

Trying similarity, doing difference:

The role of interviewer self-disclosure in interview talk with young people.

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### Abstract

Advocates of semi-structured interview techniques have often argued that rapport may be built, and power inequalities between interviewer and respondent counteracted, by strategic self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer. Strategies that use self-disclosure to construct similarity between interviewer and respondent rely on the presumption that the respondent will in fact interpret the interviewer's behaviour in this way. In this paper we examine the role of interviewer self-disclosure using data drawn from three projects involving interviews with young people. We consider how an interviewer's attempts to 'do similarity' may be interpreted variously as displays of similarity or, ironically, as indicators of difference by the participant, and map the implications that this may have for subsequent interview dialogue. A particular object of concern relates to the ways in which self-disclosing acts may function in the negotiation of category entitlement within interview interactions.

**Key Words:** Interviews, interaction, self-disclosure, narrative, identity, category entitlement

### *The Use of Interviews as a Research Tool*

It has been claimed that we now live in an ‘interview society’ (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), and according to one estimate interviews are used in 90% of social scientific research (Briggs, 1986). The widespread appeal of the interview has been attributed to its versatility, affording application to both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and to a variety of epistemological perspectives, from realist approaches which treat interview accounts as forms of testimony, to constructionist approaches which treat the interview conversation as a site of negotiation and co-construction of meaning between interviewer and respondent (Hammersley, 2003; Smith 1995).

Even researchers who adopt realist perspectives may argue that the ‘organized social discourse’ (Mishler, 1986a, p. 119) of the interview interaction needs to be considered when approaching analysis (Mathieson, 1999). Silverman proposes an ‘interviews-as-local-accomplishment approach’ (2001, p. 104-5), where the interest focuses upon *how* interviews function as opposed to *what* they are about. Similarly, researchers adopting the perspectives of discursive psychology and conversation analysis emphasise the need to take account of the productive role of the interviewer in the ongoing talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1995; Rapley, 2001), and of the ways in which interview conversations may be structured by local conventions, in which the interviewer is expected to ask questions, and the respondent’s role is to answer rather than ask (Schegloff, 1992). This position has been summarised by Pomerantz & Zemel (2004) in terms of an injunction to researchers to:

“see the interview as an interactional occasion in which respondents’ expressed views are partially shaped by the respondent’s perception of: the reasons for the interview, the sympathies of the interviewer, previous interview talk; anticipated upcoming topics, etc.” (p.219)

### *Narratives and Self-Disclosure in Interviews*

It is common for analysts to note the ways in which, in the interview setting, experiences may be communicated in storied form (Mishler, 1986b). Riessman (1993) drawing upon the work of Goffman (1959) suggests that one function of these narratives is to construct the respondent’s disposition and character. Kvale (1996) has noted how, in semi or unstructured interviews, people use stories to answer questions, often in the form of self-disclosure. Increasingly it is suggested that encouraging participants to tell stories may represent ‘good practice’ (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Typically the interviewer asks questions on a topic, which in themselves occasions a narrative from the respondent, for example asking, “Have you ever...?” As a result both participants may be engaged in the business of co-constructing narratives that are constrained by the interview topic and the specific guiding of the interview frame.

Although much has been written about respondents’ use of stories within interview interactions, less attention has been paid to the interviewer’s use of self-narratives or disclosure. In fact, as Holstein and Gubrium note: “in traditional research interviewers are generally expected to keep their ‘selves’ out of the interview process” (1995, p. 13). However, advocates of less structured interviewing techniques have

suggested that, on occasions, self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer may constitute a useful research strategy. It has been argued that interviewer self-disclosure may prompt reciprocal talk on the part of the respondent, especially in relation to potentially 'delicate' matters (Jourard, 1971). In particular, Reinharz and Chase (2003) have noted that:

Interviewer self-disclosure takes place when the interviewer shares ideas, attitudes and/or experiences concerning matters that might relate to the interview topic in order to encourage respondents to be more forthcoming. (p. 79)

