



Exclusion in Gossipy Talk: Highjacking the Preference Structure for Ingroup Belonging

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Abstract

This paper employs discourse analysis and draws on interdisciplinary approaches to examine how identity is constructed in conversation. The purpose of the paper is twofold: to present an argument for a particular exclusionary practice in everyday life; and to show how this practice is revealed through discourse analytic methods. Specifically, the analysis describes how extremely negative moral assessments about outgroup identity-related behaviour constitute a high-risk strategy for ingrouping with co-participants in ordinary face-to-face interactions. Demonstrating this strategy shows how discourse analysis can provide a frame through which to understand what interactional resources are available to people and therefore how we might reflect on the relationship between local exclusionary practices and broader social phenomena such as racism and sexism.

Key words: *discourse analysis, exclusion, assessment, ingroup, preference, morality*

1. Introduction

In our everyday lives, sometimes we want so badly to belong that we may resort to such dangerous methods as espousing an extreme opinion we hope will be shared by the people with whom we want to associate. While this tactic can backfire, when deployed correctly, it displays a powerful cohesive group identity among people who share agreement or affiliation.

This paper draws on various discourse analytic approaches to examine how identity is constructed in conversation. The purpose of the paper is twofold: to present an argument for a particular exclusionary practice in everyday life; and to show how this practice is revealed through discourse analytic methods. Specifically, the analysis describes how extremely negative moral assessments about outgroup identity-related behaviour constitute a high-risk (but potentially high-success) strategy for ingrouping with co-participants in ordinary face-to-face interactions. Analyses of discourse can demonstrate these strategies and suggest a frame through which to understand what interactional resources are available to people and therefore how we might reflect on the relationship between local exclusionary practices and broader social phenomena such as discrimination.

2. Extreme Opinions in Interaction

It is well-known among conversation analysts that the preference structure of interaction exerts a powerful influence on progressively realizing actions across sequences (Schegloff 2007). What this means is that the normative demands to respond to certain first actions in particular ways make not doing so difficult to the point that people avoid it. When people do respond in dispreferred ways, they must display difficulty in doing so (for example, with pauses, hesitations, and repairs). The power of this was illustrated in a conversation analysis course I took with Barbara Fox in which she gave the example of two people who do not want to spend time together--but A's knowledge of B's party compels B to invite A, and A is then compelled to accept the invitation. Thus, a situation not desired by either person takes place because the demands of preference (and the face-attentiveness associated with preference—more on face shortly) made it so. We see cases like this across many contexts in the research: for example, agreement-preferring 'you'd be willing' more often than not gets people on board with mediation (Sikveland and Stokoe 2016) and disagreement-preferring self-deprecations will generally get disagreement in interpersonal conversations (Pomerantz 1984).

Based on much of the literature in social science on extreme opinions among ingroups, it has typically been assumed that extreme opinions are threatening to ingroups because they challenge the possibility for greater conformity (e.g. Festinger and Thibaut 1951). However, research has also found that extreme opinions can emerge when groups are defined by sharing those extreme beliefs, when differences of viewpoints within a group are mild, or when certain strategies are used such as information-sharing and argumentation (e.g. Galam and Moscovici 1991; Van Swol et al. 2015). In research on language and social interaction, the focus of inquiry is on how extreme opinions are delivered, how they are responded to, and what implications this may have for group cohesion and influence over time. For example Billig (2001) showed how racist jokes are enjoyed among groups that are already extremist, and other discourse analytic research has shown how group belonging and shared identity can be constructed through sharing extreme opinions (e.g. Geddes 2016).

But extreme opinions, especially those associated with racism, sexism and so forth, are often seen as face-threatening in contemporary society, and political opinions are managed carefully in conversations according to context, even when (sometimes especially when) conversants are intimate (e.g. Billig 1988; Ekström 2016; van Dijk 1992). While we may assume participants would be emboldened to share extreme opinions among friends, there is also a greater stake in preserving those relationships. Thus, extreme opinions may emerge more easily in some ways, but will probably be modulated in some way; and from an interactional and discursive perspective, the meaning and possible consequences of such opinions will be shaped by how recipients respond. This is also evident in the way that extreme opinions delivered to 'strangers' will be packaged as 'ordinary', as commonsensical views that any person might have (Tileaga 2005). Extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986) can serve to emphasize the normalness of the speaker by proposing that certain activities are overwhelmingly common. From a critical discourse analytic perspective, this contributes to and reflects broader processes of normalisation, and is evident in the way that certain practices considered taboo for some people, places or times

may be constructed as reasonable and normal over time (Foucault 1977; see also Gurney 1999; Nettleton, Neale and Pickering 2013).

