

Reporting Microaggressions: Kinship Carers' Complaints about Identity Slights

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Abstract

The psychological concept of “microaggression” has refocused interest on what counts as prejudicial action. It redirects attention from standard socio-cognitive explanations of overt prejudice among social groups toward recipients’ perspectives of largely unwitting and subtle everyday racism. Microaggression studies define common implicit identity challenges faced by minority groups, including kinship carers. However, criticisms of the “microaggressions program” raise difficulties inherent in establishing prejudicial action from accounts of necessarily ambiguous actions, and contend that reliance on self-reporting inevitably lacks validity. This conversation analytic (CA) study offers a complementary approach: from videos of ten kinship carer support groups it shows how participants construct accountabilities for prejudicial actions in their retrospective reports of questions, challenges and suspicions in ways that build these actions as microaggressive. It addresses methodological shortcomings in microaggression studies, and extends CA research on accountability in offense construction, and on prejudicial social actions that are contested and difficult to analyze.

Keywords

“alternative” families, conversation analysis, identity, kinship care, microaggressions, prejudice, social action.

The burgeoning field of “microaggression” theory has developed beyond its origins in clinical psychology to promote the broader recognition of contemporary subtle forms of prejudice (Lau & Williams, 2010; Nadal et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2007). Microaggression refers to prejudicial actions operating at the interpersonal rather than macro-systemic

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level (Sue et al., 2019). Moving on from psychology's traditional conception of prejudice as clearly manifest in the cognitive biases of offenders (Allport, 1954), microaggression studies place the perceptions of recipients center stage, in order to develop social group-based taxonomies of everyday, unintentional identity-based slights (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggression includes notions of "microassault," "microinsult," and "microinvalidation" in descending order of threat: the latter is defined as any exchange that "exclude(s), negate(s) or nullify(ies)" the experiences of minority group members (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274).

In this paper, we will begin to show how conversation analysis (CA) can complement the microaggressions program in addressing the limitations of traditional prejudice studies while also dealing with concerns about a lack of empiricism in the way action is theorized in the microaggressions literature. Despite the achievements of the microaggressions program in foregrounding the voices of targets of prejudice, and in highlighting the key role of language in prejudicial action, the vexed question of how to recognize social actions that are by definition unwitting or inexplicit (Sue et al., 2007), and so *designedly* ambiguous (Speer, 2017), has been raised in methodological critiques (Lau & Williams, 2010; Lilienfeld, 2017; Wong et al., 2014). These critics propose the addition of independent measures, external observation and longitudinal impacts to balance otherwise self-reported, subjective evidence. However, these additions would displace recipients' versions of events from their position as the focus of investigation. Fortunately, the same question, that is, how can we recognize and systematically analyze contested, "possibly" prejudicial, actions, has also been raised, and tackled, in parallel—but different—debates within the field of conversation analysis (Speer, 2015; Stokoe, 2015). This provides an opportunity for dialogue between the theory of microaggressions and CA. We aim to show how identity slights are built and oriented to in retrospective accounts involving third parties' questions, challenges and suspicions, using the insights developed in CA studies of prejudice (Speer, 2015; Whitehead & Stokoe, 2015).

CA studies of prejudice in the form of "-isms" (sexism, racism, heterosexism in talk) have shown how participants orient to others' prejudicial actions via details of sequential composition (Edwards, 2003; Speer, 2004). Examples include how participants establish or defend their identities in sequential dialogue (Edwards, 2003; Widdicombe, 2017), and how recipients may treat exchanges as prejudicial or invalidating (Speer, 2004, 2015; Speer & Potter, 2000; Whitehead & Stokoe, 2015). Therefore, instead of falling back on empirical traditions that may eclipse the significance of members' own understandings, a CA approach shares microaggression studies' commitment to these, and offers a theory of language adequate to the task of identifying how prejudicial actions come to be recognized as such (Sidnell & Enfield, 2017). This paper seeks to offer a form of empirical analysis that keeps the orientations identifiable from recipients' accounts at the heart of the investigation.

Microaggressions researchers typically introduce a hypothetical taxonomy of perceived slights (Sue et al., 2007) to interviewees and focus groups, in order to elicit participants' accounts, which are then thematically analyzed to produce identity-specific taxonomies of offenses (Nadal, 2019; Nadal et al., 2016; Pérez

Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Conversation analysts have shown how naming an action as prejudicial in order to thematize accountability for it is a separate matter from analyzing how it is being recognized and achieved (Sidnell & Enfield, 2017). By lifting segments of reports out of the sequence of their telling we do not know how each offense comes to be constructed as such (see Antaki, 1994, p. 56). In order to claim that utterances “do things,” the model of language adopted in microaggression studies (though only recently discussed as such: see di Gennaro & Brewer, 2019) is recognizably a speech-act model (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975). In classifying typified speech, speech act theory “lacks any engagement with actual practice and. . . is correspondingly inattentive to how we come to recognize individual actions as such.” (Clift & Raymond, 2018, p. 109). Speech acts involve “the separation of form from function” in language use (Potter, 1996, p. 12) such that it is not possible out of context to tell what action is being performed.