Moreover, self-disclosure in the research process has been suggested as a strategy for managing unequal power relations inherent within an interview interaction. Kvale (1996) clarifies the point suggesting:

The conversation in a research interview is not the reciprocal interaction of two equal partners. There is a definite symmetry of power. The interviewer defines the situation, introduces the topics of the conversation, and through further questions steers the course of the interview. (p. 126)

This is an issue that has traditionally been of considerable concern to feminist researchers (Levy & Hollan, 1998; Oakley, 1981). In addition, interviewer self-disclosure has been advocated as a strategy by which concerns relating to race and culture (Song & Parker, 1995), and age (Eder & Fingerson, 2003) may be managed in interview encounters. The construction of similarity between interviewer and respondent within the

interview situation may be linked to the interviewer's positioning as either an 'insider' or an 'outsider' (Merton, 1972). In particular, Eder and Fingerson (2003) suggest that in research with young people, interviewer self-disclosure can empower the respondent, and enable them to share similar experiences. In contrast, some researchers have suggested that it may sometimes be beneficial for an interviewer to emphasise their differences from the interviewee (Hathaway & Atkinson, 2003). This approach links to early work from Becker (1954) whereby interview strategies such as scepticism, sounding uninformed and asking obvious questions, are recommended in order to produce better interview material.

Although interviewer self-disclosure is often suggested as a strategy for dealing with vulnerable groups of people, it is not without certain constraints. Poindexter (2003) discusses the role of self-disclosure in interviews in the context of social work and argues that it can unduly attract attention to the practitioner. She argues that self-disclosure plays a role in positioning the researcher in the interaction. However she adds that this should not be "excessive, gratuitous, or self-serving" (2003, p. 401).

The positioning of the interviewer in relation to the respondent is a key concern in research. As Baker (1997, 2003) notes, most participants are selected for study on the basis of being members of a particular category, for example, young people, and thus an interview can be approached exploring how these identities are accomplished, and the participants' invocation of their respective category entitlements to knowledge and experience (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Song and Parker (1995) have found that the interviewee's assumptions about the interviewer's cultural identity may be central to what is disclosed and the manner in which it is done, and as such have argued for more



work on how interviewees position and construct interviewers, and how interviewers respond to and negotiate such positioning.

Although there has been much attention paid to interviewees self-disclosure, relatively little attention has focussed on interviewers using self-disclosure as a research strategy. Where it has occurred it has been used to exemplify how such strategies are adopted to manage power relations and build rapport with respondents encouraging their further self-disclosure. In this paper, we consider the role that interviewer self-disclosure may play in interview settings with young people. However, whereas previous research has generally assumed that the respondent will receive self-disclosures on the part of the interviewer unproblematically, we focus in particular on the ways in which the effects of interviewer self-disclosure may be crucially reliant upon matters of reception. Specifically, we examine how interviewers mobilise category memberships in order to construct rapport, or to construct difference with respondents, and the circumstances under which self-disclosure by the interviewer effectively produces further interview talk from the respondent.

## The Data

The data are drawn from three different projects<sup>i</sup>, all of which involved semi-structured-style interviewing with young people aged 14-25 in England. The focus of these projects varied: the first was on young people at risk, the second on UK constitutional change and identity, and the third on young people and European identity. Two of these projects were designed specifically with young people in mind, whilst the other involved a total sample with an age-range of 16-89. The combined data corpus involved 80 interviews with young people, varying in terms of gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity. The interviewers comprised of two young female interviewers (Abi and Jackie) and two young male interviewers (Cliff and Stephen), and were aged between 24 – 30 years at the time of interviewing. The authors, usually on a one-to-one basis, conducted the interviews, ranging from 45 minutes to 3 hours, with most lasting approximately 90 minutes.