One way to think about this is in relation to (im)politeness research (Arundale 2006; Linguistic Politeness Research Group 2011). Agreement, affiliation, compliments, praise, and so forth—the ‘active’ dimensions of politeness—are highlighted by the label ‘positive politeness’ or positive face (versus freedom from imposition, or ‘negative politeness’, negative face) (Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1955). Negative politeness is more distance-based, while positive politeness is more intimate. Thus, eliciting and delivering any sort of extreme assessment could be a practice for collaboratively generating positive politeness in the form of agreement and affiliation, which would further construct and reconstruct the mutual positive regard of ingroup members. However, this would only work in such a way if it were successful, which presupposes that an extreme opinion would occur alongside a reasonable assumption that it would be well-received. Where it might not be, the mere act of delivering an extreme opinion could compel a group to show some form of support for it, or to modulate a lack of support, given the research previously described on preference, relational maintenance, and face-threat (consider catcalling, in which extreme one-sided intimate talk is directed toward women by men they do not know as a tactic to metacommunicatively comment on a relationship’s potential or fantasy closeness: Bailey 2016). In research on responses to racist comments, it was shown that participants often respond in ways that may point out the problematic comment, but that also allow it to pass with humour and without serious critique (Kurylo and Robles 2015; Robles 2015). Having support (or lukewarm/lack of support) on-record in the interaction may legitimize the opinion’s potential reasonableness even if there is not strong agreement for it—in other words, it could be a way of showing that certain stances are tolerable.

‘Stance’ (Jaffe 2009) is how interactional and discursive research approaches opinion and attitude delivery, by focusing on the way in which participants display, perform, and formulate their talk *as* ‘presenting an opinion’. Stance is accomplished across sequences and even across interactions; ‘stance accretion’ has been proposed as a definition of identity by duBois (developed by Rauniomaa 2003). While considering stance accretion as a key component of how individual and group identities evolve, the current project focuses more on the local environment in which such stances may be fertilized in the moment, for example, through other forms of evaluation and assessment (see Pomerantz 1984). In accomplishing stances, participants do identity-work (Tracy and Robles 2013) for themselves, as a certain sort of individual; in accordance with their ingroup; and positioned in relation to larger social and cultural ideologies. But they also formulate identities for others—for particular people, types of people, and groups of people—who may be contrastable with themselves or their own groups. One way to examine this is through Sacks’ (1992) membership categorization device, a way of understanding how people associate categories or groups of people with certain activities in descriptions. In the example of the description (a very short story) ‘the baby cried, the mommy picked it up’, two categories are referenced (babies and mommies), which belong to a family collection. Sacks describes ‘device’ as a way of unpacking how these categories do some work by associating categories with activities, in that we hear the baby as being the baby *of* the mommy who is mentioned, and therefore we hear her picking the baby up as being occasioned by the crying and as designed to

provide comfort. Descriptions of people are a common feature of extreme opinions about people and their alleged types or groups with which they are associated. Often stories (whether elaborate or 'small') are a basis for presenting such opinions in a way that allows recipients to collaboratively participate in the inferential logic of the opinion or evaluation being constructed (Georgakopoulou 2007; Tracy and Robles 2013).

The following analysis focuses on descriptions that are embedded in stories, many of which have a gossipy tone. Though not all of the examples constitute gossip, there are interesting overlaps. As an activity, gossip is rather more complex than any particular underlying set of base adjacency pairs of greetings and greetings, invitations and acceptances, assessments and agreements, and so forth (Bergmann 1993). Rather, gossip is built out of expanded sequences, and series of sequences, in which discreet information is divulged and dissected (Bergmann 1993). Like stance, it is built over the course of a conversation. There is a delicacy to gossip that pervades it such that preference ceases to be as straightforward as it might typically be. One might not want to wholeheartedly agree with a negative evaluation, for example, because such antisocial behaviour may have consequences for one's presentation of self (Maynard 2013). Gossip is an order of activity rife with dilemmas such as this. But gossip is also a common and enjoyable pastime among friends (or apparent friends): it is overwhelmingly an 'ingroup' activity, where the context demands sufficient safety to air negative opinions without too much sanction, and where the group's identity appears to benefit by contrasting its virtues with that of another group's vices (Wert and Salovey 2004).

