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**Constructing Ethnicity Statistics in Talk-in-Interaction:
Producing the 'White European'**

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Constructing Ethnicity Statistics in Talk-in-Interaction:

Producing the 'White European'

Abstract:

This article 'looks behind' official statistics, analysing the social context of their production. It uses conversation analysis to examine how an organisation's ethnic monitoring statistics are constructed in and through interactions between callers and volunteers on its telephone helpline. In particular, it examines how the process of self-categorisation is shaped by the response categories on the organisation's monitoring form and by the format in which the ethnic monitoring question is asked. These analyses contribute to developing understandings of the social construction of 'race'/ethnicity and of organisationally-generated statistics.

Keywords:

conversation analysis, ethnicity, interaction, official statistics, social construction, whiteness

Constructing Ethnicity Statistics in Talk-in-Interaction:

Producing the 'White European'

This study of how ethnic monitoring statistics are constructed through interaction on a telephone helpline draws on - and integrates - two key traditions of sociological inquiry: conceptual and methodological analyses of official statistics; and analyses of the construction of 'race'/ethnicity, particularly in social interaction.

There is a longstanding sociological tradition of interrogating official statistics (Starr, 1987). Some of the best-known contributions derive from critique and analysis of Durkheim's classic data on suicide (e.g. Atkinson, 1978; Douglas, 1967). Other studies interrogate statistics relating to crime (e.g. Maguire, 1994), medicine and health (e.g. Garfinkel, 1967), and education (e.g. Atkinson and Coffey, 2004), and contribute to the theoretical debate (e.g. Bulmer, 1980) about the uses and construction of statistics. From this body of work, it is clear that the conventions used in statistical data collection, analysis and reporting construct particular kinds of representations of the world. The status these representations achieve as 'social facts' (Townesley, 2007) makes it all the more important to understand both their construction and their (intended and unintended) uses. In particular, official statistics are instrumental in constructing (and reinforcing) the social categories - including 'racial' and ethnic categories - which frame research agendas and influence political, policy and funding decisions (e.g. Petersen, 1987). Of particular relevance to the research reported here are national census statistics (Kertzer and Arel, 2002) and the introduction - for the first time - of an ethnic group question in the 1991 UK Censusⁱ.

The question's response categories (and those of the revised 2001 version) have subsequently been used by over 43,000 public bodies across the UK for equal opportunities monitoring (www.ons.gov.uk/census/).

Influential scholars (e.g. Omi and Winant, 1994) of 'race'/ethnicity (a field too vast to admit to systematic overview here) have identified a general conceptual shift from the classical view of 'racial'/ethnic group membership as based on a relatively-fixed 'presumed identity' to seeing it as a dynamic and complex social phenomenon that 'can change according to variations in the situations and audiences encountered' (Nagel, 1994, p.154). A growing body of work informed by conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) uses recorded naturally-occurring interaction to examine the moment-by-moment construction of 'race'/ethnicity in interaction in ordinary social situations. The focus of such work is generally on *when* ethnicity becomes relevant for participants in interaction, in relation to *which* audiences or co-conversationalists, and on *what* it is used to accomplish. Ethnic self-categorisation has been studied in a range of naturally-occurring real life settings: e.g. a public planning meeting (Hansen, 2005); a university governance meeting (West and Fenstermaker, 2000); a school classroom (Bailey, 2000); a neighbourhood dispute resolution service (Stokoe and Edwards, 2007); and an anti-racist training workshop (Whitehead, 2010; see also Whitehead and Lerner, 2009). Across these different situations, ethnic self-categorisation is invoked by the speaker as a way of accomplishing some other action: e.g. conveying expertise; building a complaint; negotiating an identity; or describing and accounting for other people's behaviour.

The research reported here is, like the studies cited above, a conversation analytic study of naturally-occurring interaction in which ethnic self-categorisations are produced. Unlike other studies, however, in which ethnic self-categorisation is done in the service of some other action to which it is subsidiary, in the ethnic-monitoring situation analysed here, self-categorisation has become, at this point, the main business of the talk. Speakers self-categorise because they are asked to do so, and this enables an analytic focus which is distinctive in that it is on the process through which that self-categorisation is accomplished, rather than on what ethnic self-categorisation is designed to achieve when used unprompted by a question about it. The process whereby ethnic self-categorisation is accomplished is, in turn, part of the process of the social construction of ethnicity statistics.

Data

The data are recordings of interactions on a health-related helpline run by a national (UK) charity. Volunteer call-takers complete a call monitoring form, noting type and location of caller, main reason for call, and source of information about the organisation. In April 2007 a new item, 'ethnicity of caller', was added to this form, asking call-takers to select one of five categories for each caller: 'White European', 'Black African/Caribbean', 'Asian', 'Chinese/Japanese', and 'Other'. This is an adaptation of (1991 and 2001) UK Census categories and was added to the form in order to carry out ethnic monitoring of callers in accordance with the mandate for operating an inclusive service, required by the charity's funders.

