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Abstract

Identity has often been approached by asking questions about it in interviews. However, speakers sometimes reject, resist or modify category membership because of the sensitive inferential and interactional issues invoked. This paper aims to provide a systematic analysis of category-eliciting question-answer (Q-A) sequences from a large corpus of Syrian interview data concerning several identities. Using conversation and membership categorization analysis, four Q-A sequences are identified: minimal confirmation of questions seeking the hearably demographic fact of membership; modifying membership claims in response to factual-type questions by rejecting some not other category-bound attributes; characterising membership as fact and nominating an alternative identity in contrast to questions about feelings; and, in response to questions seeking confirmation of a category implicated through the prior talk, warranting the denial of membership. The analysis therefore highlights a paradox: asking direct questions about category membership is used to generate talk about the topic of identity that would be difficult to collect otherwise, but this may in turn provide for a reluctance to self-identify, thus making identity a delicate business.

Key words: identity, membership categories, conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, interviews, interaction

The delicate business of identity

It is widely assumed in the social sciences that social identities are important to people, that they are tied to social category membership, and that people will, on occasions, claim or mobilise their membership of one or other social category. Evidence also suggests that people do not necessarily affirm or ascribe to themselves seemingly relevant categories; for example, when they are asked specifically about their category membership (e.g. Condor, 2011). My aim is to explore such occasions further to see what they can tell us about the difficulties that may attend claiming category membership, which can make identity a delicate business.

Mobilising and undermining membership categories

There are many examples in the literature of how invoking membership categories can do important work for speakers in interaction. For example, in his classic discussion, Sacks (1972) showed how the category 'hotrodder' was mobilised by a group of teenagers to exclude outsiders. Thornborrow (2001) found that callers to a radio programme described themselves in terms of a topically relevant category, and this functioned to establish their competence to contribute to the discussion (e.g. as a parent or teacher in a discussion about education). Other studies similarly showed how posters mobilised self-identities to establish their legitimacy in seeking help through an online support group (Stommel and Koole, 2010), or friends through an online emo discussion forum (Chernoff and Widdicombe, 2015), and how this was an important precursor for generating responses from members. Stokoe (2010) showed how a suspect invoked his gender identity ('not the kind of bloke who hits a woman') to mitigate potentially blameworthy behaviour in a police interview.

There are also examples of occasions in which, when asked directly about their identities, speakers do not orient to their practical or functional significance; instead, they reject, resist or deny category membership, even when there are locally occasioned grounds for assuming its relevance. For example, Condor (2000) recruited white, English participants for interviews about 'this country' and national identity. She found that they denied or undermined being English as significant to them; and expressed reluctance to categorise themselves in national terms. Fenton's (2007:328) participants also 'articulated some kind of hostility to national labels, or they rejected nation in favour of broader identities like 'citizen of this world''.

Other studies reveal further ways in which speakers may deny category membership that is seemingly relevant for that moment. For example, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995; Widdicombe, 1998) recruited young people for a study of 'people who looked different', and asked them to say something about 'themselves, their style or appearance'. They found that participants resisted the implicated subcultural category ascription and in response to a direct question ('would you say that you were punks?'), they rejected category membership. Interviewees warranted this by denying their possession of significant category-bound attributes, and by producing alternative (individualistic) motives for appearance. Merino and Tileaga (2011) and Verkuyten and De Wolf (2002) found that respondents, recruited for studies of how members construct ethnic minority identity, drew contrasts between different versions of ethnic identity in accounting for, managing, and rejecting self-definition (specifically, *being* by birth, *feeling* through upbringing, and *doing* by possessing category-bound attributes such as language). Speakers also reconciled personal positioning (self-definition) and cultural positioning ('what everyone knows or assumes' about category members) by denying personal possession of criterial

characteristics (Merino and Tileaga, 2011). Widdicombe (2011) showed how the formulation 'x but not y' (e.g. 'a believer but not conformist') was used by Syrian respondents to make relevant different meanings of being religious and to reject one (problematic) meaning (e.g. being fanatical or against other religions) in favour of another.

These linguistic strategies address the sensitive interactional and inferential issues that may attend category membership. Inferential issues relate to the way that ascribing category membership to self can also invite assumptions about the kind of person one is, implied conformity, and lack of authenticity (Widdicombe, 1998; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). Interactional issues relate to the context specifically of interview interaction, and the way that asking direct questions about identity may breach certain 'rules' of conversation (Condor, 2011). Condor's discussion is focused on English national identity, but at least some of her points are pertinent to other category memberships and are therefore outlined here. The first rule is that speakers should not ask questions for which the answers are already known or obvious. As participants are usually recruited *because* they are presumed members of a particular social category, their membership can be taken for granted, and they may therefore feel obliged to answer questions about it with 'non-obvious' answers. Second, people should not make an issue of (national) identity (e.g. through public assertions). That is, while national identity is routinely flagged indirectly or alluded to through pronoun use for example (Billig, 1995), speakers show unwillingness to make identity the topic of conversation, and treat such talk as an accountable matter. They do so by making talk about it specific to the context of asking or occasioned by the interviewer's request (e.g. 'if somebody actually asked me'; Condor, 2011:39; see also Mann, 2006). Third, responses to questions of national identity should attend to the assumed knowledge and purpose of the questioner in asking them. Thus, respondents may treat questions as a