Previous research has questioned why certain stances such as racism and sexism, despite being socially problematic, nonetheless occur; and why such talk is rarely met with direct disagreement. Some research has found that often it is because such talk serves local purposes in the interaction (e.g. Kurylo and Robles 2015; Robles 2015; Robles and Kurylo in press). The current study focuses more closely on the strategies for delivering extreme opinions, and how this relates to the social interaction and relationships in the local environment. The analysis focuses on how extreme opinions may be professed in situations where it will be difficult to directly disagree. In other words, participants may take advantage of others' disinclination to do dispreferred actions in order to share certain opinions because if they are well-received, it may increase a sense of cohesion in a group and contribute to belonging. Even when not well-received, getting extreme opinions on record without direct disagreement could construct them as potentially reasonable over time. However, sharing extreme opinions is a dangerous game, and this practice may also backfire and generate disaffiliation and exclusion.

3. Methods

This paper investigates how talk in gossip-like exchanges about non-present third parties constructs belonging and non-belonging identities through identity categorizations that involve strong negative moral stances. This examination is based on a discourse analysis of a corpus of more than 50 hours of audio and video recordings of naturally-occurring talk in American English. The analysis is based on 21 cases of gossipy (gossip-like) stories in which participants construct

strong negative assessments of particular or general categorical non-present others. The participants are primarily Americans between the ages of 18 and mid-30s who were recorded as part of research or as part of teaching assignments later donated to research. The conversations were spontaneous and naturally-occurring (as much as possible, given that people knew they were being recorded). The data were collected from four states across the U.S.A. (California, Colorado, New Hampshire and Washington) using audio and video recordings and have all been transcribed according to Jefferson-inspired standards (2004).

The discourse analysis deployed herein focuses on how specifics of language and embodiment in situated instances ('language in use') construct individual identity in relation to group identity (see Cameron 2001, and Ehrlich and Romaniuk 2014, for the broader definition of discourse analysis being used in this paper – this is not referring to Foucauldian discourse analysis). The analysis takes a broadly pragmatic (Brown and Yule 1983) and ethnomethodological (Garfinkel 1967) perspective and is inspired by a number of approaches in discourse analysis: conversation analysis (from American and European sociologists, linguists, anthropologists, and communication scholars), membership categorization analysis and discursive psychology (from European social psychologists), as well as ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, and sociocultural linguistics (from American communication and sociolinguistics research). In drawing these influences together, the data analysis focuses on the following dimensions:

1. To a large extent, the sequential micro-components of turn-by-turn interaction, including, where relevant, the paralinguistic and embodied conduct of participants rather than the mere content of their talk (conversation analysis) (e.g. Schegloff 2007);
2. Focusing on how categories of persons are specifically named and labelled, or invoked, in the ways that participants implicate certain identities based on race, class, gender, and so forth, in descriptions of non-present persons' activities (membership categorization) (e.g. Stokoe 2012);
3. Attending to the dimensions of participants' supposedly 'mental' matters such as attitudes toward others or formulations of others' intentions as interactional products in service of social actions (discursive psychology) (e.g. Edwards and Potter 1992);
4. Considering also, where possible, how cultural codes are deployed and cultural meanings assumed or proffered based on how participants orient to one another's talk and its descriptions as ordinary or accountable in relation to local and group-specific forms of communication and/or frames of reference (cultural discourse analysis, ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, sociocultural linguistics) (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Carbaugh 2007; Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi 2015; Schiffrin 1996).

The next section presents the results of the analysis, describing how participants use gossip stories to manage group identity membership, as well as pointing out how discourse analytic methods provide these insights.

4. Analysis

The following analysis shows how participants seek to manage inclusion in their local environment--to accomplish belonging and ingrouping among peers--by drawing on moralizing norms about communicative conduct in talk that differentiates local co-participants from dislocated others. The following sections present a selection of five excerpts featuring cases in which gossipy talk accomplishes belonging and non-belonging. The examples feature tellings and stories in which an extreme negative stance is displayed toward a non-present particular (known) or general other based on an identity category. The 'gossipy' quality of the examples is associated with the strong overlap that these examples have with cases of gossip, including categorical assessments, negative opinions, and participants treating the content of talk as either secret or inappropriate to share beyond the confines of the particular conversation. The goal of the analysis is not, however, to defend these excerpts as examples of gossip, or stories, but rather to show different ways that participants attempt to say negative things about others as a way to construct belonging, and how this can backfire.

The first example is a rare case in which the extreme stance is not treated as extreme at all—it is the only such case in which neither participant displays any sort of delicacy around what most people would call ageist, racist, and homophobic language:

Excerpt 1 'The lottery'

- 1 Greg: so the lady that won she's from Rhode Island she's
 2 fucking eighty-two.
 3 Kelsey: ei::ghty two she's go:ing to die:: ((wailing
 4 tone))
 5 Greg: she won three hunnerd million and she's black (.)
 6 so you know she's gunna buy (.) like (stupid) shit,
 7 Kelsey: ((stretching noise))
 8 Greg: that's fuckin gay isn't it=
 9 Kelsey: =yeah.