## Analytic Procedure

All interviews were transcribed fully for content. The first stage of analysis involved identifying all instances of interviewer self-disclosure. The second stage of analysis involved examining these exchanges with a view to distinguishing between cases in which it provoked, and those in which it inhibited, response from the participant. During this process the gender of the interviewer and interviewee were taken into account, as was the topic under discussion, as well as the function of the self-disclosure strategy. Analysis was informed by Membership Categorisation Analysis (Lepper, 2000);

Sacks, 1992; Silverman, 1998), Discursive Psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), and Conversation Analysis (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1991).

## Analysis

### *Establishing shared experience*

We shall start out by considering those instances where interviewer self-disclosure is presented and received as an account of shared experience, and functions to provoke further talk from the respondent. Interestingly, these cases were particularly prevalent in interviews between a female interviewer and a female respondent. The first extract involves Jackie Abell interviewing two young women who were temporarily resident in a women's refuge in Manchester.

#### **Extract 1: Annie & Lucy (both aged 17, 'Constitutional change and identity' project)**

- 1 Annie Salford Quays is nice (.) you know the Quays (.) I think it's quite nice up  
2 there, you've got the, like, the Lowry Centre and all that.
- 3 Lucy Salford? [laughs]
- 4 Annie No, not Salford, [the
- 5 JA [Salford Quays.
- 6 Annie Where [the =
- 7 Lucy [The city place?
- 8 Annie = docks are and everything.
- 9 Lucy Yeah.
- 10 Annie I think it's nice there.
- 11 JA Supposed to be the posh bit, that, init? The nice bit where [the =

12 Annie [Stuck up  
13 people  
14 JA = where the, yeah, the people with the money go (.) I don't know very well. I  
15 only know Salford through one bloke I interviewed, who lived in Salford  
16 and gets beaten up on a regular basis, cos he looks gay, he isn't, but he  
17 looks g[ay=  
18 Lucy [Ah.  
19 JA = and Scallies beat him up, just like, continuously. The guy's just  
20 permanently black and blue.  
21 Annie Well, I've got, I've got, I used to live in Salford with my friend, and, my  
22 friend, °boyfriend's brother°, he is actually gay. But, it's mad, because he's  
23 in with like, people think they're hard in Salford, and he's gay and he just,  
24 it's funny to think, but, he's a top lad as well, but, he's friends with all  
25 your, like, hard people so they just  
26 JA Sort them all out.  
27 Annie if you're giving him hard time, oh it's mad. Didn't like walking round the  
28 streets of Salford neither.  
29 Lucy No, I think it's rough down there too.  
30 JA No. Wouldn't be my choice.

The first notable point about this extract is that the talk does not take a standard interview question and answer format. This extract begins with Annie's tentative evaluation of Salford Quays ('I think it's quite nice', line 1). She makes an appeal for Lucy to

recognise the place she is describing ('You know the Quays', line 1). Lucy responds with a reference to the city of Salford and in doing so produces some laughter. As we see later in the extract this laughter is understood as ironic as the city of Salford is not recognised by any of the girls as 'nice'. The Quays, however, is an exception and one that requires further clarification from Jackie as interviewer (line 5) until the 'yeah' (line 9) produced by Lucy confirms her knowledge of the area. Jackie interjects with a potential shift from an evaluation of the place to an evaluation of the people who go there (line 11). In so doing, she implicitly displays a working class identity shared with the respondents. Specifically, she adopts a slang vocabulary that contrasts her own identity with the 'posh' place, a contrast which is worked up co-operatively with Annie to further position all three women in a class category of not 'posh' or 'stuck up'. In an utterance that equates class with money, the interviewer's class positioning of herself is further marked through her display of lack of knowledge of, and entitlement to talk about, 'posh' Salford Quays (lines 14 and 15). Her claim to knowledge is warranted instead with reference to hearsay evidence. Through her invocation of an account made by a previous interviewee, Jackie offers an implicit negative evaluation of the people of Salford. Salford is a place where being beaten up because you look gay is normative (line 16). Lucy's receipt token ('Ah', line 18) precedes the interviewer's continuation of the disclosure as she provides further details and confirmation of the normative negative behaviour that occurs in Salford in the form of extreme-case formulations ('continuously', 'permanently black and blue', lines 19-20). This account on the part of the interviewer serves three main functions. By acknowledging her personal lack of experience of Salford, Jackie opens up the discursive space for Annie and Lucy to speak.