The organisation collates the information on the monitoring forms and summarises it on a quarterly basis. For the quarter during which I was collecting data (July-September 2007, three months after ethnic monitoring was first introduced) the charity reported receiving a total of 507 calls to the helpline. Of these I have 180 calls (with six different volunteers) - around a third of the total number of calls received by the organisation. According to the report on the 507 calls during this quarter, callers were mostly 'sufferers' (rather than family or health professionals) from London and other major cities, calling for information about the condition, and they found out about the organisation from (in order of frequency) health professionals, the internet, or newspapers/magazines. In terms of ethnicity, 86% of callers (N=435) in this three-month period were coded as 'White European'; 0.4% (two callers) were coded as 'Black African/Caribbean'; 1.4% (seven callers) were 'Asian'; and none were 'Chinese/Japanese' or 'Other' ethnicities. No information on ethnicity was reported for 12% of calls.

Analysis

This analysis 'looks behind' the charity's ethnicity statistics. It examines how the helpline interactions are shaped by events outside the talk (e.g. the nature of the monitoring forms, the construction of the ethnicity categories), how ethnic self-categorisation is produced in the context of individual interactions, and hence how the published statistics are an interactional outcome. I focus, in particular, on how it comes about that 86% of callers are categorised as 'White European'.

My analysis is based on only 58 of the calls in my data corpus. This is because most - 68% - of these calls do not include (any version of) the ethnicity question. There is a very substantial discrepancy between the organisation's report that 12% of calls have missing ethnicity data (based on their compilation of the monitoring forms) and the massively larger percentage in my sample. Given that I have around a third of the 507 calls received during the data collection period, this discrepancy is such as to raise at least the possibility that call-takers sometimes recorded callers' ethnic category on the monitoring sheets without asking them the relevant question. Given what I will show of how the ethnicity question is designed when it is asked, it is certainly possible that volunteers sometimes simply presume - on the basis of accent or some other contextual information - that the person they are speaking to is 'White European', and record them as such without ever asking. To the extent that this is true, it exposes the organisation's ethnicity statistics as (in part) the product of ethnic categorisation based on guesswork by volunteers rather than reported self-categorisation by callers.

In what follows, I begin by showing how responses are shaped by the ways in which the ethnicity question is asked: (i) as a list of categories, (ii) as about 'ethnic origin', or (iii) as about 'nationality'. Fourthly, I consider how volunteers make ethnic ascriptions. Finally, I examine the ways in which questions about ethnicity are designed to balance a bureaucratic task with sensitivity to individual callers.

(i) 'Are you White European ...?'

A first and obvious answer to how it comes about that 86% of callers are categorised by volunteers as 'White European' is that 'White European' is available as one of the pre-designated response categories on the monitoring form. In Extracts 1 and 2 below, volunteers start to read out the category list in the style of a survey questionnaire, such that what the callers do is confirm they are 'White European' ('*oh yeah*', Extract 1, line 5; '*oh yes*', Extract 2, line 9). Not only is this category available - it is also always presented first, and on no occasion is even as many as three of the five pre-designated categories fully articulated before the caller intervenes with a self-categorisation.ⁱⁱ This is compatible with Schaeffer's (1991, pp. 386-7) finding that survey-type questions are vulnerable to interruption because they can be heard to implicate a response (in this case, acceptance of an ethnic category that 'fits') before all of the response categories have been read out.

Extract 1ⁱⁱⁱ

[D013]

01 Vol: uh:m hh and (0.5) #u e# you:r I
 02 need to know your ethnicity:. hh
 03 Again it's #i# (.) for fundi:ng. Is:-
 04 Are y' white Europea:n:,
 05 Clr: Oh yea:h [(.)]
 06 Vol: [Yeah. Yeah.]

Extract 2

[C006]

01 An' one other question if I ma:y
 02 .hh[hh uh]:m wha- we- we're looking at=
 03 Clr: [Ye:s.]
 04 Vol: =>you know< the ethnicity of people who
 05 ca:ll.=Uh:m .hh are you white

06 Europe:an: black African[::]
 07 Clr: [Oh] no I'm whi:te.
 08 Vol: You're white- white European. [.hhh That-]
 09 Clr: [Oh yes.]
 10 Vol: That's fine. <.hh It's only to- <.hh It's
 11 only just for uhm our statistics an:d you
 12 know [uh:m for r]esea:rch as well.

Although the charity's response categories are modelled on Census categories, 'White European' does not appear on any UK Census. The 1991 census - the first to include any question about ethnicity (Peach, 1996) - offered the category 'White' with no subcategories. The other options were 'Black-Caribbean', 'Black-African', 'Black-Other', 'Indian', 'Pakistani', 'Bangladeshi', 'Chinese', or 'Any other ethnic group (please describe)'. In the 2001 census (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/census/>), 'White' had three subcategories: 'British', 'Irish' and 'Any other White background (please write in)'.^{iv} The organisation's decision to use 'White European' represents an attempt to come up with an umbrella term to cover the subcategories. One cost of this adaptation is that it loses comparability with the census category 'White' in that 'White European' excludes (where 'Any other White background' includes) people who identify as white but not European (such as white South Africans or Canadians resident in the UK).