request for 'something more than' factual information about category membership such as psychological attachment or feeling (Abell, 2011) or a subjective sense of self (Condor, 2011), and it may be that the reluctance observed relates to this inferred demand. Fourth, speakers' identity avowals may implicate the exclusion of others and therefore they may be designed to avoid impinging on the imagined sensitivities of the 'foreign other'. Thus, observed difficulties in interviews on identity may arise because of such breaches in conversational rules. Moreover, talk about identity as a topic is often elicited through direct questions such as 'are you a practising Christian?' or 'are you heterosexual?'. These have a potentially intimidating character, in that they may be threatening to positive 'face', regarded as impolite, or intrusive (Svenning, 1999).

However, some work indicates that these inferential and interactional problems are not only found in interview interaction, nor do they arise in all cases. Similar issues have been shown in interaction studies of the ethnicity monitoring question in calls to telephone helplines. For example, Leydon et al. (2013) found displays of caller uncertainty and resistance in answering the question of ethnic identity, and that call-takers sometimes avoided asking the question, instead presuming the membership category of the caller for institutional purposes. Wilkinson (2011) showed that call-takers could orient to the delicacy of the question by, for example, making relevant the institutional requirement for its asking. In addition, Joyce et al. (2013) show how, in comparison to Irish students (who show the pattern of rejection discussed above), Irish travellers accentuated their Irish national identity for strategic purposes.

To conclude, Condor suggests that the difficulties observed in English national identity avowals relate to the ideological and interactional context of direct questioning, and to

'social sensibilities' (empathy, tact, establishing common ground for the situated purpose of such identity assertions). The review above indicates that similar interactional contingencies may contribute to observed difficulties of ascribing a variety of identity categories to self, and that they arise when identity is treated as a topic rather than a speaker's practical in-the-moment tool or resource (cf. Abell, 2011). In other words, they arise when asking questions about identities and category membership. Interviews provide a common context for the asking of such questions: much social scientific work relies on self-reports collected in interviews in response to direct questioning in part because of the difficulty of eliciting spontaneous, predictably occurring (and therefore easily captured), talk about self-identity (Condor, 2000, 2011; Merino and Tileaga, 2011). It is therefore important to examine in detail the discursive and interactional work that takes place when people are asked to report on their identities.

Consequently, my aim is to conduct a detailed and systematic analysis of a corpus of question-answer (Q-A) sequences concerning a range of identities, the relevance of which are presumed by the question (cf. Condor and Abell, 2005). More specifically, my aim is to understand how category-eliciting questions may be negotiated, resisted or affirmed, and hence provide some insight into how interview and other interaction may shape social scientific understanding of identities. This may, in turn, suggest ways of modifying our research practices (see Roulston, 2011). This study is novel, then, in that its concern is with the question-answer (Q-A) sequences in which participants are asked to report on a range of category memberships rather than on a particular identity category. The data come from a large corpus of interviews conducted in Syria which were concerned with a range of identities, so the analysis also allows us to extend an appreciation of linguistic strategies beyond the largely British or Western context of previous studies.

Method

Q-A sequences, in which interviewees were asked about their membership of a particular category, were analysed using sequential and membership categorisation analysis (Stokoe, 2012: 277) in order to identify 'categorial practices'.

The Data

The data consisted of a corpus of 153 audio-recorded interviews with 158 people conducted in 1998-1999 in various locations in Syria. The participants included Muslims (121), Christians (37), men (75) and women (83), from all over Syria including urban (92) and rural backgrounds (66), and ranging in age from 19 to 90 years. They were recruited through personal introductions, snowballing and the universities. They were told that the study was of the lives, views, and identities of 'ordinary Syrians', and was driven by a desire to counteract a lack of understanding and negative stereotyping. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured and taken very seriously. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic by a native English-speaker (the author). The interviews included questions about speakers' religious, national, regional, gender, and class identities, as well as questions about their childhood, family, relationships, occupation and personal attributes. They were transcribed in Arabic and translated into English.

Analytic procedure

The author and UK-based students on a Voluntary Research Assistant scheme extracted all instances of questions and answers which were directly and explicitly concerned with whether or not the respondent regarded themselves as a member (e.g. 'are you an x?', 'would you say you were an x?', 'what do you feel is your nationality?', 'are you x or y?').