This excerpt is included because the categorization and assessment practices herein are similar to those across the corpus that *are* treated as problematic by participants (see Robles 2015, and Robles and Kurylo 2015, for a discussion of such cases with respect to racist comments). The practices involve:

1. Mentioning a person as an example of a type or category of person based on stereotyped activities: e.g., being old and therefore about to die (line 3), being black and therefore prone to spending money unwisely (lines 5-6);
2. Displaying a strong negative stance toward the person, as a representative of their 'group', through negative assessments and

morally-valenced language practices: e.g., ‘stupid shit’ (line 6), ‘fuckin gay’ (line 8).

In conversation analysis, it important not to analytically attribute phenomena to the interaction that are not demonstrably relevant to the participants. Thus, we do not have a conversation analytic basis to say the utterances in excerpt 1 are problematic for the participants, who do not treat what they are saying as trouble. However, we have an empirical, comparative basis to say so alongside the membership categorization approach, which allows us to track how people negatively associate groups of people with negatively-moralized traits, behaviours, and so forth. In the rest of the examples, we have both of these legitimizations; furthermore, we can see in how people do or don’t account for or repair their talk, the extent to which their stances are seen as socioculturally problematic or not. This example illustrates an expected relationship between the delivery of an assessable (lines 1-2 and 5-6) in which affiliation is provided, but not strongly; thereafter which, an explicit assessment is pursued (line 8) and agreement is given. The speakers, who are brother and sister, are aligned as sharing the same position toward the topic and categories in their talk, and this alignment produces and reproduces their claimed identities as certain sorts of people (for instance, more deserving of winning a lottery, on the basis that they are young and have more time to enjoy it, and that they would spend the money more wisely).

In all the other examples of these practices, participants orient to the extreme opinion as extreme, and treat the talk in a sometimes-gossipy manner—as secret, as delicate, as extreme, as moral—even when they produce affiliation or agreement. Excerpt 2 is an example of this sort of talk. Once again the participants are well-known to each other (close friends rather than brother and sister as in excerpt 1), and one relates how her mother is trying to get her to befriend someone whom she only knows through social media.

Excerpt 2 ‘You’re a slut’

- 1 Bea: my mom is like (.) trying to get me to be buddy
 2 buddy with: one of his <roommate’s sisters> which is
 3 like a year older than me, and literally? I
 4 looked at her facebook and I’m like scared (f)her
 5 (.) all of her pictures are just like her tits are
 8 like out and like- it’s like- you’re
 9 a s- like- l:: =>I don’t even< KNOW
 10 it’s just [gro:ss
 11 Cat: [you’re] a slut.
 12 Bea: it’s gross=
 13 Cat: =you’re a slut=
 14 Bea: =it’s like every single picture

Bea begins to formulate her negative stance on line 4, building toward a description on lines 8-9 in which she presents her assessment as though something she thought toward the woman at the time that she 'looked at her facebook' (line 14). She makes six attempts to formulate the assessment in this format before abandoning it and reverting to the negative opinion 'it's just gross'. It seems likely that Cat's formulation 'you're a slut' (lines 11 and 13) are collaboratively completing what Bea was attempting to say in lines 8-9 (based on the particles *s* and *l*). Through this particular sequence of incremental formulation attempts and the way they are received and reformulated by the interlocutor, we have a conversation analytic basis to say that Bea treats her utterances as potentially problematic. This is further shown through these repairs and disfluency, through which Bea displays difficulty with what she is trying to say, which from a discursive psychology perspective, is a way of constructing rather than simply reporting a psychological attitude (Antaki 2004). To add membership categorization analysis, both participants produce a description associating the category of this kind of woman called a 'slut' with the activity of posting inappropriate photos of herself on Facebook. Though Bea does not affirm the formulation Cat provides for her (repeating 'it's gross' instead), she affiliates with the stance and gives the preferred response. The category label 'slut' is already pejorative; the assessment 'gross' intensifies this. Thus, the stance presented is extremely negative and presents the woman described as morally inappropriate. This reinforces a sociocultural norm about how women should conduct themselves in public and/or through public fora, such as social media. It invokes a woman of low moral character, and by contrast, the two women in the interaction (who do not engage in such behaviour) can safely denigrate her and reinforce their own shared moral superiority. By negotiating their convergent selves and divergent others, the participants construct local identities in relation to larger societal assumptions about how women should behave.