But the most important cost of using this adapted version is interactional. A great deal of work goes into making Census categories 'subjectively meaningful' to the respondents compelled to self-categorise using them (Office for National Statistics, 2003, p.7). Adaptations risk losing precisely this important feature. Previous research has found that people who could be categorised as 'European' (Edinburgh

residents) have 'little or no sense of European identity' (Grundy and Jamieson, 2007, p.669). This is evident in my data too. Callers are willing to endorse 'European' if that is the only response option they are offered that 'fits', but - as we will see - they never spontaneously provide 'European' (or 'White European') as a self-categorisation.

When callers confirm that they are 'White European' what they are confirming is - in the first instance - that they are 'white', not that they are 'European' (see Garner, 2006 for a review of whiteness in European contexts). So in Extract 2 at line 7 it is 'whiteness' (not Europeanness) that is initially endorsed. In response to '*are you white European, black African*' the caller says '*oh no I'm white*' (not '*oh no I'm European*'). The *oh*-prefacing makes this a particularly emphatic rejection of the possibility that she might be *black African* and displays her sense that the question itself was inapposite. Conversation analytic work by Heritage (1998) shows that 'oh-prefaced responses to enquiry' provide an inexplicit comment to the effect that 'the question questioned something which could (or should) be taken for granted, or which is unquestionable, or should not be questioned, or is "beyond question"' (p.4).

In Extract 3 at line 3 the caller responds part way through the first ethnicity category - after the word '*white*' and before the word '*European*' - confirming that she's '*white*'.^v And in Extract 4 the volunteer produces what sounds prosodically like a list of three categories (*white European, black African* and *Caribbean*) when the caller intervenes with '*I'm white*' - not selecting for herself *any* of the categories on offer but merely asserting her whiteness.

Extract 3

[C012]

01 Vol: Uh:m .hh a:nd may I ask your ethnic origi:n.
 02 Are yo[u: (.)] white [Euro]pean bla[ck A-]
 03 Clr: [Uh:m] [Yes.] [uhm]
 04 (.)
 05 Clr: I don't know the terms that you
 06 u:[se ()]
 07 Vol: [.h White Europea:n:] black
 08 Afric[an]
 09 Clr: [It's] white European.=
 10 Vol: =White European. Tha:t's fi:ne. Thank you.

Extract 4

[E010]

01 Vol: A:nd would you mind telling me .hh are you
 02 white Europea:n, (.) black African:, [Caribbean]
 03 Clr: [I'm white.]
 04 Vol: Right. That's lovely. Thank you very much indeed.
 05 =It's just that we don't get any central funding...

So, an unintended effect of the organisation's decision to 'simplify' the Census categories by collapsing the subcategories 'British', 'Irish' and 'Any other White background' into the single category 'White European' is that they have created an ethnicity label that nobody ever produces spontaneously^{vi}. Some callers, like those in Extracts 1, 2 and 3, endorse it if it is offered to them - but many others actively resist it. We can see a hint of this resistance in Extract 4 where '*White European*' is not endorsed - although presumably the volunteer, who doesn't pursue the Europeanness or otherwise of this caller, categorises her as 'white European' on the monitoring form.

(ii) 'May I ask your ethnic origin?'

In fact, it is relatively unusual in my data for the ethnicity question to be followed by a list of options. It is more often formatted in an open-ended way - as in Extract 5 (line 1): *'And may I ask your ethnic origin please.'*

Extract 5

[C017]

01 Vol: And may I ask your ethnic origin plea:se.02 Clr: What d'you m- Engli:sh?

03 Vol: .hh We:ll are you whi:te European?

04 Clr: Whi:te.=

05 Vol: =Yeah(p). Fine.

It is often only when callers display some difficulty with the question that response options are produced. In Extract 5 the caller initially displays some problem with the question (at line 2 he starts to ask *'what do you mean'*) but then offers a candidate answer, *'English'*. The volunteer re-poses the question (line 3) with the first category on the list of options (which must also be the one to which she presumes - on the basis of *'English'* - that he belongs), and he then confirms (at line 4) that he is *white*, though not that he is European. In his first response he took it that his whiteness went without saying.

When callers respond to an open-ended ethnicity question, unconstrained by pre-designated response categories, they regularly self-categorise in terms of their nationality, rather than their ethnicity. In Extract 6 the caller's response (at line 3) is *'I'm British'*. At line 4, the volunteer repeats the answer *'You're British'* by way of

receiving it and then asks a follow-up question: *'White British are you'*, which the caller repeats and confirms (at line 5). The caller has not said that she's white (she's treated it as going without saying), but the volunteer's pursuit (at line 4) is designed to anticipate that 'yes', the caller is white. And that presumption is confirmed.

Extract 6

[C007]

01 Vol: And (.) may I ask you:r ethnic origin
 02 plea:se. [U h : m]
 03 Clr: [I'm British.]
 04 Vol: You're British:. Whi:te British are you?
 05 Clr: Whi:te Brit[ish] ye:s.
 06 Vol: [yeah]
 07 Clr: Fi:ne. .hh That- That's lovely.