In keeping with my interest specifically in category-nomination and self-ascription, questions about meaning or evaluation (e.g. 'is it important being *x*?' or 'what does it mean to you to be *x*') were excluded. The selected extracts were then transcribed in detail using Jefferson's (2004) notation system. As the Arabic script does not permit the use of this notation, the extracts were transliterated using the standardised guidelines provided by the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). Analysis was done on the English translation and Arabic transliteration simultaneously.

A preliminary analysis of the data extracts was conducted to identify patterns of question-answer sequences. Four main patterns were found: minimal self-ascription; nominating an alternative membership category; drawing contrasts between different meanings of category membership; and rejecting category membership. A more detailed analysis was then done for each pattern separately. This drew on Stokoe's (2012) approach to combining membership categorization analysis (MCA) and sequential conversation analysis (CA). Specifically, the analysis attended to sequential features, turn design, delivery (e.g. hesitation), the use of categories, and to category-bound attributes and inferences. The aim was to specify in detail the design features and action orientation that characterized each broad pattern, together with participants' orientation to them. In the analysis that follows, I have presented the analysis of the clearest examples of each.[1]

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[1] Space permits presentation of the translated extracts only here. The transliterated extracts with full CA notation are shown in a supplementary file. Where possible notation is provided on the translated version (e.g. overlaps occurring at the beginning or middle of a word, raised tone at the beginning or end of a word, and faster speech).

Analysis

In the analysis that follows, interviewees are designated IE and the interviewer as IR. It addresses each of the four Q-A sequences in turn.

(i) 'I'm a Muslim'
The following extracts are examples of instances from the corpus in which respondents

affirm the category ascription proposed by the interviewer (IR).

Extract (1) I 31:F 20: Mus (p1)
```
1    IR    >and now< we record .hh just could I ask- err
2          information: (.) first .hh about- err about you .hh for example err,
3          are you marrie[d
4    IE                  [ye[ah
5    IR                     [is there (.)
6          two parents        [trans. you have a father and mother?]
7    IE    yes
8    IR    .hh tch and you were born in- Syria↑
9          (.)
10   IE    yeah
11   IR    and: you (m.) were brought up here
12   IE    (.) ye-=
13   IR    = you (f) were brought up here
14   IE    yes yeah
15   IR    (.) .hh and err you are Muslim
16   IE    (.) yeah
17         (1.8)
```

Extract (2) I 39: M 30s: Mus (p1)
```
1          [tape turned on]
2          (1.4)
3    IR    we begin hh (1.0) .hh just I want to ask simple information=
4    IE    =as[k
5    IR       [first and- and later just .hhh (.) I want stories from your life
6    IE    yeah no  [problem
7    IR             [because I have ↑questions specific  [but
8    IE                                                  [mm
9    IR    open
10   IE    err: I talk I on the basis that is on my own    [tr. shall I just talk]
11         >or do you< want >to ask me and I answer<
12   IR    (0.2) .hh (.) and
13         (0.6)
14   IR    depends on your view- for- for- for example
15         just I want to know first- you are m- m- not married isn't that right
16   IE    yeah no not married
17   IR    and you were born in Syria and brought up here
18   IE    and I was brought up in- Syria
19   IR    and are you Muslim
20   IE    (ah) Muslim
21   IR    and
```

These extracts occur at the start of the interview. Each begins with an explicit interview opening comment, '>and now< we record' (1:1) and 'we begin hh' (2:3). There is also reference to a set of questions or 'information' concerning the respondent: 'could I ask- err information (.) first .hh about- err about you' (1:1-2). In (2), IR presents a set of instructions 'because I have questions specific but open' (2:7, 9). This provides an account of what the upcoming interview will involve and, in (2:6), the speaker demonstrates receipt of these instructions. So, there are several discursive ways in which the exchange is produced as the opening of an interview. Moreover, the first question concerning marital status, is presented as an example of the type of upcoming questions the IR wants to ask, and it is followed by further questions about place of birth and growing up. The categorical question, 'are you Muslim?', then, is asked as one of a series of what are hearably demographic questions aimed at establishing 'facts' about IE. This question status is reinforced by comments such as 'ask simple information' (2:3) and by distinguishing these questions from 'later just .hhh (.) I want stories from your life' (2:5). The sequential position, and IR's statements that work to 'do' the opening of the interview, provide an implicit rationale for asking the question. By providing a minimal categorical response, 'yes', and 'I'm a Muslim', participants are shown to be treating it accordingly. Thus, the sequential context is shown to provide an implicit rationale for asking the question, 'are you …?', and the response is the minimal and unproblematic production of a membership category.

(ii) 'Muslim on paper but non-practising'

In the following extracts, speakers are also asked factual-type questions about category membership but these occur later in the interview.