Moreover, by producing a second-hand account of someone else's experience, she is able to unaccountably offer an evaluation of a particular group of people who live in Salford ('Scallies', line 19). Thirdly, the reference to a previous interview seems to allow Jackie to provide some self-disclosure that is still within the boundaries of an interview interaction. This disclosure is successful insofar as Annie produces a similar account (lines 21-25), one which not only confirms the interviewer's negative evaluation of people who live in Salford, but which also establishes Annie's greater entitlement to talk about it ('I used to live in Salford with my friend', line 21). The extract ends with a co-operative negative evaluation of Salford from all three women, noting that they would not wish to be there.

In extract 1, where there exists an age difference between the interviewer and the two girls, the interviewer successfully constructs common ground on the basis of class. This act of self-disclosure also functions to establish the interviewee's greater entitlement to talk about a particular topic. In the next extract we see another example of a claim to common identity on the part of an interviewer functioning to encourage further interview talk. In this case, the interview concerns experience of drugs, a topic that, as Shiner and Newburn (1997) note, is a highly accountable activity. Like extract 1, the interviewer (Abi Locke) invokes an absent other to position her own identity alongside Chloe, this time as people who have little personal knowledge about drugs.

**Extract 2:** Chloe (age 18, young people at risk project)

1 Chloe °but we never saw (.) I don't like that stuff°

2 AL no (.) [sniffs] I said to the others that I've interviewed I came across a  
3 heroin addict last year and it was just (.) I nev- I've known people that  
4 have tried it like once (.) or whatever (.) but never come across anybody  
5 who's hooked on it and it's just really bizarre cos he used to work in um  
6 (.) [sniffs] in the pub I mean he got fired cos he was dropping syringes  
7 about the place and stuff (.) but he'd come up work just high and you were  
8 like (.) [y'know

9 Chloe [( ) you can tell cos ( )

10 AL yeah

11 Chloe [their ey]es

12 AL [his pupil's were t↑in↓y

13 Chloe di-did his eyes go like that

14 AL Yeah

15 Chloe (sitting on the nerves) or anything like that (.) look horrible (.)

16 looks like the=

17 AL =yeah it's a bit freaky heh

Once again, this stretch of interview talk does not conform to the standard interview question-and-answer format, and in fact the only question in this sequence is asked by Chloe (line 13). Over the course of this stretch of talk Chloe and Abi display to one another their lack of personal experience with drugs, and Abi produces an account of an absent other who is a drug-user. This functions to not only position the interviewer in a common group with Chloe as 'people who have no personal experience of drugs', but



also enables Chloe to co-operatively display some knowledge about the physiological appearance of drug-users with the interviewer.

This extract begins with Chloe's declaration of a lack of knowledge about drugs ('but we never saw') coupled with a negative evaluation of drugs ('I don't like that stuff', line 1), spoken quietly. At this point the exchange could be terminated, however the interviewer produces an agreement token with Chloe ('no', line 2) and prefacing the self-disclosure as a previous interview experience goes on to produce an account of a heroin addict she knows. However, Abi is careful to maintain her own distance from the category of 'drug-users' and notes that she circumstantially 'came across' (line 2) a drug-user working in a public space. The repair (line 3) and admission that she has known drug-users is qualified as people who have 'tried it like once' (line 4) and were not 'hooked on it' (line 5). Thus being morally adequate whilst talking about drugs is not simply a concern for the interviewee but also for the interviewer. The abnormal activity ('dropping syringes about the place', lines 6-7) is contrasted with the normative context of a pub, which Abi claims 'it's just really bizarre' (line 5). The end of this narrative provides an invite for Chloe to provide an evaluation ('and you were like (.) you know', lines 7-8). Chloe's overlapping speech ('you can tell', line 9) contrasts with her previous claim ('we never saw', line 1), and both interviewer and interviewee shift to co-producing a collaborative account of the generic physiological signs of drug-use rather than the external evidence described in the interviewer's narrative (syringes). It is interesting to note that Chloe does not respond with a narrative of anyone she knows who's taken drugs, but with a general account of what drug-users look like. The interviewer provides a continuer ('yeah' line 10), which facilitates Chloe's account of the