The presumption that someone who is British (or Irish) is also European is based on the fact that Britain is part of the European Union, and so all^{vii} British citizens can therefore be described as 'European'. However, the same logic means that 'Black' and 'Asian' British citizens are equally 'European'. There is no evidence in my data set that anyone does actually claim their ethnicity as 'Black European', but equally there is very little evidence for a 'White European' identity.

In Extract 7, in response to the question *'may I ask your ethnic origin please'* (at lines 1-2), the caller delays before answering - and then (at line 4) offers *'I'm English'*. At line 6, this is transformed - via an understanding check - into the first of the ethnicity categories *'So you're white European'* - which is treated (via 'so') as the upshot of being *'English'*. The caller confirms this. As we have seen in other interactions, the

caller (at line 4) takes her whiteness for granted. And, since 'English' people are automatically taken to be 'European', what the volunteer is checking out (at line 6) is 'white'.

Extract 7

[C018]

01 Vol: .hhh And: (.) may I ask you:r ethnic

02 origin please.

03 (0.5)

04 Clr: Yes:: [(It's-)] I'm- I'm Engli:sh.

05 Vol: [You've-]

06 Vol: You've- So you're white Europea:n.]

07 Clr: [I']m

08 white Euro[pea:n].

09 Vol: [Ye:s.] That's lovely::

Some callers display overt evidence of resistance to being categorised as 'European' and insist, instead, on other (typically, nationality) labels such as 'British', or 'English'.^{viii} In Extract 8 the question (at line 2), '*And may I ask your ethnic origin please*' is met with silence (at line 3). At line 4, the volunteer pursues a response by beginning to list the predesignated categories, starting with '*White European*' and leaving a significant pause. The caller (at line 5) initially endorses '*White European*', but post-receipt produces a resistant '*White British*' (line 7).

Extract 8

[C016]

01 Vol: .hh Uhm and may I ask your ethnic origin

02 plea:se.

03 (0.2)

04 Vol: Are you Whi:te Europe:an, (0.5)
 05 Clr: White Europ[ean]
 06 Vol: [Whi]te Europea[n.]
 07 Clr: [Whi]te British:.=
 08 Vol: =Yeah, yeah. Fi- That's fine.

In Extract 9, at lines 1-4, the volunteer formulates an open-ended version of the ethnicity question - and when this is met with silence (at line 5) she pursues the caller's ethnicity with a question that displays her expectation that she can be categorised as '*White European*' (lines 6-7). The caller initially confirms this (line 8, '*yeh*'), but post-receipt revises her response to '*I'm white well uh British should I say*' (lines 11-12).

Extract 9

[D020]

01 Vol: [<I-I just need to] know==it's just
 02 for ou:r [uh:m stat-]statistics.=I=
 03 Clr: [That's fine.]
 04 Vol: =just need to know your ethnis-sicity.
 05 (.)
 06 You #u-u-u# you are (.) white European
 07 are you. .hh[hhh]
 08 Clr: [Yeh!]
 09 Vol: Yeah you sou:nd it! uh huh huh huh
 10 [heh heh heh heh heh heh]
 11 Clr: [Yes. I'm- I'm white we:ll] uh (0.5)
 12 Bri(h)]tish s(h)ould I [(say)]
 13 Vol: [[Bri]tish yea:h.\$
 14 Yeah.
 15 (.)

16 Vol: Tc[h! .hhh]
 17 Clr: [Wanna] know me a:ge.^{ix}
 18 (.)
 19 Vol: \$No::.\$ Nothing like tha:t. No: no:.

So, in response to open-ended versions of the ethnicity question, callers typically self-categorise as 'British' or 'English', with whiteness generally taken for granted. Neither 'White' nor 'European' is a popular selection.

(iii) 'Would you mind telling me your nationality?'

Across the data set, there is considerable variability in the way that the ethnicity question is asked. Sometimes volunteers simply list ethnicity categories without explicitly naming the sort of categories they are (as in Extract 4). Sometimes they specifically ask for the caller's 'ethnicity' (as in Extracts 1, 2, 9 and 15), with or without listing ethnicity categories. On other occasions the information sought is formulated as ethnic 'origin' (Extracts 5-8 and 13), ethnic 'background' (Extract 16), or ethnic 'group'. We know from the literature on social survey design that these differences in question wording produce differential responses: e.g. using 'ethnic origin' orients the response backwards in time relative to using 'ethnic group' (Aspinall, 2001, p.831).

Even more strikingly, volunteers sometimes replace the word 'ethnicity' with 'nationality' (Extracts 10-12) or ask where callers were 'born' (Extracts 14 and 16). (However, nobody ever asks about either 'race' or 'colour': neither word is ever used in any context across the 180 calls.) So in Extract 10 the volunteer asks *'would you*

mind telling me your nationality', followed (at line 3) by the first pre-designated category: *'Are you white European'*. The response (at line 4) has a turn-initial delay ('Uh' and silence) and an abandoned start on *'w(hite)'*. The question plus candidate answer is problematic for the caller. Rather than confirm that she is *'white European'*, she answers that she's *'U-K'* and revises this to *'English'*. Here, then, the resistance to *'white European'* is occasioned - additionally - by the nature of the question asked. This caller would of course have been coded as *'White European'* on the monitoring sheet.