A similar example is presented in excerpt 3 (some lines of the transcript that involve unrelated insertion sequences have been removed). In this case it is a small group of three close friends, talking about face-to-face (rather than online) behaviour of someone they all know and interact with regularly (rather than someone they just know of). It is similar, however, in deploying strong negative assessments toward a woman's sexualized activities:

Excerpt 3 'The game'

- 1 Halley: the other day (.) I was coming in (0.5)[to-
 2 ?: [()]
 3 ((laughter))
 4 Halley: t- I was coming into the room (.) with Jerome (.)
 5 a:nd Bree was drunk as (1.0) hell like=
 6 Liz: =°oh my god°=
 7 Halley: I've never seen her like that >(even though) I
 8 don't really want to< [but (.) so
 9 [((laughter))]

(40 seconds later)

10 Halley: She was li~ke “oh my go:sh I’m so:: drunk ha ha ha
11 ha ha ha” and then (.) Aaron was just like u↑u::h

(10 seconds later)

12 Halley: all the sudden (0.5) she like tells me about her
13 night=

14 Liz: = °oh [go:d°

15 Halley: [>n it’s like<] she’s already disgusting >I
16 mean I don’t wanna know abou that shit< and she’s
17 like (0.5) hh (0.8) um (.) “*I went to the bar
18 toni:ght (.) a:nd (0.5) I hhad this guy buying me
19 drinks a::ll ni:ght because I was like flirting
20 with hi:m and making it [seem like]=

21 Liz: [((laughs))]

22 Halley: =I would go h↑ome with him? but I wasn’t go:ing to.
23 (.) see I’m s(h)o good at the g(h)a:me [like (.)
24 the ga:me you know*,”]

25 Liz: [<°oh: my:
26 go:d°>]

27 Halley: and I was like (0.5) “n(h)o”=

28 K/L: =((laughter))((laughter))

29 Liz: [g(h)ame]

30 Kayla: [y(h)eah ((laughs))]

31 Halley: [“what game”] and she was like “*the game of
32 flirtation*” and I was like (.) [“↑O::H R↑EA::LLY”]

33 Kayla: [hh no way, (0.8)]

34 (I don’t think it is)=

35 Liz: =nah

Halley launches a typical sort of story in which she presents her own behaviour as ordinary, contrastable with the gossip target Bree’s behaviour, described as ‘drunk as hell’ (line 5). Halley distances herself from her description of Bree, saying ‘I’ve never seen her like that’ and ‘I don’t really want to’ (lines 7-8) as a way to show she has no friendship or positive regard for Bree. Her co-participants support her description immediately and throughout with response cries that imply negative assessments (lines 6, 14, 25-26, 33) and aligning laughter (lines 3, 9, 21, 28, 30). This support, coming right away, may explain why there is far less delicacy evinced toward the stance being built in this

interaction, though there is some. For example, the pause at line 5 shows some difficulty describing how drunk Bree is, and even the description of Bree's drunkenness as something Halley hasn't seen before could have functioned as an account for whatever story Halley is going to tell about Bree. However, the tone is already negative and without directly negatively assessing Bree (at first), Halley nonetheless presents her in highly objectionable ways. She performs Bree's talk in the encounter she is describing in the form of direct reported speech, as though she were Bree, and uses a high-pitched, breathy voice (lines 10-11). She also acts out another party's response to Bree at the time with a response cry of something like uncertainty and distaste (line 11). By this point, Halley has built up her negative stance, and received enough support from her interlocutors, to be more explicit with an assessment. Thus, a conversation analytic account of the sequence of actions in interaction shows how the talk prepares a context for a preferred response to an upcoming assessment.

In line 15 Halley formulates the description of Bree as 'disgusting'. Here, discursive psychology would draw attention to this affective language, which presents an embodied, almost instinctive negative reaction to Bree as a person. Though neither Halley nor the others present produce a label such as 'slut' (as in excerpt 2), they categorize Bree in a similar way, linking a strong negative assessment with her as a kind of person based on the activities she engages in (flirting with someone to get free drinks). Halley goes on to produce more of Bree's alleged talk in the encounter (lines 17-20) and comes to the upshot when she presents Bree as being 'proud' of her behaviour and describing it as a sort of clever way to get free drinks (lines 22-24 and 31-32). Thus, Bree is presented as a certain category of woman who is morally problematic based on her sexually-related behaviour, in this case a way of acting toward men in bars rather than a way of presenting her physical appearance online. All of Bree's turns are responded to with the preferred affiliation, and constructs the women in strong agreement against the behaviour of Bree. This agreement is treated as an obvious response based on the 'evidence' Halley provides, suggesting a resonance with larger societal assumptions about what constitutes good behaviour versus Bree's 'deceptive' flirting. The women construct their individual and shared identity as people who do not do the sorts of things Bree does: as perhaps more honest, forthright, reasonable, and overall 'moral' women.

