. Furthermore, the fact that few instances of *-isms* are treated explicitly as such goes to the heart of debates in conversation analysis about the empirical warrants for particular kinds of observations, and the defeasibility of social action. Possibly prejudiced turns are designed to be exactly that; as *possible* things that are difficult to pin down analytically and in mediators' responses. It is for these reasons that real data provide the basis for sophisticated training for mediation and other practitioners, in contrast to hypothetical cases. "Real" *-isms* are designed to be withdrawable-from; to be "just" something other than an *-ism*. Moreover, talk that looks like a possible *-ism* might turn out not to be, and may instead reveal something of the prejudice of the mediator themselves. This paper, therefore, continues to provide reasons why studying actual social life as it happens – the remit for conversation analysts – is important both empirically and epistemologically, and why it can provide the basis for application with integrity.

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