Extract 10

[E012]

01 Vol: Right, An:d (0.4) would you mind
 02 telling me:: your nationality?
 03 Are you: white (0.4) European?
 04 Clr: Uh (0.2) (w-) I'm (.) y- U-K.
 05 (.)
 06 Vol: Y[es.]
 07 Clr: [Ye]s. E- English.
 08 (0.2)
 09 Clr: Y[es.]
 10 Vol: [R]ight.
 11 (0.4)

Extract 11

[E010]

01 Vol: A:n:d we: have to know the nationality of
 02 the people: that w[e're talking] to.
 03 Clr: [O : k a y :z]
 04 Vol: .hh

05 Clr: Uhm[:]
 06 Vol: [Is i]t white Europe:an?
 07 (.)
 08 Clr: I'm British, white (.) white British,
 09 Vol: Right tha[t's fine.]

We see a similar resistance to '*white European*' in Extract 11. After formulating an open-ended version of the question (lines 1-2), and encountering a delay, the caller pursues a response (at line 6) by producing as a candidate answer the first response option ('*Is it white European*') and then she waits - effectively signalling (both by turn-final prosody and by her subsequent silence) that she presumes that her recipient is indeed 'white European'. This pursuit is hearable less as presenting the first in a series of options than as a 'yes/no' question, designed to prefer a 'yes'. It gets neither a 'yes' nor a 'no' - instead the answer is what Raymond (2003) has called a 'type non-conforming response'. At line 8 the caller displays some problem with the question: she cannot simply say 'no' since, as she goes on to say, she is '*British*' (and '*white*') and a 'British' person could be categorised as 'European'; but she cannot say 'yes' since 'Europe' is not generally considered to be a nation nor 'European' a nationality (and of course neither is 'white'). Instead she answers the question about 'nationality' by producing a category that is a nationality category, '*British*', amending it to '*white British*' by way of acknowledging that a colour question has also been asked.

In Extract 12 (at lines 1-3) the volunteer formulates (as part of an account for asking) the question as one about nationality and immediately follows it by the first two of the pre-designated ethnicity categories ('*white European*', '*black African*'); and (at line

5) the caller answers that yes, she's '*white*', '*white European*', immediately followed by '*British*'.

Extract 12

[E004]

01 Vol: An:d .hh (.) they want to know the
 02 nationality of the people that we speak
 03 to: ,=Are you white European, .hh black
 04 African[: ,]
 05 Clr: [Ye]ah I'm whi:te.=White
 06 (0.6) European British:
 07 Vol: R:ght.
 08 (0.2)
 09 Vol: uh hh hah hah .hh \$That's lovely:\$.
 10 Clr: \$Distressi:ng\$.=
 11 Vol: [uhhhh hah hah hah .hh]
 12 Clr: =[hah hah You j's never kno:w] the:(h)se
 13 d(h)a:ys, hah hah
 14 (0.2)
 15 Vol: That's: (0.2) supe:r.=Thank you very
 16 much indeed and if there's anything
 17 else that we can do to help please
 18 Vol: do get back to [us.]

This episode is one of a significant minority of cases in which the ethnicity question is followed by talk about ethnicity. After the volunteer's receipt of the caller's answer ('*Right*', line 7) and closing assessment ('*That's lovely*', line 9), the caller produces (at line 10) what sounds like a counter-assessment. She says '*Distressing*', apparently assessing the fact that her colour and nationality have been open to question (rather

than 'white British' simply assumed). Her expansion at lines 12-13, '*You just never know these days*' is an idiomatic formulation that offers an account for her assessment that the ethnicity question is '*distressing*', while also accepting the volunteer's need to ask it. It conveys something like: 'It's "distressing" that Britain "these days" is a multi-ethnic society such that you cannot simply assume that I'm white and British but have to ask'. The volunteer 'laughs along' but does not otherwise engage with this assessment, then reissues a closing evaluation, and moves into closing the call.

Laughter is often used in response to 'improprieties' (thereby constituted as such) as a way of showing alignment that 'stops short of outright affiliation' (Glenn, 2003, p.122). There are several calls in the data set where the ethnicity question leads to topicalisation of race and ethnicity issues - sometimes, as here, by the caller, sometimes by the volunteer - and they are always interactionally problematic.

(iv) Ethnic soundings

It seems self-evident that people make ethnic (and racial) characterisations of each other based on what they can see (visually) of each other's bodies, hair, skin colour, clothing and so on. In (conventional) telephone conversations people cannot see each other, so any such characterisations must rely on contextual cues and the sound of the other's voice. Schegloff (1999, p.566) has commented on the fact that people regularly make ascriptions of gender based on the sound of a person's voice. My data set offers strong evidence that people are making ethnic (and indeed racial) ascriptions based on voice.

In Extract 13, the 'evidence' for presuming that the caller is white and English is made explicit. When the caller doesn't immediately respond to the ethnicity question (line 1), the volunteer pursues with a candidate answer formulated as '*You sound white and English*' (my emphasis). She's apparently right.