Extract (3) I 49:M 40s: Mus (p26)
```
1    IR    huh yeah
```

2	IE	mm=
3	IR	=and >from which< err: sect are you
4	IE	.hh (.) err: one of the sec- the- (.) the sects Shiite *[the Shiite sects]*
5		(1.0)
6	IE	the Ismayliis did you hear of the Ismayilis
7	IR	mmhm=
8	IE	=>I am Ismayili< .hh (0.2) I belong to the Ismayili sect
9		but in my opinion .hh (.) personal >I didn't belong to< any sect
10		.hhh in my opinion my ancestors are Ismayili
11	IR	mmhm=
12	IE	=my belonging is as my father (0.4) .hhh
13		as father is Ismayili but Ismayili is not my belonging
14		(.)
15	IR	mmhm .hh and there [isn't
16	IE	[in my opinion not to me a belo- religious belonging
17	IR	ahha: (0.4) .hhh w- there isn't *((next question))*

Extract (4) I 37: F 20s: Mus (p1)

1	IR	mmhm- and you are err Muslim [or Christian
2	IE	[yeah
3	IE	Mus:lim
4	IR	Muslim=
5	IE	=mmhm huh (almost) HUH [HUH HUH] HUH
6	IR	[uh hah]
7	IE	.hh huh huh .hh that is .hh (.)
8		on paper but not
9		(0.4)
10	IR	mm[hm
11	IE	["non practising" but m- huh huh [huh *[said in English]*
12	IR	[ah hah .hh
13	IR	yeah (0.2) tch and *((next question))*

Extract (5) I 38: F 80s: Mus (p13)

1	IR	eh (.) .hh tch .hh and are you religious
2	IE	me yeah .hh religious .hh
3		(0.4)
4	IE	in- in my thinking
5	IR	mmhm
6	IE	ha
7	IR	*((clears throat))*
8	IE	in my belief that is
9	IR	ahha
10	IE	but neglectful (0.2) religious neglec- a neglectful Muslim
11	IR	ahha
12	IE	mm
13	IR	yeah=
14	IE	=that is the the- err the rituals um: I don't do them
15	IR	mmhm
16	IE?	mm
17	IR	yeah and how *((next question))*

In each of these extracts, interviewees are invited to nominate or confirm a category membership: '>from which< err: sect are you' (3:3), 'you are err Muslim or Christian' (4:1), 'are you religious?' (5:1). These questions are produced without signs of trouble (e.g. pauses and hesitations)[2], and participants respond by nominating a membership category as requested. For example: one of the Shiite sects, Ismayili (extract 3), 'yeah Mus:lim' (4:2-3), and 'me yeah .hh religious' (5:2). Initially, then, we see that speakers treat the question-answer sequence as a factual request to which a straightforward answer concerning membership can be, and is, given.

The category nomination is not, however, taken up by IR in her next turn, nor does she go on to the next question immediately, although these actions would be appropriate and expectable on receipt of an answer to the question. Instead, in extract (3:5), there is a one second silence after the speaker says he belongs to one of the Shiite sects. In extract 5 (line 2), there is silence after the initial claim to be religious and in extract (4:4), the interviewer simply repeats 'Muslim'. So, in each case, IR does not ratify the initial response. In an important sense, it is therefore IR who treats category membership here as an accountable phenomenon.

In all extracts, a second response to the question is produced, this time using an 'x but not y' formulation (cf. Widdicombe, 2011). In extract 3 (lines 8-9), the speaker says 'I belong to the Ismayili sect' (x) 'but in my opinion .hh (.) personal >I didn't belong to< any sect' (y). Similarly, in extract 4 (8, 11), the speaker describes herself as (almost) Muslim 'on

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[2] Although IR does say 'err' (extracts 3 and 4) which could be regarded as an indication of hesitancy, this has been shown in other contexts to be typical of qualitative interview questions that are designed to provide for the encounter as a 'chat' rather than an 'interview' (see Rapley, 2001).

paper, but not' and the initial statement following 'but not' is repaired using the English

term, 'non-practising'. Finally, in extract 5 (8,10), the speaker describes herself as religious

'in my belief that is but neglectful'. These formulations contrast different grounds for

membership and reject one in favour of the other. For example, in extract 3, the respondent

contrasts a familial and personal sense of belonging ('my belonging is as my father … but

Ismayili is not my belonging'; 3:12-13) and on line 16, he specifies this as not a religious

belonging for him. We thus have an implicit contrast between membership as a matter of

birth or of belief, and the speaker aligns himself with the category as defined in terms of

birth and rejects it in terms of personal belief. Similarly, the speaker in extract 4 invokes a

contrast between 'official' classification ('on paper') and undertaking religious practices.

These contrasts resonate with the distinction observed in other studies between being a

member and doing membership (Merino and Tileaga, 2010; Verkuyten and de Wolf, 2001),

and the rejection of the latter in favour of the former in the speakers' own cases.