However, retrospective accounts, including records of talk from interviews and focus groups (Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Puchta & Potter, 2004), such as those found in microaggressions research (including this study), though offering no verifiable access to what previously took place, are themselves interactive events in their own right, full of sequential phenomena that can be analyzed, given detailed recording and transcription (Mondada, 2013). Then we see prefacing, displaying a speaker’s stance on what they are about to recount (Whitehead, 2015). Speech perturbations such as hesitations and pauses mark dispreference (Stokoe, 2015), or noticeable departures in descriptions from the way problems are usually handled in talk (Stevanovic, 2013). Repair becomes visible, such as who corrected who in what way (Robles, 2015; Weatherall, 2015); also how, in descriptions, lexis and prosody are chosen (Stokoe, 2015). How recipients show the impact of an action can be seen in the affective stance displayed in their complaints (Drew, 1998). In CA analyses, discourse phenomena such as these move beyond a speech act notion of social action to identify how descriptions are formulated by speakers, and how they can be designed so as to ascribe a type of action (Levinson, 2013).

The majority of microaggression research has focused on examples of racism, sexism and heterosexism (Nadal et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2014). Studies of “alternative” parenting have also identified typical microaggressions, attributed to bionormative assumptions (Garber & Grotevant, 2015; Witt, 2014), in which biological parenthood is constructed as both natural and exclusive (Baker, 2008). Despite widespread demographic changes in the composition of modern families (Appell, 2010; Gabb & Silva, 2011), identity slights are recounted by LGBT parents (Voultsos et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2019); adoptive parents (Haines et al., 2018; MacDonald, 2016; Wegar, 2000; Wiley, 2017), older parents (Ylänne & Nikander, 2019), and have also been documented in kinship care (Dolbin-MacNab & Few-Demo, 2018; Yancura et al., 2016).

Kinship care is an arrangement in which people take on full parenting responsibilities because the child’s birth parent (often their own son or daughter) is unable (Nandy et al., 2011; Selwyn & Nandy, 2014). Kinship carers report problems in establishing a valid parental identity with health services and schools (Dolbin-MacNab, 2015;

Meara, 2014). It is important to note that a parental identity in everyday life is principally constructed through “category-bound activities” (Sacks, 1992), rather than any formal procedure. Where identification may be required, although between 200-300,000 children and young people live in kinship care arrangements in the UK (Nandy et al., 2011; Selwyn & Nandy, 2014), formal systems often do not recognize carers’ parental authority (Bailey et al., 2009; Hayslip et al., 2013).

Typical microaggressions related to kinship carer roles have been presented in the form of a taxonomy of indignities (Dolbin-MacNab & Few-Demo, 2018; Yancura et al., 2016), including intrusive questioning, remarks assuming bionormativity, recurring confusion and ignorance, and questioning of parental status (Dolbin-MacNab & Few-Demo, 2018; Hayslip et al., 2017; Yancura et al., 2016). However, these typified problems are deduced by researchers from thematic analysis of interview and focus group data, removed from its situated context. In the absence of detailed studies of interaction to date, it has not been possible to see how carers themselves orient to these issues in the process of describing reported incidents. Using CA’s technique of moving between the detail of particular sequences and an overview of the collection as a whole (Sidnell, 2013), we aim to show how kinship carers construct their parental identities in descriptions of defensive interactions involving identity challenges in everyday encounters, and how they manage the social consequences of these. By building on the insights gained in CA studies of prejudice, we aim to show how reports of everyday, subtle identity slights or “microaggressions” are built and oriented to as such in kinship carers’ complaints.

One common aspect of accounts and reports involving complaint sequences identified in CA studies is the attribution of accountability to the offender (Drew, 1998). Pertinent to the question of accountability is what is *intended* by a particular action. In contrast to the cognitive explanations offered by mainstream psychology, Sidnell and Enfield argue that, because ascription of intentionality rests on the way speakers describe actions, as mental states are inaccessible, it is only in the composition of a description of both an action and of the response to it (which are different but related things) that actions are realized (Sidnell & Enfield, 2017). Using CA, we can analyze the way accountability for action operates by seeing what cultural norms and “tacit conventions” of offensiveness people make reference to (Durant, 2010, p. 202), including the way they build actions by reference to different systems of accountability (Sidnell & Enfield, 2017).

We are interested in identifying how accountabilities for complainable actions arise in carers’ descriptions of identity challenges, and how these are formulated, particularly for potentially ambiguous actions. This study contributes to an understanding of kinship carers’ accounts of handling identity slights in everyday life concerning their particular role (Gauthier & Wellard, 2014). It also extends the CA literature on complaint sequences to include instances in which the offense is attributed to a spread of accountability, including broader normative expectations, or institutional norms. It adds “microaggression” to the identification of prejudicial social actions (Stokoe, 2015), with implications for how the impact and consequences of subtle prejudicial action are constructed.

Data and Methods

Data consist of 10 hr of video recordings from ten support group meetings across England during 2017. Peer support groups of kinship carers meet regularly in order to help members buffer a sense of solidarity by contact with others in the same role (Strozier, 2012). Ethical approval was granted by Manchester University Research Ethics Committee, and all participants gave informed consent to the recordings. Participants in this study were recruited via the largest closed UK-based Facebook site for kinship carers (c.1,500 members). Site administrators' permission was obtained to post information about the study, in which members were asked if their local group wished to participate. Local volunteers came forward, participant information was distributed, and where a group agreed, a date for the first author to visit a future meeting was arranged. Each meeting lasted from 30 mins to an hour and a half, and included between 6 and 20 participants per group (total $n=92$ kinship carers) with an average of nine attendees per meeting. The majority of participants are grandparents of the child or children they care for.