Extract 13

[B026]

01 Vol: Uh wha:t ethnic origin a:re you.

02 (.)

03 Vol: You sound white and English.

04 [huh huh huh]

05 Clr: [I do:. Yes. I am.]

Volunteers regularly treat the 'sound' of callers' voices - in particular their accents - as a cue to their ethnicity. This is particularly so with Scottish (and also Irish) accents which are quite markedly different (at least to British ears) from regional English accents. When callers with Scottish accents also reveal that they are living in Scotland (either by asking for a local support group, or by giving a Scottish postcode), the conclusion that they are 'Scottish' - and therefore 'white European' - appears to be irresistible. In Extract 14 a caller with a Scottish accent and a Scottish postcode is asked the ethnicity question (at lines 2-3) in the form: '*You were born in Sco- You're Scottish are you*'. The caller confirms this, it's receipted, and the volunteer moves on. The question of whether she's black or white is never raised, and the volunteer surely ticked 'White European' in the monitoring box.

Extract 14

[D022]

01 Vol: Uh:m (.) I think that's all I need to know.
 02 =You-you were born in Sco- u-you're Scottish
 03 are yo[uɹ]
 04 Clr: [Y]es.
 05 Vol: Yeah.hh That's all I need to know th[en.]

Statistically, the likelihood that a caller is properly categorised as 'Black African/Caribbean', 'Asian', 'Chinese/Japanese' or 'Other' is considerably reduced for Scottish compared with English callers. According to the 2001 census (www.ons.gov.uk/census/), whereas nearly 8% of the UK population as a whole is other-than-white, fewer than 1% of Scottish residents are non-white (and a large proportion of these non-white people resident in Scotland are new immigrants who would not 'sound' Scottish: see Bond [2006] on minority ethnic groups in Scotland). The widespread presumption that people with a Scottish accent are white is very strong - and makes asking the ethnicity question quite difficult for volunteers.

In Extract 15, the caller has a Scottish accent and a Scottish postcode but the volunteer does actually succeed in asking the ethnicity question (at lines 9-13). It takes some work. The question itself is preceded by a 'my-side telling' (Pomerantz, 1998) - an observation about the caller's Scottish accent, which is also formulated as a compliment. The volunteer says: (at lines 9-10) *'You've got a nice Scottish accent'*. This is complicated because the volunteer also has an equally marked 'nice Scottish accent' and their shared Scottishness is part of what the co-interactants are treating as laughable here. *'You've got a nice Scottish accent'* is built to claim - in a manner attentive to their shared Scottishness - already to have some access to the caller's ethnicity in advance of asking a question to which it might be assumed that the

volunteer already knows (or should know) the answer. She further delays the ethnicity question itself by reporting that '*We're having to ask people about their ethnicity*', thereby claiming to be compelled to ask this question despite already having a fair idea of what the answer will be. At line 12 she launches the question with '*I presume*', abandons it and asks the formal question '*Are you white, white British*' in overlap with the caller laughing (I take it at the absurdity of asking a Scot whether or not she's white: since she is '*definitely*' [line 15] - i.e. unquestionably or self-evidently - so).

Extract 15

[C002]

01 Vol: May I just ask you: a couple of other questions
 02 just before you go: ,=
 03 Clr: =Ye::[s,]
 04 Vol: [.h]h uhm .hh (0.4) uhh- uHow uhh uhm >may
 05 I just have< the first part of your postcode please,
 06 Clr: W-X one three. ((Scottish Highlands))
 07 Vol: <W-X one three.>=It's only for our statistics so
 08 it doesn't go anywhere it's quite confidential,
 09 .hh: uhm .hh an:d (.) \$you've got a nice Scottish
 10 a(h)cc(h)ent, [.hh] uhm .hh and we're having
 11 Clr: [hoh! hoh!]
 12 Vol: to ask people about their ethnicity.=I presume: (.)
 13 uhm I mean [are you whi:te] (.) white British? [O:r]
 14 Clr: [huh huh huh] [Hh]
 15 hah hah. \$.hh Ye:s de:fin[itely:(h) huh huh huh huh]
 16 Vol: [Yes. hah-hah-hah hah hah!]
 17 hah hah .hh: Well .hh um: .hh do feel free to
 19 contact us: a[gai:n, ...

In Extract 16 again there is trouble asking the ethnicity question of a caller with a Scottish accent who has mentioned that she lives in Scotland:

Extract 16

[D006]

- 07 Vol: Uh:m: (0.2) pt an:d ee:- well obviously you're Sc-
 08 u-we need your ethnic ba- uh-n eth:nicicity but
 09 obviously you're \$°Scottish° aren't you(h)\$
 10 hah .hh[h Y]ou were co(h)rn in Great Britain=
 11 Clr: [(I am.)]
 12 Vol: =so tha that's fi:ne. for that one, .h[h]
 13 Clr: [Y]up.=
 14 Vol: =Yeah tha that's all I nee:d the:n.