There is a further point. Non-uptake may be treated by IE as an indication, for example, of

IR's non-understanding, non-acceptance, or the inadequacy of IE's response. However, in

these extracts, speakers seem to orient to the possible cultural ignorance of the interviewer.

That is, in (3:6), the speaker asks a direct question confirming understanding, 'did you hear

of the Ismayilis'. This also makes relevant the possibility that IR has not heard of this sect

and so does not share this cultural knowledge. The speaker in extract 4 uses the English

term 'non-practising' to describe her identity as 'Muslim', thereby orienting to possible

linguistic and cultural ignorance, and emphasising at the same time its significance. In

extract 5, the cultural issues are more subtle, but it is noticeable that the speaker repeats her

description of how she is not religious in several ways: repairing 'neglectful' to 'religious

neglec-' and to 'a neglectful Muslim' and providing further specification of how she is non-

religious ('that is the the- err the rituals um: I don't do them') when there is minimal uptake

of her prior response by IR ('ahha', 'yeah', lines 11 and 13). In these ways, the

interviewees treat non-uptake as non-understanding.

(iii) 'I am a human being'

In the following extracts, speakers are asked about their feelings regarding category

membership.

Extract (6) I 2: F 40s: Mus (p33-34)
```
1    IR    mm (1.2) .hhh (.) tch and what now .hh err you fe- err
2          do you feel is your nationality
3          (0.2)
4    IE    how do you mean
5          (2.2)
6    IE    my nationality I   [ as a Syrian=
7    IR                       [mmhm
8    IR    =yeah but err you feel your feelings .hh
9          (1.8)
10   IE    my feelings
11   IR    yeah (.)
12   IE    (ma*)-  I didn't [understand I this question=
13   IR                     [uh hah
14   IE    =how are you [name] bless your hands by God
               ((a few lines omitted as tea/coffee is brought in))
23   IR    what hmm ((clears throat)) I asked .hh uh ahhm ((clears throat)) (.) tch
24         what: err do you feel .hh is your nationality
25         (1.0) ((sound of cup placed in saucer))
26   IE    mm ((sound of cup put down on table))
27         (2.4)
28   IR    no problem ((more banging))
29         (4.0)
30   IR    I >(stopped) do you have< it is do you feel more you are Syrian,
31         you are Syrian (.) .hh or you are an Arab=
32   IE    =no ((staccato))
33         (2.0)
34   IE    I am an Arab .hh I don't (feel)- except I don't feel myself that I am Syrian
35         I must be I Syrian not (   ) that I must be Syrian only
36         .hh I feel that .hhh all the Arab nations .hh
37   IR    yeah
38   IE    they are the homeland of any person
39         (1.8)
```
[*ma is a negative participle]

Extract (7) I 66: M 30s: Mus (p2-3)
```
1    IR    =and what do you feel is your nationality .hh
2          (0.8)
```

```
3    IE    what do I feel is my nationality
4    IR    ↑yeah
5          (1.4)
6    IE    tch it is the subject what does one feel is his nationality
7          this business this question is very hard that is (.) .hh complicated na-nationality
8          ↑no I in relation to me that is
9    IR    yeah=
10   IE    =.hh a person's nationality is a place where he is comfortable psychologically
11         or [financially or socially
12   IR       [yeah
13         (0.6)
14   IE    that is
15   IR    .h[hh
16   IE      [so this is my nationality and perhaps until now (.) I haven't found it (.)
17   IR    ahha
18   IE    .hh  [that is
19   IR         [you don't feel- Syrian or[: ((croaky))
20   IE                                   [it is
21         [certain that is if- if we are talking
22   IR    [(origin or-)
23   IE    in relation to the identity papers
24   IR    mmhm
25   IE    no [I (              )]
26   IR       [no no we are talking feelings
27   IE    because (internal) feelings (.) feelings I don't feel any-
28         >that is< I am saying I in relation to me the basis of nationality .hh
           ((definition above is repeated))
```

Extract (8) I 27 F 30s Mus (p18)

```
1    IE    [yeah
2    IR    [mmhm .hh and  [what do you feel- (pl)] you feel that it is
3    IE                   [hhh .hhh            ]
4    IR    your nationality
5          (2.0)
6    IE    that I am a human being I huh [huh huh] ↑yeah
7    IR                                  [heh heh]
8          (0.2)
9    IE    s- .hhh (a::ha) Syrian Arab I don't mm much [care *[trans. not too fussy about that]*
10   IR                                                [ahha
11   IE    mm
12   IR    yeah and ((next question))
```

There are several observations I want to make about these extracts. First, each opens with a question inviting the participants to nominate a membership category. The initial questions ask about feelings rather than facts regarding membership, that is, what do you feel is your

nationality? not what *is* your nationality? They therefore assume that category membership may be something more than ontology (cf. Condor, 2011).