The first author briefly introduced the purpose of the study "Identities in Kinship Care Families": which is to explore kinship carers' experiences of daily life in an "alternative" parental role. Written consent was obtained from participants, and the meeting was video recorded. We did not set out to study microaggression, or prejudice, and these terms were not introduced, neither was the discussion chaired or facilitated. After an initial prompt: "So what's it like being a kinship carer?", the first author did not participate in the discussion. The participants discussed the issues faced in their role, ranging from lack of support by local authorities to problems with birth parents, other family members, and service providers.

Recordings were transcribed verbatim and identifying details replaced with pseudonyms. Transcripts were reviewed for interactional phenomena where identity is made salient and 105 "complaint sequences," were identified (Drew, 1998), concerning the reported action(s) of other family members, professionals or acquaintances. 31 complaints (from 8 out of 10 sessions) featured carers' descriptions of absent third parties' questioning or challenging their role, ranging from expressions of curiosity and requests for clarification about their family situation, to challenges about the validity of their status or in some instances engaging in investigative procedures designed to detect child abuse: in sum, almost one-third of complaints oriented to the problems arising for them in their role as carers from someone questioning the nature of their parental identity. Given the frequency of the occurrence of these reported concerns, and their compositional features as accounts of subtle identity challenge to this particular family role, these sequences from the support group conversations form the basis for this study. We adopted the term "microaggression," effectively "respecifying" it from its use as psychological label to a descriptive device for the patterns of discursive phenomena identified in accounts of specific situations (Edwards & Potter, 2005; Garfinkel, 1991).

These 31 instances were transcribed in detail using conversation analytic conventions (Jefferson, 2004), which enable detailed analysis of the interactional features of

the exchanges. Taking each sequence in turn, transcripts and video clips were reviewed to identify how the carer constructs the complaint sequence, drawing on findings of conversation analytic studies of such accounts (Drew, 1998; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007).

Results

We identified three different actions in the organization of carers' complaints about absent third parties (questions, challenges and raising suspicions) which orient to the concept of microaggression by virtue of particular compositional features. This paper is organized in three sections focused on these reported actions and how they are described. In the first section, carers design their reports of third parties' *questions* to reflect normative categorical assumptions about family life in ways that invalidate carers' identities. In the second section, carers' report various *challenges* to their parental status, to similar effect, via reported claims to epistemic rights, and in the third section, carers complain that they are subjected to *suspicions* involving negative preconceptions arising from institutional accountabilities concerning their roles and motivations, which they build as undermining. We conclude with a consideration of the implications of these analyses for the ways in which accounts of microaggressions are constructed in interaction.

Section 1: Carers' Complaints About Third Parties' Questions

Hypothetical examples of intrusive questioning are cited as common instances of microaggression in the kinship care literature (Yancura et al., 2016). CA analysis of real questions shows how even simple requests for information invariably do far more: questions are "underpinned by matrices of assumptions, possibilities, explanations" (Tracy & Robles, 2009, p. 132). Here a question (lines 8-10) is formulated as both "innocent" *and* troublesome in terms of its consequentiality for the recipient:

Extract 1 SA2 0:07:07

- 1 Pat: I went to a party yesterday- hh. the two little ones
 2 were invited to this party hh (.) I know the mam, she's
 3 invited the other two cos she knows I can't go- (0.6)
 4 Jen: [Yeah.
 5 Pat: [unless I take all four, and one of the other mams (.)
 6 whose little boy is in the youngest one's class hh.
 7 obviously doesn't know the situation, she's just new,
 8 y'know, cos little one's in nursery (.) 'Do you always
 9 do everything with them, does their mam do nothing with
 10 them.'
 11 Jen: Mm mm hmm hm
 12 Pat: An you've got neh- (.) you just feel- (.) well you've
 13 gotta explain everything- 'Well she lives with me:: an

- 14 I've got-'
 15 Jen: [Yeah.
 16 Pat: [an 'blah blah blah', and it's ju- all the time having
 17 to explain to somebody.

The formulation of the reported question in lines 8 to 9 addresses a problem-oriented “noticing” of Pat as “not-mother,” possibly orienting to her visual age (Llewellyn, 2015): “Do you always do everything with them, does their mam do nothing with them.” This question is constructed to index a high level of epistemic content concerning Pat’s situation (Heritage, 2012). It builds in an assumption that the birthday party is not a one-off occurrence, but an ongoing arrangement. The question also assumes the “standard relational pairing” of mother and child, as part of the “family” device (Sacks, 1992), and the expectation, as expressed in line 9, that mothers would normally do these things with children. It is seeking confirmation of the degree of departure from the bionormativity of standard family relationships (which is proposed as an index of “microaggression” towards kinship carers in Yancura et al., 2016).

Requests for information are a classic form of first action that makes a response accountable whether one is given or not (Stivers & Rossano, 2010). A question that “imposes presuppositions” (Hayano, 2013, p. 395) delimits the kind of response that can be given (Heritage, 2002). In addition to a high level of assumption, the action performed by a question is in part characterized by the type of response it engenders (Stivers & Rossano, 2010); in this case it invokes a narrative of how things came to be (Kidwell, 2009), which Pat builds as particularly problematic for her (lines 16–17).

Here, Pat inserts an “explanation slot” (Antaki, 1996, p. 75) in her preface at line 7 which provides a warrant for the line of questioning: she “doesn’t know the situation”; “she’s just new.” This account is significant for the way Pat is setting up the action that follows, in that it enables her to signal that something accountable is being reported, without directly accusing the other party. The questioner’s “newness” provides ostensible legitimacy for her curiosity, and renders her reasonably entitled to an account. In describing the “knowing” question as justifiable, Pat provides an “innocent” motive for it, and portrays her own choices of response as limited by its justifiability. She glosses her accountability for a response (lines 12–13) as being constrained to deliver, however burdensome, an expectable answer (Schegloff, 2007). Her tentative response in line 13: “Well, she lives with me-” is framed as the beginning of a much bigger story, glossed as “everything.” Any part of a kinship care story is characterized as disclosing all, invariably involving an admission that you, not your son or daughter, care permanently for the child, which may indicate serious family trouble.