The previous examples show how stories featuring specific, negatively-categorized people (whether known or unknown to participants) may engender (or get worked up to engender) affiliative responses to construct shared positions and identities. By relying on preference and (usually) showing some modicum of delicacy, participants present themselves as reasonable, and present the behaviour of those they lambast as unreasonable. Thus, even though they provide extreme opinions based on race or gender, these opinions are collaboratively made justifiable and acceptable. However, occasionally, participants stumbled into situations in which their categorizations could be taken to offend. The next example shows how someone may orient to the problematic nature of their utterance in the progress of their turn, and how this may be treated initially without affiliation, but then ultimately engenders affiliation.

Excerpt 4 ‘Mexicans love that’

- 1 Chris: at the flea market >you know Mexicans love that ki- oh-<
 2 (2.0)
 3 Val: N(h)o comment (.) r[(h)acist=
 4 Chris: [rewind]
 5 Val: =ass).
 6 (1.0)
 7 Chris: du:de,
 8 Val: My boyfriend doesn’t own a globe shut up m hm hm
 9 Chris: hh hh huh but if you made him one I’m sure he’d love
 10 it,
 11 Val: I don’t think so.
 12 (3.0)
 13 Chris: What would he say if you handed him a paper mache globe?
 14 (2.0)
 15 Val: “*I don’t know what ees*”
 16 ((laughter))
 17 Val: “looks like shit”
 18 Chris: No he’d probably jus say “*o:h thank you*”
 19 Val: “*Oh, thanks bayby*” (1.0) “*I lofe it*” ((laughs)) “what
 20 the hell is it?”

In line 1, Christa displays having ‘caught herself’ in the midst of what she was saying, and does work to repair (even explicitly) what she’s just said (lines 1, 4). In doing so, she displays a sort of ‘mental error’, in the sense of one’s mouth running ahead of one’s mind. Val calls Christa out on this association Christa has made between a group of which Val’s boyfriend is a member (Mexicans) and a negatively-presented activity (enjoying or buying tacky handmade items at flea markets—a mark of ‘low class’). However, while disaffiliating from the stance, Val does not work strongly to disagree. Her objection and ‘I don’t think so’ (lines 8, 11) are preparatory to later collaborating with Christa on a ‘mock’ conversation in which Val imitates her boyfriend (including imitating his accent) reacting to receiving a paper mache globe as a gift (lines 15-20). Thus, the disaffiliation from the comment on Mexicans is somewhat undermined by an affiliation with the humorous idea of the boyfriend receiving a crappy gift of the sort Christa had initially described. The initial comment was unsuccessful, but it was successfully repaired into something else. The interaction attends to a larger cultural discourse about not making generalizing or racist comments; but also reinforces a shared identity of the American women, versus Val’s Mexican boyfriend, by mocking him in a playful way.

In the previous examples, extreme negative stances about categories of people were (mostly) treated with some delicacy, but ultimately received with agreement and/or affiliation. These examples were common in the data, regardless of whether they were gossipy (as in the first three cases) or appeared as ‘accidents’ (as in excerpt 4). However, in some instances, such negatively-assessed categories were treated as problematic and in need of fixing, with little or no attempt to affiliate (the proportion of examples that receive such responses in the excerpts presented here are roughly proportionally equivalent to the larger corpus of 21 cases). For instance, in the next example with a group of friends, Carrie describes a mutually-known neighbour to some of the co-participants in the form of a gossip-like news delivery:

Excerpt 5 ‘Drug dealers’

- 1 Carrie: °um° (0.5) s↑o are your neighbors all drug
 2 dealers: (0.5) or,
 3 Kathy: [((laughs))]
 4 Mike: [wha:t]
 5 Kathy: ((laughs)) (.) ((laughs))=
 6 Carrie: =so I was sitting outside the other morning
 7 (0.5) eating breakfast reading (.)
 8 (just on the step) and (.) one of them
 9 stumbles out (.) [literally stumbles out
 10 Mike: [hmheh
 11 Carrie: in a sports bra (0.5) and shorts (.) like
 12 brings the dog out and just goes and
 13 like s- stre:tches (.) full out on the
 14 gr(h)ass:(.) it’s l(h)ike=
 15 Kathy: =huh huh
 16 Carrie: [(eight) in the morning]
 17 Kathy: [heh heh heh]
 18 Mike: [()]
 19 Carrie: may:be? (.) so she might have just come back from a run.
 20 (.) bu::t (0.8) I don’t know ((eyebrows raised))
 21 (2.5)
 22 Riley: why would that make her a drug dealer.
 23 (1.0)
 24 Carrie: >I (just know that one of them was)<
 25 (0.8)
 26 Riley: °ile