Second, there are difficulties manifested in both asking and responding to this question. For example, it is produced in a hesitant manner (with pauses, false starts and in-breaths in extracts 6 and 8). Likewise, we can see delays in responding (extracts 6, 7 and 8); expressions of not understanding ('how do you mean', 'I didn't understand I this question'; 6:4 and 6:12); questions seeking confirmation (e.g. 'my nationality I as a Syrian'; 6:6; 'what do I feel is my nationality'; 7:3); and comments on the question and its purpose ('this business this question is very hard that is (.) .hh complicated'; 7:7).

Third, the expectable answer (i.e. a national category) is not produced immediately. Indeed, in extract (6), IE ascribes to herself a membership category only after IR repeats the question on lines 1-2 ('What err do you feel .hh is your nationality'; 6:24) and then reformulates it by offering candidate categories ('do you feel more you are Syrian [   ] or you are an Arab'; 6:30-31). In extract 8 (line 6), the speaker initially produces an alternative membership category, 'a human being' and in 7 (lines 10-11), the speaker formulates nationality in 'unconventional terms' as 'a place where he is comfortable psychologically or financially or socially'.

Fourth, interviewees subsequently reject the relevance to them of the expected national category, for example, 'I don't feel myself that I am Syrian' (6:34) and 'Syrian Arab I don't mm much care' (8:9). In extract 7, the respondent makes a distinction between 'official' identity ('identity papers', 7:23) and feelings towards that category, and he denies the latter ('feelings I don't feel any-' (7:27).

Therefore, speakers acknowledge the potential relevance of the national category as an answer to the question while simultaneously rejecting it. Their orientation to its potential relevance is evidenced in several ways. In extract 6, the speaker mobilises national identity in her question seeking clarification ('my nationality I as a Syrian'; 6:6). In extract 8, the speaker rejects the category 'Syrian Arab' explicitly, but in providing it as a candidate answer, she acknowledges its *potential* relevance while dismissing it ('Syrian Arab I don't mm much care', line 9). In extract 7, the speaker is asked directly, 'you don't feel Syrian or ' (7;19) and the answer describes specific circumstances in which national identity is relevant ('in relation to identity papers', line 22). In these extracts, then, when speakers are asked about their feelings, they respond by rejecting the relevance to them of the national category, by proposing an alternative membership category, or by transforming the meaning of the category as related to place not identity (extract 7).

There are several ways of accounting for this pattern. One is that the expectable category is obvious and speakers are simply avoiding it (cf. Condor, 2011) by producing 'non-obvious categories' (extracts 7, 8). It may also be that the problem lies in the inferences made available through reference to feelings about national identity (such as patriotism or favouritism) and speakers' production of more inclusive categories (such as 'human being', or 'a place where anyone feels comfortable'), and avoidance or explicit rejection of 'feelings' is a way to avoid such problematic inferences. Similarly, in extract 6 (lines 36 and 38), IE's claim is reinforced by describing 'all the Arab nations' as 'the homeland of <u>any</u> person', and although not shown in the extract presented here, she goes on to contrast 'the world God created for the people to enjoy' with one in which people are divided according to national identities.

Similar features can be observed in the following extract, where a specific membership category is also rejected in favour of a more inclusive one.

Extract (9) I 26: F 20s: Mus (p14)
[prior to this, the speaker had described his family as 'not belonging to any society' when asked about their class membership]

```
13   IR      and- again the same err- the answer the- err .hh tch
14           from which class do you feel yourself now
15   IE      currently
16   IR      mmhm
17   IE      I am from all the classes .hh with all the classes
18           (2.0)
19   IR      mmhm=
20   IE      =look I no matter how rich I am I do not forget the poor
21           (2.2)
22   IE      I ca(n't)- I wouldn't forget him ((croaky))
```

Here, the speaker describes herself as being 'from all the classes' (line 17) when asked about which class she belongs to. Moreover, she repairs her initial claim to be 'from all the classes' to being 'with all the classes' (9:17) and then states that 'no matter how rich I am I do not forget the poor' (6:20). She thereby raises and addresses the inferential problem that attachment to one category excludes others, and therefore claiming membership also implies discrimination or prejudice on the part of the member.

(iv) *Warranting non-membership*

In the following extracts, speakers reject membership of the category nominated by the interviewer.