Discourse elements combine in Pat’s description of the question and its consequences to render her complaint one of microaggression: its bionormative stance and overly-intrusive epistemic formulation (lines 8–10) necessitate potentially face-threatening disclosure which combine with the “reasonableness” provided by the described “newness” of the acquaintance signal a difficulty in attributing blame. This conjunction forms the crux of Pat’s complaint. Pat described herself orienting both to the reference to bionormative family roles (which excludes her from the standard relational pairings (Sacks, 1972) enjoyed by ordinary parents and grandparents) and to its

justifiability. She reports having no reasonable option but to disclose potentially discrediting information about her family circumstances.

In the next extract, a third party is again reported making parental identity relevant by noticing something out of the ordinary. However, whereas the circumstance in Extract 1 renders “the other mam’s” question defensible (line 7), here the school context is held responsible for the intrusive query:

Extract 2 SA2 0:06:11

- 1 Pat: One year I didn’t have to explain to the new teacher
 2 because (1.0) she’d been the teacher in the Reception
 3 (.) so I didn’t have to explain th[at-
 4 Jill: [Yeah becós she knew.
 5 Pat: This year I’ve had to sort of (.) like Tabby’s teacher
 6 sorta said (1.0) !hh ‘Is her mam pickin’ her up or are
 7 you doin it all the time.’
 8 (1.0)
 9 Pat: An it shocked us cos hhh. I thought he would have known.
 10 Jill: Right yeh you would wouldn’t you.
 11 Dee: [Would-
 12 Pat: [Ah yeah, cos ‘Its always gonna be me’, (.) an I had to
 13 explain to him (.) the circumstances of why she lives
 14 with us type of thing, so then he didn’t know what to
 15 say.
 16 (2.0)
 17 hhh y’ know, [so-
 18 Jill: [Well he wouldn’t if he didn’t know.
 19 Pat: Well exactly, so it puts- him in an awkward position,
 20 Jill: Yeah.
 21 Pat: makes me feel awful- hh.

As in Extract 1, Pat’s description orients to an accountable rationale for the inquiry into her “circumstances” (line 13), in this case her expectation (line 9) that the teacher “would have known” (by virtue of his institutional role) her family situation. Her framing in line 6 to 7 of the question again infers the teacher making relevant the matter of parental status, by “noticing” (Schegloff, 2007) the regular absence of the parent. Pat’s complaint does not concern the entitlement of the teacher to know about the family situation: indeed she reports having *expected* him to know; it is normally accepted that safeguarding means that teachers need to know who has legal status to collect children from school.

The teacher’s reported query “Is her mam pickin’ her up” (line 6) is built to infer the bionormative categorial assumption, not only that mothers are the ones that collect their children, but that they hold parental responsibility. It inquires into how the arrangement is sanctioned: “all the time” (line 7) which indicates a noticing that Pat’s collecting the child has been a regular occurrence so far. The reported question infers

an institutional agenda of safeguarding to which the recipient is obliged to respond in an appropriate way. As in the previous extract, though in speech act terms this could be classed as a request for information, the action Pat describes (lines 6 to 7) is far more complex than this: the teacher's reported query is built from a number of presuppositions: it references repeated personal observation, institutional roles and bionormative legal and categorial parental attributes.

Pat's complaint is twofold: that the school has failed to properly attest to her legal identity in not passing information on (Mueller, 2018); and is accountable for the teachers' question, and the burden of disclosure unnecessarily placed on her, so in part reducing his "intent" or accountability. As in extract 1, the complaint characterizes the action as "unintended" and microaggressive by providing an account for an individuals' bionormative questioning. The support group align with Pat's assessment (lines 10, 18, and 20), concerning the avoidability of the teacher's faux pas and their mutual embarrassment.

In the following case bionormative assumptions are no longer implicit, but rise to the surface of the talk, with different interactional consequences, enabling the carer to report a different kind of response:

Extract 3 SDI 0:05:43

- 1 Jill: We just get too exhausted by everything that's gone on
 2 and its too hard to have to sit there and actually
 3 explain it all hh. time and time and time and time
 4 again.
 5 Bev: Yeah.
 6 Jill: Cos everyone goes hh 'What's a special guardian.' 'What
 7 do you do that for.' 'Who pays you to do that job.'
 8 'Well actually its not a job.'
 9 (1.0)
 10 Jill: 'Well I'm a grandma too, I look after my grandkids.'
 11 'Well this is more than just lookin' [after my grandkids=
 12 Bev: [He heh.
 13 Jill: =luv-
 14 Ann: [Mmm.
 15 Jill: ['This is actually raising them and parenting them.'
 16 Ann: Huh huh.
 17 Bev: Yeah lots of people just don't get it at all do they.