At line 7, the volunteer cuts off her first version of this question - designed in the open-ended format '*and e(ethnicity)*', indicating it is the next in the series of monitoring questions. She starts again with something headed for, '*well obviously you're Sc(ottish)*', thereby getting it heard - before she actually asks the ethnicity question - that she does already know the answer. '*We need your ethnicity*' (line 8) is an account (of sorts) for asking the question - it hints at an administrative task she's undertaking on behalf of the organisation - but she continues to convey a strong presumption that '*obviously you're Scottish aren't you*', recycling the utterance she abandoned before. She does not pursue the issue of whether or not this Scottish caller is 'white'. This caller was presumably coded as 'White European'.

(v) Standardisation versus recipient design

In asking the ethnicity question, volunteers encounter a recurrent problem: the tension between standardisation and recipient design. On the one hand, they know that the ethnicity question is a standard question that they are supposed to ask everyone who calls. On the other hand, in many cases they figure (rightly or wrongly) that they already have a pretty good idea of what their co-interactant's ethnicity is, based on cues such as their accent, where they live, and (sometimes) their name.

'Recipient design' refers to the ways in which talk is constructed 'in ways that display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants' (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974, p.727). It may well seem to volunteers that it would be insensitive to ask someone with a Scottish accent who lives in the Scottish Highlands whether they might be 'Black African', 'Asian', or 'Chinese'. It's massively unlikely that they would be (though of course not impossible). Such a question may be felt to run counter to the principle of recipient design, to display an inattentiveness to the 'particular other' they are interacting with, a failure to notice what they should really have picked up on over the course of what is often a fairly intimate and lengthy conversation. We have already seen that callers respond to some versions of the ethnicity question with '*oh yes*' or '*oh no*', conveying that the question was inapposite - that of course they are white (or British).

Volunteers manage the tension between standardisation and recipient design in a number of ways. One of these is to signal a shift from the substantive part of the interaction (giving personal information and advice, sufferer to sufferer, about a health condition) to what is marked as a clearly subsidiary, impersonal bureaucratic

exercise. So the questions necessary to complete the monitoring sheet - including postcode, how the caller heard about the organisation, and their ethnicity - are often introduced with a 'preliminary' item such as: *'May I just ask you a couple of other questions just before you go'* (Extract 15); or *'Just before you go Marie, may I ask you one or two questions please, is that alright'* (C006). These preliminaries indicate that a new activity is about to be launched (Schegloff, 2007).

The ethnicity question is rarely the first of the monitoring questions to be asked. It usually comes after either the question about the caller's postcode or the question about how they heard about the organisation. Also, it is regularly preceded by the conjunction 'and'. Such 'and-prefacing' (Heritage and Sorjonen, 1994) signals that the new question/answer pair is linked to the previous one and is part of a single ongoing activity of a routine bureaucratic character (like monitoring or form-filling).

We have seen several examples of this: *'And may I ask your ethnic origin'* (Extracts 5-8); *'And would you mind telling me your nationality'* (Extract 10); *'And we have to know the nationality ...'* (Extract 11). Heritage and Sorjonen comment that an and-preface can be used to 'normalise or detoxify the question it prefaces', and to imply that there is 'a routine, task-centered motivation for questions which might otherwise be treated as troublesome by virtue of their content' (p. 22).

Volunteers also signal that the questions they are about to ask are institutional ones - and not ones driven by their own personal interest or by any immediate relevance to the information or advice they are giving - by shifting from 'I' to 'we' in introducing the ethnicity question (i.e. by using what is often termed 'the institutional we').

Examples include: *'we need your ethnicity'* (Extract 16); *'we're looking at the ethnicity*

of people who call' (Extract 1); *'we have to know the nationality of the people we're talking to'* (Extract 11); *'we're having to ask people about their ethnicity'* (Extract 15).

I have commented already on the sense of compulsion - 'having to' ask - that is also conveyed by these sorts of formulations.

Another strategy is explicitly to shift the 'footing' of the question (Goffman, 1981) from 'I' or 'we' (where 'we' represents the organisation of which the volunteer is a part) to 'they', where 'they' are the funding body: *'They want to know the nationality of the people we speak to'* (Extract 12); *'They also ask us for the nationality of the people that we talk to. Are you white European'* (E002).

Finally, the ethnicity question is often accounted for, in the course of its production, in impersonal terms, particularly related to 'statistics' and/or 'funding': *'I just need to know, it's just for our statistics, I just need to know your ethnicity'* (Extract 9); *'I need to know your ethnicity. Again it's for funding'* (Extract 2). The 'statistics and funding' account is sometimes left for after the caller has answered the question (i.e. in 'post-response slot'): *'It's only just for our statistics'* (Extract 1); *'It's just that we don't get any central funding'* (Extract 4). The post-response slot is regularly a place where - in ordinary conversation - people can comment on the response, or assess it, or topicalise it (Schegloff, 2007). By placing the 'statistics and funding' account in this slot, the volunteers display clearly that they were asking the question only for bureaucratic ends, and have no personal interest in the answer.