Extract (10) I 104: F 22: Ch (p25)
```
1    IR      mmhm yeah yeah and are you religious
2            (0.8)
3    IE      .hhh (0.2) n- no not religious-
4            proof is that I (   )
5            like a mixture of- err: all of the people .hhh Druze err: Muslim
6            su- that is err: Christians .hh I like the mixture- [and I have
7    IR                                                          [(  )
8    IE      colleagues and friends from all of the religions
9    IR      ahha there is you have friends=
10   IE      =I have [friends from
```

```
11   IR            [(    )
12   IE   all of the religions not religious .hh
13   IR   yeah and
```

Extract (11) I 86: F50s: Ch (p16)
[prior to this, the speaker spoke about growing up in a village]
```
1    IR   ahha [.hh °yeah°
2    IE        [mm
3    IR   so t- t- ((swallow)) do you feel err: that
4         you are a villager   [lit. daughter of the countryside]
5         (0.4)
6    IE   mm- hmm
7         (0.4)
8    IE   not a lot- no by God I don't feel   [I don't:
9    IR                                        [uhha
10   IE   I like. the life .hhh the- the- err: the developing  [trans. the developing life]
11        that is the countryside err [is limited
12   IR                               [mmhm
13   IE   limited yeah
14   IR   yeah .hh is this because you err lived- lived err
15        in the city
16   IE   ↑no. no because it is in my nature this thing (0.2)
17   IR   mmhm
18        (0.2)
```

In these Q-A sequences, IR invites speakers to affirm their membership of a category, the
relevance of which there are prior grounds for assuming. For example, the question, 'do
you feel err: that you are a villager' (11:3-4) occurs after the speaker has been describing
life in the village. The question 'are you religious' (10:1) comes after a description of the
positive tradition of religious intermingling in the village. The questions are produced
without hesitation, delays or other indication of difficulty; the responses, however, manifest
all these features and therefore have the character of dispreference (Pomerantz, 1984).
Indeed, speakers go on to reject the nominated category emphatically. For example, in
extract 11 (line 8) the speaker upgrades 'not a lot-' to 'no by God I don't feel I don't'. In
extract 10 (line 3), there is emphasis on 'no' in 'no not religious'.

The extract below similarly follows a category-relevant account, here of sectarian
discrimination at school.

Extract (12) I 80: M 3/40s:Mus
[the speaker is talking about how, not having been taught about religion, he and his siblings found they were being beaten at school by the teachers and children]

```
1    IE    later I realised the truth (   ) that we were, Muslim err:
2          Muslim- Muslim Alawite ((sniff))
3          [yeah
4    IR    [you are Alawite Muslim
5    IE    ↑yeah yeah  [yeah   ]
6    IR                 [mmhm] yeah
7    IE    of course according to them but I don't >belong to
8          anything< and this is like a thing
9          (3.0)
10   IE    has caused me problems (in many aspects)
11         (2.2)
12   IE    towards the- the- the- the- err (1.8) the society
13         (0.2)
14   IE    towards religion especially towards religion
15   IR    [mmhm
16   IE    [what are these religions .hh (.) that (     ) that is with- err:
17         allow themselves (.) to cause suffering to childhood and-
18         er and ch- children
```

As above, the IR's question is formulated as one seeking confirmation and the answer is expectable on the basis of the prior claim. Indeed, initially, the respondent acknowledges membership of the category, 'Alawite Muslim' ('yeah yeah yeah', line 5). However, he ascribes this view to outsiders ('of course according to them', line 7), and rejects explicitly the relevance of belonging to this category in his own case ('but I do not >belong to anything<', lines 7-8).

In each extract, speakers warrant their claims by presenting evidence of their non-membership. This is most explicit in extract 10 (lines 4-5) where the speaker characterises as 'proof' of not being religious her liking of a 'mixture of- err: all of the people'. In extract 12 (lines 7-8), the claim 'I don't >belong to anything<' is followed by 'this is like a thing (3.0) has caused me problems'. Although there is a three second delay before completing the utterance, the description of 'problems' that follows is hearable as caused by and therefore evidence for a stance towards 'not belonging'. In extract 11, evidence for

non-membership is achieved more implicitly through the juxtaposition of two claims: 'by God I don't feel I don't [a villager]' (11:8) and 'I like the life .hhh the- the- err the developing [life]' (11:10). In other words, the speaker implies an incompatibility between her views and category membership that warrants, in turn, her claim to non-membership.

Furthermore, the 'proof' of non-membership is reinforced in several ways. In extract 10 this is done by the speaker listing categories of liked people ('the Druze, the Muslims, the Christians'), and 'upgrading' her positive views by claiming 'colleagues and friends from all religions'. It is thus implied that such widespread friendship and liking is incompatible with 'being religious'.[3] She uses extreme case formulations, '*all* of the people' and '*all* of the religions', to strengthen her claims against potential scepticism (cf. Pomerantz, 1986). In extract 11, the respondent's views are reinforced by her description of the countryside as 'limited'. Moreover, when asked whether her views are derived from experience ('is this because you err lived [ ] in the city'), she rejects this in favour of them having an inherent basis ('in my nature this thing'). This strengthens her claim to hold views contrary to 'village life' by making them an intrinsic part of her identity. In (12), a similar effect is achieved (lines 16-18) by questioning 'these religions' that cause suffering to children and childhood.