Jill's construction of three typical queries in lines 6-7, in rapid-fire delivery, is designed to imply a sense of vexatiousness. Unlike the first two extracts, Jill does not provide an account for the occasioning of these questions. "What do you do that for" (lines 6-7) is seeking (and querying) a motive. The final question: "Who pays you to do that job" embodies the presupposition (Heritage, 2012) that the role under discussion does not belong to the category of family, but to the world of paid work. Jill returns an exposed other-correction (Schegloff et al., 1977): "Well actually it's not a job." A brief

pause at line 9 gives time for this to sink in, before a restart of the reported interrogation on a fresh tack: a well-prefaced remark (Heritage, 2018): “Well I’m a grandma too.” (line 10) directly counters Jill’s claim to a different role (line 8). The report in lines 8–12 pursues the algorithmic logic of a cross-examination (Bilmes, 1988): if the role is not a job of work, and therefore belongs to the family category as claimed, then it must belong to it in a normative way (line 10): “*you must be a grandma like me.*” Jill is rendering the sheer tenacity of the “induction-proof” nature of bionormative standard relations (Sacks, 1992, p. XLI). Here, Jill’s enactment demonstrates how “grandparent” may be bionormatively directly cast, not inferred, as it was in extracts 1 and 2. She sets up the occasion for her robust and dismissive (“luv”) rejection of her status as “ordinary” grandparent (lines 11–16). The sequence closes with an affirmation from Bev in lines 13 to 17, that this lack of understanding is indeed a common occurrence.

This example differs from the previous two in that the reported questioning is not supported by any account for the occasioning of the questions. Instead the episode is built as a *typified* example to support Jill’s claim about “everyone” (line 6) showing general incomprehension “time and time and time again” (lines 3–4), that being a kinship carer is fundamentally distinct from ordinary grandparenting. Jill’s complaint focuses on having to repeatedly resist the bionormative eclipsing of her role altogether, and the downgrading of her parental status. Accountability for this micro-invalidation is built both as personal in Jill’s typified example, and also as diffuse, general, and therefore to a degree expectable in the everyday.

These CA analyses of reported slights offer new insights into how descriptions of microaggressions are constructed beyond the typification of intrusive question formats currently offered in microaggression studies. Identity slights are built in carers’ descriptions as follows: first, bionormative categorial assumptions indexed in reported questions about parents and grandparents and their attributed rights and domains of action render carers’ parental status questionable. Carers’ reports refer to common presuppositions about “normal” family structures and arrangements, and their observed lack of fit with these. Second, they express how being “reasonably” required to answer these questions (Seuren, 2018) involves unwelcome personal disclosure. Third, carers’ descriptions orient to purported rationales and “lack of intent” alongside the complainable conduct. These excuses, which in many other contexts might be treated as mitigating factors, are not treated here as reducing the prejudicial impact of the reported action, but are built as complicating it, which, by virtue of supplying a rationale, make objections or hurt feelings less justifiable. In all three extracts a plurality of accountability is constructed which warrants the reported queries as both injurious and “unintended,” key features of microaggression. Speech act levels of analysis would not capture the role of sequential construction in the ascription of “micro-invalidating” actions being built here, as it is only in the sequencing of the descriptions that these reports of subtle injuries (Gunter & Peters, 2014), can be analyzed and fully understood.

In the next section, carers report direct challenges to their parental status in third party encounters. People are depicted adopting a superior epistemic stance (Heritage & Raymond, 2005) to that of the carer concerning their parental status.

Section 2: Carers' Complaints About Challenges to Their Parental Status

In this section, declarative morphosyntax (as in courtroom interrogation), constructs a knowing stance on the part of the questioner (Heritage, 2012), in order to set out a “version” of events which challenges that of the kinship carer. Again, as noted in Section 1, automatic attribution of parental status to birth parents occurs here in a complaint about events in an emergency room:

Extract 4 SFI 07:25

- 1 Jane: Well it's like when people say 'Oh well, er er', if
 2 something happens or whatever, 'Oh we need to speak to
 3 the parent.'
 4 Pam: Yeah.
 5 Jane: 'I am the [parent.'
 6 Vicky: [parent yeah
 7 Jane: 'I'm the guardian.'
 8 Vicky: Mm mm
 9 Jane: 'Wull hh (.) no you're their Nana.'
 10 Pam: Yeah.
 11 Jane: 'W-we want to speak to the Mum and Dad.'
 12 Vicky: No.
 13 Jane: 'No you can[t].'
 14 Vicky: [No.
 15 Jane: 'You speak to me.'
 16 Vicky: Carer that's what-
 17 Jane: Er an like it's- yeah parent or, guardian or whatever- erm.

Jane prefaces her complaint by typifying this example: “it’s like when” (line 1) of an exchange with a member of health sector staff. She reports the staff member making the question of parental status relevant with an oh-prefaced shift in awareness (Heritage, 2018): “Oh well, er, er”. . . “Oh we need to speak to the parent.” (lines 2–3). As in Section 1, this inferred “noticing” signals that something is not in order, here raising the question of parental responsibility. Jane asserts her identity (line 5): “I am the parent.” She reports self-repairing her statement to “I’m the guardian”: an “official” version, orienting to the consent issue raised. Jane reports a marked dispreferred response: “Wull hh (.),” followed by a declarative (Rossi, 2018): “no, you’re their Nana” (line 9), combining observation with disagreement. “Other-correction” of this kind is normatively used to instruct children or people who are seen as not fully competent, and can seem demeaning (Schegloff et al., 1977). The staff member’s assessment of Jane’s family status is presented as valid purely on the basis that it is factual (which it is). But Jane’s reported claim attends to who “the parent” *relevantly* is in the context of medical treatment—so, who can give consent, rather than to the *non-relevant facticity* of biological grandparenthood. The staff member is depicted as pursuing the biological but irrelevant fact, and invalidating Jane’s assertion of her own status.