- 27 (1.5)
 28 Carrie: so maybe not a drug dealer but cracked out all the time
 29 Riley: >right=right<
 30 (1.0)

Earlier in the conversation, Carrie had attempted to launch this story with the same ‘so’, but her interlocutors had not attended to it; by recycling it here with the ‘um’ and pause that waits for attention before continuing, Carrie orients to her story as ‘tellable’: worth telling, rather than abandoning it when it did not get a chance earlier (line 1). She introduces the telling as a bid for attention in topic transition, and her telling (pausing for emphasis, inserting laughter particles, etc.) suggests this is meant to be a humorous recount. The sequential work she does to get this story told is therefore an important dimension of its meaning as an attempt to get affiliation; and the orientation to attention establishes a sort of psychological context that further constructs what is coming as ‘listenable’. As in excerpt 3, Carrie begins by framing her own behaviour as ordinary (lines 6-8) and that of the woman she describes as strange (lines 9, 11-14, 16). By treating the behaviour as newsworthy, Carrie implies it is unusual and accountable, associating it with the category ‘drug dealers’ to provide the negative assessment. As such it potentially functions relationally to establish belonging through shared laughter and alignment of ‘us’ (who do not behave this way) versus ‘them’ who do. It is populated with indirect references to gender (e.g. sports bra) and class (drug dealers, stumbles, etc.) to provide an off-record production of shared social norms.

However, in this case, it becomes noticeable that the story does not get affiliation. This is evident in the lack of laughter among most participants: Kathy is the only recipient who provides this sort of affiliative laughter (lines 3, 5, 15, 17). Everyone else’s receipts are dispreferred, and yet with minimal attempt to modulate their production *as* dispreferred. Mike displays confusion with an open-class repair (line 4) and gives a minimal laugh-like response token (line 10) before providing an account in line 18 (reformulated in line 19 by Carrie), and presenting a reasonable-sounding explanation for the woman’s behaviour. Two other participants are silent. But the most dispreferred move, a direct challenge, comes from Riley in line 22 in which she asks how the activities Carrie has described (stumbling, wearing sporty clothes, lying on the grass) are related to the category ‘drug dealers’. Carrie quickly repairs her initial characterization, modifying ‘all the neighbours’ to one particular neighbour she knows about (line 24). This too receives minimal uptake with a quiet change-of-state token ‘oh’ (line 26), prompting Carrie to account further. Carrie adds in line 28 a different description of a drug user (rather than a drug dealer) with ‘cracked out’, and it is unclear whether she is referring now to all or some of the neighbours, the one neighbour she ‘knows about’, or the neighbour she earlier described lying on the grass in the morning. However, Riley accepts this (line 29) with a rushed-through sequence-closing receipt.

In excerpt 5, not only is belonging not constructed among Carrie and the other participants, but seems to cast her own inclusion into doubt: only one person aligns with her talk, no one agrees, and she is even directly challenged. Carrie provides various elements that might receive affiliation (mutually-known places

and people, embodied ‘acting out’ of the scene) and frames the incident as humorous. But her category association falls flat by being too extreme and possibly even inaccurate. Though one of the participants provides a preferred response by laughing, none of the others do. Later in the same conversation, there is a more successful example in which the participants call a different neighbour a ‘lady of the night’ (a reference to prostitution) because she sits around outside her apartment in a robe smoking cigarettes. Perhaps part of what made this story a success is that it refers to Carrie’s neighbour, who is not known to the rest of her friends, whereas they are all more familiar with the setting and neighbours of their current location (where most of them live). Thus, Carrie is describing her own experience rather than presuming access to theirs. This suggests there are important conditions that must be met for an extreme stance to be treated as funny and affiliative.

In the first three examples, extreme negative stances about categories of people were received with preferred, affiliative responses, even when those stances were oriented to as potentially problematic or taboo. In the last two examples, there was more trouble. Excerpt 4 featured a moment of disaffiliation that was eventually resolved, but excerpt 5 was received with dispreferred and disaffiliative responses. The next section reflects on this analysis and considers the implications of these dangerous strategies for belonging.