So one key way in which participants manage the ethnicity question is to display - with preliminaries, and-prefacing, shifts in footing, and the like - that it is

prefabricated: that they are animating a question designed by others (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000), rather than asking a question 'from me to you at this point in our interaction'. But even prefabricated talk can be packaged and delivered in a recipient-designed way - i.e. in a way that displays sensitivity to callers' individual characteristics as those have been displayed, reported, or otherwise made available over the course of the interaction (Author, 2010). We have seen this earlier where volunteers have asked the ethnicity question as '*you're Scottish aren't you*' (Extract 16) or 'presumed' that a caller is '*white British*' (Extract 15).

Occasionally, callers manage to disguise altogether the bureaucratic requirement that mandates the ethnicity question, by asking it in a way that suggests it is driven by a personal interest in the response. In Extract 17, as the caller makes a move to end the conversation (at lines 1-2), the volunteer says (at line 5) '*Is that a touch of an Irish accent there*'. For us as analysts, this is recognisable as a disguised version of the ethnicity question - in part due to its position (in the pre-closing phase of the call); in part due to the information it analysably seeks to elicit (the caller's nationality); and in part due to its comparability with the ways in which the ethnicity question is formulated across many of the other calls with respect to the callers' accents. It is highly unlikely that the caller hears this as an ethnic monitoring question - and, in fact, her answer to the question ('*Oh yes. I'm Irish*' - where the '*oh*' conveys that her Irishness should have been taken for granted) leads into a discussion of different types of Irish accent (data not shown).

Extract 17

[B028]

01 Clr: Anyway listen Katy (I'd) better not hold

- 02 you up any lo:nger.
- 03 Vol: Oh it's been lovely ta_lking to you.=
- 04 Clr: Ye:s: a:nd u:h (.)
- 05 Vol: Is that a tou_ch of an I_rish accent [there]
- 06 Clr: [O h]
- 07 yes. I'm I_rish:.
- 08 Vol: I thou:ght tha:t!

The tension between standardisation and recipient design underpins and informs much of the variability in question design. When callers say *'Is that a touch of an Irish accent there'*, or observe that *'you've got a nice Scottish accent'*, they are attentive to recipient design features which hold them accountable for not asking a question to which they already know the answer, despite the organisational mandate to ask the ethnicity question in a standard way. This points to a systematic, interactionally-based feature of the construction of ethnicity (and other) statistics.

Conclusion

This analysis has 'looked behind' the ethnic monitoring statistics of one organisation to see just how these statistics are constructed, and in particular how it comes about that 86% of helpline callers are 'White Europeans'. The organisation's adaptation of the Census categories to create the category 'White European' is part of what makes possible such an outcome, even though it names a category in a manner that is analysably not subjectively meaningful to the very people so categorised. The subsequent manner in which the ethnicity question is asked and responded to, and then transformed into entries on a coding sheet, constitutes the process of data collection on which the published statistics rely. The organisation's statistics are not

simply the outcome of callers' self-categorisation: they are a product of the categories on the monitoring form and the interactions on the helpline.

This study makes a distinctive contribution to understanding how 'race'/ethnicity is constructed in and through ordinary social interaction. I have no reason to suppose that this particular organisation is in any way atypical in its practices. Rather the reverse: colleagues who work with other organisational data have (informally) confirmed the existence of similar practices in their recorded calls. It seems likely that general findings from this particular organisation are broadly applicable across a range of (UK) organisations which conduct this kind of ethnic monitoring as part of their equal opportunities mandate. Further, the kinds of processes we have seen in operation here may well be more widely generalisable across situations in which talk about 'race'/ethnicity - particularly that involving ethnic self-categorisation - becomes relevant.

In sum, through its detailed analysis of how this particular organisation's ethnic monitoring statistics are constructed in and through talk-in-interaction, this study illustrates how specifically *interactional* factors underpin the construction of official statistics of this type.

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Notes

ⁱBy contrast, in the USA, a 'race' question and 'racial' categories have appeared on every census from the first in 1790 (Anderson, 1990).

ⁱⁱSee Schwartz and Hippler (1991) for an overview of the impact of choice and presentation order of response alternatives.

ⁱⁱⁱData extracts are transcribed according to conversation analytic conventions, and each has a location 'tag': e.g. Extract 1 comes from volunteer D's 13th recorded call. Throughout, 'Vol' designates the volunteer call-taker, and 'Clr' the caller.

^{iv} In the forthcoming (2011) Census, there will be four sub-categories of 'White': the 'umbrella' subcategory 'English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British', plus 'Irish', 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller', and 'Any-other-White-background-write-in'.

^vWe can see (at lines 6-7) how answers to questions are also vulnerable to interactional effects: when respondents display 'uncertainty' (Maynard and Schaeffer, 2002, pp. 24-7), questioners may well intervene before the projectable end of a turn at talk.

^{vi}Also, more generally, forced-choice classification systems which combine many different ethnic groups may map poorly onto vernacular usage/understandings (Stephan and Stephan, 2000).

^{vii}Actually not quite all: apparently British citizens of overseas territories are excluded.

^{viii}For recent analyses of British and English identities, see McCrone (2002); Ward, (2004); Young (2008).

^{ix}The caller's subsequent inquiry about 'age' (line 17) shows that she recognises the ethnicity question as potentially one of a series of demographic questions typically asked in contexts like this.