Jane builds the staff's superior epistemic stance in choosing the term "Nana" to address Jane (a colloquial term normally used with children), and in reformulating the formal term "the parent" in line 3, to the colloquial "Mum and Dad" in line 11, in the course of repeating their assertion, addressed as if to a recipient who may have trouble understanding the previous version. As in extract 3 above, "Nana" equates to an "ordinary" grandmother, refuting Jane's claim to the legal status of guardian. Accountability is built by the term "we" (line 11), denoting official status: this is, in part, the organization speaking, with formal accountability for action. This stance is constructed as both individual and corporate.

CA identifies a number of "conventional reference points that actors orient to which give behavior its particular intelligibility" (Bilmes, 1988, p. 162). Preference is shown in how people treat one another as having privileged access to their own experiences, and associated rights to define them (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Pomerantz, 1980). CA has also documented normative expectations concerning how problems of communication are handled (Robinson, 2006). Conventions about people's epistemic entitlements and obligations to correct or not to correct each others' talk make departures from these expectations both observable and accountable. The design of Jane's report of other-correction of her own legal and social status represents a significant departure from the way rights to personal knowledge are commonly handled (Stevanovic, 2013). The comments of the group recipients (lines 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16) demonstrate their orientation to both the personal and organizational nature of this microinvalidation (Garber & Grotevant, 2015) as a challenge to their status, and propose how carers should respond to challenge from officials.

Extract 5 shows a further example of a reported organizational microinvalidation, built again in the form of a challenge to a carer's epistemic and parental status:

Extract 5 SJI 18:00

1 Carrie: I went to the chemist's the other day for the- >to get
 2 some< (0.4) erm (.) earwax erm (.) drops erm (.) theh
 3 oil thing, cos Lettie keeps o:n (0.2) gettin (.)
 4 >obviously blocked ears<, hh so she says- I did it in
 5 the self cert ↑one -.hhh and she went, 'Oh you can't
 6 fill that in, it has to be Mum'. And I went- 'No I
 7 need to fill this in'. And she went '↓No.' (.) 'Mum
 8 needs to fill it in.' I went 'No I need to,' I goes
 9 'I've got special guardianship for my grandchildren.'
 10 an she went-
 11 (1.0)
 12 '↓O::H.' and I went-
 13 (2.0) ((compresses lips))
 14 I'm standing there and >she's still standing there
 15 looking at us< and I'm thinking, .hh right I'm being
 16 an old gran just like ↑before hhh! and erm she went
 17 'Ri- right OK then, erm erm. If you if you just do

These analyses offer added insights into the sequential construction of reports of microaggressive action in the way breaches of norms are reported (see Heritage, 1984). For example, carers report how people notice and account for biologically “normal appearances” (Sacks, 1992). We see evidence of a procedure for associating expectable attributes with the categories linked to the device of “family” (Butler & Fitzgerald, 2010). Basic assumptions about age are used to query identity (Llewellyn, 2015). Rather than standard deference to individuals’ epistemic status (Pomerantz, 1980), carers are depicting firm resistance from third parties to giving ground on the question of their parental responsibility. Carers’ reports of third parties’ speech are formulated both as individual and as institutional actions. Carers portray the third parties as offering alternative assessments in which they claim primary rights to assess the matter (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Carers’ descriptions of these actions warrant them as microaggressive in combining bionormative assumptions with a presumption of greater epistemic access to their identity than they have themselves (Stivers et al., 2011), supported by institutional status.

In the final section, we look at how microaggressions are formulated in complaints concerning third party actions in health settings, going beyond the attribution or otherwise of parental status, in which staff are reportedly raising suspicions about the carer’s moral character.

Section 3: Carers’ Complaints About Others’ Suspicion of Their Role and Motives

The Children Act 2004 requires agencies to share information electronically about the safety and welfare of children who are in care, or subject to a child in need assessment or child protection plan, which includes 60% of children in kinship care (Grandparents Plus, 2019). All public agencies have computerized systems for “flagging” alerts, which can occasion routine checks with the local authority about current case status. Carers’ complaints in the following extracts concern the negative consequences for them of the verifying of their identity.

In extract 6, Pat describes taking a child to hospital:

Extract 6 SA2 00:00:52

- 1 Pat: I take mine, the youngest boy-
 2 (0.6)
 3 Pat: It always flags up that he’s on the child protection
 4 register. >Y’know.< (.) but he’s not.
 5 Rita: Mm. [So why are you-
 6 Pat: [He’s been off it- well, because it’s a fault by
 7 the local authority, (.) they’re supposed to do
 8 something once the order’s in place and inform the
 9 health service or something,
 10 Lin: Yeah.

- 11 Pat: but because they haven't in Jacks case (.) any time I
 12 take him to hospital it always flags up .hhh so then
 13 you're made to feel-
 14 (1.0)
 15 Pat: Y'know.
 16 Rita: [Police.
 17 Pat: [Like there was one time
 18 Rita: Ye[ah.
 19 Pat: [I felt like a criminal.
 20 (1.2)
 21 Pat: And me youngest daughter was with us and t- it felt
 22 like they were saying (.) 'That's the mother and you're
 23 protecting- y'know hh you're lying to us and that's
 24 really his mother you've brought in'. .hhh, 'An' you
 25 can't leave the hospital, till we get these phone calls
 26 back.' And it- it makes you feel like a criminal.
 27 Rita: Yeah.