physical evidence of drug-users ('their eyes', line 11). As the details become more vivid, Chloe asks the only question in this sequence asking for confirmation of the physiological evidence of drug-use. Here we see both interviewer and interviewee producing an account of what drug-users look like in general, whilst maintaining their own moral identity as people who are not part of this category. Towards the end of the extract Chloe gives a negative evaluation of drug-users ('look horrible', line 15), which is further warranted by the interviewer in her claim 'yeah it's a bit freaky' (line 17).

In both these extracts the interviewer produces some self-disclosure within the context of a previous interview interaction, and constructs a common ingroup membership with the respondent through invoking an absent other. In both cases, this strategy functions successfully to provoke further interview talk from the interviewee. However, sometimes strategies of self-disclosure from the interviewer can result in a closing down of the conversation. From our data, it appears that this may occur for two inter-connected reasons. First, when an interviewer uses self-disclosure to try to build 'rapport' by 'doing similarity' but the respondent interprets this as evidence of difference. Second, when the act of self-disclosure is interpreted by the respondent as a display of the interviewer's greater category entitlement. In the following pages we shall consider each of these factors in turn.

*Doing similarity, receiving difference*

In extract 2 we saw Chloe co-produce an account of drug-use following some self-disclosure Abi. In the next extract we see Abi once again adopting the self-disclosure strategy, but this time failing to provoke Chloe to produce further talk.

**Extract 3:** Chloe (age 18, young people at risk project)

- 1 AL absolutely yeah (.) do you think that's kind of the main reason  
2 that it's just cheaper  
3 Chloe I think so yeah cos you could get a hit (.) of heroin for a fiver, you can  
4 get a bag for a fiver  
5 AL Yeah  
6 Chloe you get crack for about twenty five  
7 AL Mm  
8 Chloe It's quite cheap  
9 AL Yeah  
10 Chloe and it's some it to do, there's nothing to do  
11 AL I sort of wondered that cos when I – I know I keep on harping back to sort  
12 of when I was a teenager but (.) I think (.) I've maybe felt sometimes that  
13 (.) y'know I wasn't particularly good but I also wasn't particularly bad do  
14 you know what I mean there's (.) a lot of people that were worse than me  
15 and a lot of people that were (.) hh better than me but (.) I always felt that  
16 (.) people just like look at you and make judgements about you (.) do you

17            know what I mean=  
18    Chloe =mm [hm]  
19    AL            [just] >be like< oh well (.) she's a young person so therefore  
20            she's got to be (.) doing this and this and this (.) do you kind of (.)  
21            feel that happens as well?  
22    Chloe I th↑ink so (.) I don't know really (.) I suppose so  
23    AL    Mm

In this case, the interview talk is clearly taking a more standard question-and-answer format. The extract begins with a question from Abi inviting Chloe to explain why young people might be attracted to drugs. What begins as a tentative answer ('I think', line 3) turns into quite a detailed account of the cost of drugs. Using a mix of slang and formal terminology ('hit of heroin', line 3), Chloe displays her knowledge of the cost of drugs. The receipt from the interviewer ('yeah', line 5 and 9) and continuers ('Mm', line 7) facilitates Chloe's account that progresses to further demonstrate her knowledge of drugs ('crack', line 6) through her use of street language, and her justification as to why young people take drugs ('it's something to do, there's nothing to do', line 10).