A further point is that in describing 'proof' of non-membership, speakers simultaneously invoke category-bound attributes of the rejected category and these further portray category membership or the category as undesirable. For example, in extract 10 being religious is implicitly characterised as being exclusive, insular, or prejudiced against other religious

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[3] It may be suggested that 'colleagues' do not invoke a close relationship, so it is interesting that IR's uptake repeats 'you have friends' (with an appropriate pronoun change) but deletes the reference to colleagues, and IE then confirms 'I have friends' (10:10).

groups; in 11, the countryside and, by implication 'villagers', are constructed as not liking the developing life, and therefore inferrably traditional or 'backward' culturally. In 12, being religious means supporting a group that 'allow themselves to cause suffering to childhood'. Making relevant certain category-bound attributes in this way provides implicitly an account or further warrant for rejecting membership.

Discussion

In this paper, I have shown that, on some occasions and not others, asking questions that invite category self-ascription and therefore identity is a delicate business. I have begun to delineate the interactional and sequential features that distinguish these occasions. I have also shown how participants manage category sensitivity using a variety of linguistic strategies, and I have begun a systematic analysis of the different issues that these strategies are designed to address. Specifically, I identified four Q-A sequences and these are summarised below.

First, I observed that questions seeking hearably demographic facts about category membership at the start of the interview were followed by minimal answers confirming membership of a particular category. Both the question and category answer were produced without signs of interactional difficulties, and thus lacked any indication of the delicacy observed in other sequences. Following Leydon et al. (2013) and Wilkinson (2011), I suggested that in these cases, the institutional purpose of category-questions is clear: that is, establishing demographic information about the respondent at the start of the interview.

Second, outwith the opening sequences, I examined how factual questions of the form 'are you a …?' were followed by a '*x* but not *y*' formulation in which certain category-bound attributes were rejected, but not others. Self-ascription appeared sensitive because of possible inferences that may be drawn about the speaker's possession (or non-possession) of certain criterial attributes on the basis of category membership. Similar findings have been reported in relation to ethnic identities (Merino and Tileaga, 2011; Verkuyten and De Wolf, 2002), and claiming to be religious (Widdicombe, 2011).

Third, I examined extracts in which, in response to questions about feelings regarding category membership, speakers distinguished 'obvious' fact from feelings; denied the latter as significant or informative; and proposed instead an alternative more 'inclusive' category membership (e.g. human being or Arab, not Syrian). Category-ascription was treated as delicate here in that category-related feelings were rejected as implicating prejudiced or discriminatory views concerning other categories' members. Condor similarly concluded that expressions of English national identity can become a 'normatively accountable matter-of-prejudice' (Condor, 2000:181; Abell, 2011, and Fenton, 2007, make similar points).

Fourth, I analysed sequences in which the question built on an immediately prior basis for assuming the relevance of the category membership, but participants nevertheless claimed non-membership. This was warranted through presenting evidence of non-membership and category-incompatible views. Widdicombe (1998) discussed similar interactional work done by people who looked like members of youth subcultures, and suggested that identity may be delicate here because, conventionally, it is a person's right to claim their own

category memberships, and ascription or assumptions by others may thus be problematic because they breach such entitlement.

The findings from this systematic analysis of a relatively large corpus of data, show that similar patterns can be observed in relation to various identities, including national identity, sect, religion, religiosity, class and so on, and Syrian data. I have shown that they resonate with findings of previous studies, and it may therefore be suggested that sensitivities observed previously in category self-ascription arise in part as a function of features of membership categories. For example, they arise when categories are assumed to be 'more than' demographic fact, that is, to have an affective or psychological basis; and when they may be inferred as bound to particular attributes and attitudes. The observed difficulties also relate to the 'occasioned context of production' (Merino and Tileaga, 2011:86) and the way that identity here is effectively a researcher's topic rather than a participant's tool or resource. It is therefore crucial to reproduce and analyse interview questions as well as answers (Potter and Hepburn, 2012) and to take a 'symmetrical approach' to analysis (Rapley, 2012:543), which attends to the sequential and interactional context. In this way, we can appreciate the cultural construction of identities through social scientific enquiry (cf. Mazeland and Ten Have, 1996).

In conclusion, this analysis highlights an interesting paradox. Asking direct questions about category membership is used as a way of generating talk about the topic of identity that would be difficult to collect otherwise; this may, in turn, provide for reluctance to self-identify, although it may be partially alleviated by providing a rationale for wanting to know. This kind of analysis can therefore help us develop an awareness of the work that goes on in interviewing; it invites us to reflect on our own practice (Richards, 2011), and

our role in the ongoing trajectory of talk (Rapley, 2012); and it helps us appreciate that

assembling an identity account is an 'artful practice' (Silverman, 1993:781).

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