Pat sets out the historic background in her preface in lines 1 to 4, in which she indexes institutional accountability for faulty records via an explanation slot (Antaki, 1996). This effectively warrants her innocence, and glosses the subsequent reported checks as unnecessary. Accountability for inaccurate records is built as organizational, diffuse, but responsibility for its impact is heightened by the repetition of the nuisance created (lines 12–13), that “any time” she takes him to hospital “it always flags up.” To illustrate, she singles out one event where she “felt like a criminal” (line 19)—a clear injury to identity. She describes how her youngest daughter accompanied her and the child to hospital (line 21), on which occasion she reports being detained (lines 24–25): “you can’t leave the hospital till we get these phone calls back,” while staff reportedly complete their checks. She describes having thought the staff were accusing her of lying (Haakana, 2007) by passing the abusive mother off as her youngest daughter (lines 22–24) thus colluding with the abuser by allowing her to accompany the child to hospital. The accusation is delivered in “hypothetical” reported speech (Myers, 1999). Her description renders this reported action accountable at three levels: by attributing it to the “flagging” system (already discounted as faulty in her account), by giving rise to imagined accusations on the part of the staff, and in the formulation of the impact of the detention on her self-esteem “it makes you feel like a criminal.” Checks by the staff infer the identity category relevant to their actions, that of a suspected child abuser. The extreme nature of the fantasy accusation Pat reports serves to indicate the degree of persecution she says she experienced as a consequence, which raises the question of accountability for her distress, irrespective of who may be to blame (Robinson, 2016).

The stance Pat adopts in constructing this description in the support group effectively asserts her innocence, and her bona-fide parental identity, on the basis of an allegation of prejudicial treatment, built as arising from unnecessary third party actions. Pat’s “real” identity is asserted in her expressed familiarity with the flawed

system, and her attribution of fault to the local authority's failure to update the record, together with her account of victimisation ("*feeling like*" a criminal is clearly distinct from "*being*" a criminal). Pat's reports of both the real and imaginary exchanges are built as threats to her status as a protective parent.

The following extract also refers to a formal warning system as the trouble source. However, the carer portrays herself as robustly proactive in countering what she characterizes as unwarranted, microaggressive suspicions about her identity in this setting:

Extract 7 SCI 31:20

- 1 Marg: I know there's issues when the- these children go
 2 under social services .hh but have you ever tried to
 3 take one of them to the ↓hospital.
 4 Tina: Yeh I takes them every ↑month.
 5 Joy: Yeah.
 6 Marg: A big- big red square flashes up ((gestures square))
 7 social ser[vices.
 8 Tina: [-vices.
 9 Marg: An then you're tra:it¹ hh (.) you're trait like you're
 10 (.) you're the ↓abuser.
 11 Tina: Yeah.
 12 Marg: ((Gestures))'Can we take you in this room on yer own
 13 !hh (.) we need to ask you some questions'. Ehh! (.)
 14 !hhh 'I know they're under social services but like
 15 I'm not the mother, you know wharr I mean, I'm the
 16 nanna.' Hh 'So your little red square that popped ↓up,
 17 you got nothing to worry over', an they sorta like
 18 'Oh- oh.' ((moves backward))

Marg delivers an explanatory preface in lines 1 to 3 in which, as in the last extract, she claims familiarity with organizational practices. She displays knowledgeability about the institutional "big red square" that "flashes up" (line 6) and what to expect next: "then you're trait like you're the abuser" (lines 9–10). She depicts her foreknowledge of the inferred trouble-premonitor (Jefferson, 1988) "Can we take you in this room on yer own" (lines 12–13), the "we" representing an institutional persona. She then reports herself handling the staff's concerns with a claim to superior knowledge: "Ehh! I know they're under social services," delivered in a condescending tone (line 14) and by producing a pre-emptive correction—"I'm not the mother"—"I'm the nanna." Note that the addressivity of this response is personal, and familiar, rather than formal. Marg's reported response directs the recipient to the source of the trouble as "your little red square" thus placing *herself* outside of the trouble-frame (line 16). This correction reassuringly ushers the staff member to the conclusion they should draw: "your little red square that popped up, you got nothing to worry over" (lines 16–17). Her stance indexes familiarity with official "system" territory ("little red square"; "*the*

mother”); and by heavily hinting “you know wharr I mean,” she places herself squarely “in the know” about “the mother” and the necessity of the flagging system, which positions her and her recipient “on the same side.”

Her rendering of the staff’s reported response “oh- oh” (line 18) with a backward movement implies that her correction effected a change of state (Heritage, 1984). This extract offers the support group a successful mode of resistance to misidentification (note how for the group’s appraisal Marg has reduced the the threat of “*big red square flashes up*” in line 6, repaired to “*little red square popped up*” by line 16). This enactment represents a robust defense of a “good parent” identity, by taking a knowledgeable pre-emptive stance against the indiscriminate suspicions generated by reliance on formal systems.

This section contrasts two instances of complaints about suspicions raised in formal encounters regarding carers’ parental identity status. Carers’ descriptions of being subjected to investigative procedures are built by them as microaggressive by rendering their protective parental role suspect. A sequential CA analysis of such longer turns offers insights into the way accountabilities are ascribed to the reported actions and their consequences, as somehow shared between individuals and institutions. Reference is made to standard procedures, which provide morally accountable rationales for the actions described. Staff behaviors, though described as unnecessarily mistrusting, are built as warranted, “unintended,” bound up with the obligations and responsibilities of a practical moral order (Jayyusi, 2014). Carers portray themselves as fully cognisant of these, a stance which befits their “territory of knowledge” (Heritage, 2012). In recounting their responses to these systems, carers display their epistemic status, as befits their identity; and on occasion (in extract 7) as able to preempt investigation combining institutional and personal knowledge to their own advantage.