Until this point Chloe has not yet spoken of her own relationship with drugs and it is at line 11 that Abi adopts the strategy of self-disclosure to provoke such talk. This involves a narrative of Abi's own teenage years, something she apologises for ('I know I keep on harping back', line 11), and her own memory of what it was like. This narrative is littered with uncertainty ('I think', 'maybe', 'sometimes' in line 12) and appeals to shared experience with Chloe ('do you know what I mean, lines 13-14 & 16-17). The

interviewer positions herself as a teenager that was somewhat moderately behaved, yet, using an extreme-case formulation, subject to other people's judgements, thus increasing the space for Chloe to reply with her own experiences. The interviewer ends this narrative with a fishing device ('do you know what I mean', lines 16-17), inviting Chloe to respond with her own personal narrative (Pomerantz, 1980). However, it is possibly significant that this instance of interviewer self-disclosure implicitly flags the present age difference between Abi and Chloe, through the interviewer's use of the past tense when describing her own 'teenage' years ('felt', 'wasn't').

In this case, it is notable that the interviewer's use of the self-disclosure strategy fails interactionally. In response Chloe only produces an overlapping minimal news receipt ('Mm', line 18) and Abi is forced to continue her own narrative (lines 19-21). The narrative finally ends with a second invitation to Chloe to speak in the form of yet another fishing device ('do you kind of feel that happens as well', lines 20-21) and appeals to shared experience. Chloe is much less forthcoming than earlier in the extract where she demonstrated her knowledge of drugs. The initial tentative agreement with the interviewer ('I think so', line 22) is quickly downgraded to a lack of knowledge ('I don't know really') and a final resigned agreement ('I suppose so').

This example of the respondent 'stonewalling' in response to the interviewer's questions is particularly interesting since we already know that Chloe is not afraid to talk about drugs as a topic per se. Rather, the trouble occurs precisely when she is asked to account for her own personal experiences and attitudes towards the activities of young people, when the present age difference between interviewer and interviewee has been discursively flagged.

The next extract also examines how an interviewer may offer some self-disclosure in order to bridge apparent age differences between himself and the interviewee. The following is taken from an interview conducted with a male interviewer (Stephen Gibson) and female interviewee (Beth). The topic under discussion is youth culture in Manchester.

**Extract 4:** Beth (aged 20, youth and European identity project)

- 1 SG Were you at er was it (.) Justin Timberlake last [night?  
2 Beth [Oh yeah heh heh.  
3 SG Was that good?  
4 Beth Yeah. Very good.  
5 SG Yeah.  
6 Beth (.) very good concert.  
7 SG Was that at the, was it the [MEN=  
8 Beth [Yeah.  
9 SG = Arena, yeah (.) do you go there quite often or?  
10 Beth ((yawns)) Yeah.  
11 SG Yeah.  
12 Beth Been to quite a few concerts there (1) it's a good laugh.  
13 SG Yeah (.) I went to er (.) see the Inspiral Carpets last night. I don't  
14 know if you've ever heard of [them?  
15 Beth [heh heh heh no.

16 SG They've only just got back together. They've been split up about  
17 eight years.  
18 Beth Yeah?  
19 SG But they're from er Oldham actually.  
20 Beth Yeah?  
21 (1)  
22 SG It was good.

Throughout this exchange, Stephen tries to provoke talk about youth culture in Manchester, and the talk is characterised by a sequence of questions from Stephen and minimal answers from Beth. The extract begins with the interviewer attempting to display his knowledge of current music events (line 1). However, as this receives a minimal response ('oh yeah', line 2), Stephen provides a follow-up question requesting an evaluation of the concert. Again the response is minimal ('yeah', line 4), but offers an upgraded assessment ('very good', line 4). Using a continuer (line 5) the interviewer simply receives a repetition of the previous answer (line 6). Stephen offers yet another follow-up question asking for confirmation of the location of the concert, whilst demonstrating some local knowledge (line 7). Again the response is minimal. In an attempt to provoke further talk, the interviewer adopts the strategy of trying to build rapport with Beth through shared local and cultural knowledge by specifying the location of the concert ('Arena', line 9). The question concerning the frequency of Beth's visits however receives yet another minimal response which simply confirms the question ('yeah', line 10). When Stephen adopts an echoing technique (line 11), Beth provides

some elaboration upon her answer concerning the frequency and a glossed evaluation of her visits ('it's a good laugh', line 12). Here Beth provides closure on the topic.