5. Discussion

Examples such as those analyzed here, and in the rest of the collection, show the delicacy involved in exclusionary discourse and how identity categories become entangled as differentiating devices for ingroup-outgroup distinctions. Where extreme negative assessments about others were received positively—with agreement and/or affiliation—the talk seemed to accomplish what it set out to do by bolstering co-participants’ ingroup belonging while denigrating and excluding non-present others. But where extreme negative assessments about others were not received positively, the talk not only denigrated and excluded others, but risked excluding the speaker. Though preference can be assumed to supersede constraints on next turns most of the time, extreme stances by their nature risk disaffiliation, failing to construct belonging and instead putting the belonging of the speaker on shaky ground. There appear to be a number of conditions that make this more or less successful, such as the sequence in which extreme opinions are embedded, the knowledge to which speakers can claim access, the established intimacy between interlocutors, and so forth.

These results offer some insight into how and why participants say extreme negative things about others, and how preference can be a strategy for doing so with little consequence. Extreme opinions may be dangerous to one’s identity, but since it is difficult to reject them directly among close friends or family, it could be done for a number of reasons, for example: (1) if it turns out to be an opinion others share, it can bring people closer to feel their position is quite different from that of others outside the group; (2) if it is not a shared opinion, getting it public and resulting in no obvious trouble could make it more acceptable over time, bringing what might have been a marginalized position closer to the centre; (3) it could be a way of distinguishing that person as a ‘character’ in the group, someone who is a bit edgy but tolerated. Evidence from

data collection at different stages of this project suggests these are possibilities, but future research is needed to explore this.

When participants denigrate the identities of others, they risk spoiling their own: a face threat can threaten one's own face (Goffman 1955), just as gossip can boomerang and result in the speaker being seen as 'a gossip' (Bergmann 1993). Displaying vulnerability (for example, through self-deprecation) can build solidarity (Tannen 1993; see also Laihonon 2000), so attacking vulnerable positions of others could threaten one's face if not done successfully. In other words, it makes you look bad to speak badly of others. But if successful, the sort of extreme opinions that result in shared moral condemnation can generate belonging among an ingroup. This is positive for the ingroup, but can be negative for the group about which negative opinions are being formed, as this process can engender punitive moral emotions (Konishi et al. 2017).

By showing how this happens using various discourse analytic approaches in concert (conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, discursive psychology, cultural approaches), this paper shows some ways in which individual and group identity can be examined in interaction. Specifically, aspects of sequence, categorization, purportedly-mental matters, and culture are all resources on which interactants can draw to develop extreme stances about non-present others. To summarize, we might say that a negative category assessment accompanied by psychological support in the context of a (gossipy) telling can produce affiliation if the sufficient pressures of preferred responses successfully overcome the misgivings any one person might have about saying nasty things.

This analysis examined extreme stances professed in situations where it could be difficult to directly disagree. The results showed how accomplishing extreme stances may take advantage of others' disinclination to do dispreferred actions in order to share certain opinions. By engaging in this risky exclusionary talk, participants gambled on the possibility that their assessments would be well-received, increasing a sense of cohesion in a group and contributing to belonging. Even when producing stances that might not be well-received, getting extreme opinions on record without direct disagreement could construct participants' views as potentially reasonable over time. However, sharing extreme opinions is a dangerous game, and this practice may also backfire and generate disaffiliation and exclusion. Thus, participants engage in a variety of tactics in order to ensure they are most likely to obtain the preferred response they are seeking.

Transcription Notations

Symbol	Name	Use
Text [text] [text]	Brackets	Indicates the start and end points of overlapping speech.
=	Equal Sign	Indicates no hearable pause between utterances.
(# of seconds) (o.o)	Timed Pause	A number in parentheses indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.
(.)	Micropause	Indicates a brief pause, usually less than 0.2 seconds.
. or ↓	Period or Down Arrow	Indicates falling pitch utterance-final or internal (respectively).
? or ↑	Question Mark or Up Arrow	Indicates rising pitch utterance-final or internal (respectively).
-	Hyphen	Indicates an abrupt halt, cut-off or interruption in utterance.
>text<	Greater than / Less than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.
<text>	Less than / Greater than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
°	Degree symbol	Indicates whisper or reduced volume speech.
TEXT	Capitalized text	Indicates shouted or increased volume speech.
text	Underlined text	Indicates the speaker is emphasizing or stressing the speech.
:::	Colon(s)	Indicates prolongation of an utterance.
(hhh)	h in Parentheses	Indicates audible exhalation, laugh particles, breathiness
(.hhh)	.h in Parentheses	Indicates audible inhalation
(text)	Parentheses	Indicates speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript.
((italic text))	Double Parentheses	Annotation of non-verbal activity such as smiling, laughing, pointing, etc.

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