Discussion

This paper aligns with the goal of microaggression studies in offering an alternative approach to traditional studies of prejudice by placing the orientations identified in recipients’ accounts at the heart of the investigation. While microaggression studies have been generally criticized for lack of independent validation of what constitutes subtle everyday identity slights (Lau & Williams, 2010; Lilienfeld, 2017), we have provided examples of empirically-grounded analyses of action ascription in reports. Crucially, because we analyze the sequential details of participants’ reports, their perspectives remain central to the analysis. We have also been able to show how “lack of intent” is built in reporting, a key feature of microaggressive action.

This study contributes to an understanding of kinship carers’ accounts of handling their particular family identity in everyday life. We find reports of epistemic challenges combined with “states of knowing” inferring various normative stakes, cultural interests and capacities (Drew, 2018, p. 169). In particular, the appearance, and at times, the dominance, of bionormative assumptions about family life are reported, against which carers have to negotiate and defend their epistemic rights to their own

identities. Third parties' actions are constructed in carers' descriptions as prejudicial through the use of bionormative ascriptions of parental status, "noticings" of non-standard behaviors or appearances related to parental categories, superior epistemic stance-taking regarding parental responsibility, and raising suspicions concerning carers' bona-fide parental status. Carers report the use of declarative and "knowing" formats, in which third parties' dispositions and motivations are built as ranging from inquisitive to inquisitorial. In sharing these complaints, carers are able to portray themselves as reasonable, knowledgeable people who are unfairly treated and who well understand the roots of their own prejudicial treatment.

Our data consists of wholly self-reported and subjective evidence and we have no access to the experiences themselves, or to how speakers may have represented them differently in other, less harmonious contexts, where perhaps different renderings might be given (Greenland et al., 2020). However descriptions post-hoc, such as those shown in this study, are particularly advantageous to the identification of how accountability for microaggressions is constructed by participants in talk, particularly for quick normative judgments that can be both seen and unnoticed (Garfinkel, 1967). Reports give unique access to evidence of the stance speakers take in describing an action, and how they build it as unjust or offensive (Drew, 1998). The actions described in these complaints are rendered specifically *microaggressive* through the combination of all the above features of constructions of prejudicial action, together with references to diffuse accountabilities in carers' accounts. In establishing the "wrongness" of a third party's behaviour, a complainable action is normatively warranted as deliberate, and "not accidental, inadvertent, or otherwise innocent." (Drew, 1998, p. 316). We have shown how carers' reports orient to the existence of justifications and excuses for the identity slight: they variously "understand" or "explain" how it arises, for example, "not knowing" about kinship care is built as an expectable feature of everyday exchanges. Carers provide descriptions of actions involving identity slights as rationally driven (Edwards, 2000), for example, behaviour showing bionormative bias is accounted for by reference to the institutional demands of safeguarding (extracts 1, 6, and 7). Only a method involving analysis of sequences of talk beyond "speech act" type turn formats (Schegloff, 2007), can show the combinatory effect of justifications and warrants for prejudicial actions. To understand the implications of these explanations, it is important to note from the way intentionality is diffused that this is *not* offered in mitigation of the offense, as seen in previous discrimination studies (Greenland et al., 2018), or as cancelling it (Condor et al., 2006; Durrheim, 2017). Rather, by supplying a rationale for the prejudicial action, these warrants are treated by speakers as undermining justifiable grounds for blame or retaliation. This reasoning makes individuals' reported actions harder to challenge and pin down *as* prejudicial, which acts as an aggravating factor in the construction of the complainable. This is a key finding for the understanding of how this kind of prejudicial action is constructed.

Though kinship care is acknowledged to be a poorly-understood, "hidden" parental status (Dolbin-MacNab, 2015; Gladstone et al., 2009; Yancura & Greenwood, 2013), these complaints are not constructed as a simple lack of information on the

part of a third party, or mistakes that are straightforwardly remedied. Identity-work is also achieved by carers in attesting to being knowingly subjected to these actions, asserting their epistemic status, enabling them to present, by knowing more than their interlocutors, as “rising above” identity slights. The “protective parent” role involves parental awareness of and compliance with institutional procedures concerning responsibility and safeguarding (Pickering et al., 2017). Their reports of their own public forbearance, in the face of a stance which is required of them in their substantive role as “good parents,” does powerful identity work underpinning their status as protective parents.

This study broadens the scope of previous CA work on action formation and ascription in the particular way that accountability is attributed in determining an offense (Buttny, 1993; McKenzie, 2003; Robinson, 2016). It augments CA findings on the established role of accountability in complaints (Drew, 1998), and on actions that are designedly hard to pin down (Speer, 2017). It adds to CA work on epistemics represented not simply as differential access, but as rival domains governed by institutional and categorical rights (Lee, 2016; Raymond & Heritage, 2006). It also contributes to a social psychological and conversation analytic understanding of the occurrence and impacts of bionormative construction of familial identities—particularly where they may be contested (Raymond & Heritage, 2006). The study offers an additional dimension to the CA literature on the construction of prejudicial social actions that have been seen as contested and difficult to analyze (e.g., Speer, 2017; Whitehead & Stokoe, 2015). We would hope that future studies of accounts of prejudicial action, including racial and other microaggressions, might draw on an approach capable of analyzing the complex ways in which recipients of reported offenses retrospectively represent and respond to them in interaction.

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Note

1. 'trait' = 'treated' N.E. England dialect

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