At this point, in trying to re-open the topic, Stephen provides some self-disclosure. In doing so he tries to construct similarity with Beth in terms of a common category of 'people who go to music concerts'. Asked if she has ever heard of the Inspiral Carpets, (lines 13-14), Beth laughs, signalling her lack of knowledge. Stephen offers a possible explanation for Beth's lack of knowledge ('only just got back together', line 16). However, this further information provided by Stephen about the band only serves to emphasize the age difference between him and the 20 year old Beth ('they've been split up about eight years', lines 16-17). In a final attempt to work-up the relevance of his remark to Beth, Stephen stresses the band's locality ('they're from er Oldham', line 19). Again this only produces a further request for further information from Beth ('yeah?', line 20), and in a reversal of the usual question and answer format of interviews, it is now the interviewer who provides a minimal evaluation of the event ('it was good', line 22).

In extracts 3 and 4 we have considered how 'doing similarity' through the strategy of self-disclosure can close down interview talk. In both of these cases of interviews with young people, it is likely that this breakdown was due to the fact that the respondent interpreted the interviewer's attempt to 'do similarity' as a marker of their differences in age. In the next extract, we see how a white interviewer's (Jackie Abell's) attempt to construct 'common experience' with a young woman of Pakistani background is resisted by the respondent, who treats this instead as a marker of the interviewer's ethnic difference. The reported extract starts at a point in the conversation in which the



interviewer is encouraging Saima (who currently lives in Manchester) to describe her experiences when visiting Dundee:

**Extract 5:** Saima (20 years, constitutional change and identity project)

1 JA So Dundee was alright then, was it?

2 Saima Yeah uh no, you know, there are, if you see, it is pretty much (.) erm, (2) there  
3 isn't, there aren't many °Asian people in Dun↑dee°.

4 JA No, there's not, well, there certainly was[nt =

5 Saima [yeh

6 JA = about six years ago, when I was there.

7 Saima Yeah. But now, I went recently this year, I went about two months ago,

8 and uh there aren't many Asians there (1) erm that's (.) and that's why, you know, if  
9 you, if you're an Asian and you go to a white, a white city or a white area (.)  
10 erm you get stared at, don't you.

11 JA Yeh.

12 Saima You obviously feel uncomfortable as you know, a ↑western Asian. We  
13 haven't seen any Asians since last year heh heh heh So (.) erm obviously, it's  
14 difficult, it's kinda odd being in Dundee. I mean, really nice place though,  
15 too quiet. It's so ↑dull.

16 JA See, I'm sur↑prised, cos I remember it as being a thriving, throbbing place  
17 full of pubs, clubs (.) and people. But I lived right in the centre.

18 Saima Oh right (.) I don't (.) I can't remember what it looked like.

19 JA But I know the outskirts of it are absolutely ↑barren (.)

- 20 Saima Mm
- 21 JA and Broughty Ferry, which is the real touristy bit
- 22 Saima ↑Oh Broughty ↑Ferry?
- 23 JA It's very quiet.
- 24 Saima Erm.
- 25 JA You [know
- 26 Saima [yeh all those little laney [bits
- 27 JA [That's it.
- 28 Saima Oh. My cousins live near there.
- 29 JA ↑Ah, well, it is quiet there.
- 30 Saima But thing is (1) you know, because (.) we're Asians, and we're Muslims, w-we
- 31 don't find, we don't go to the pubs and [clubs =
- 32 JA [No.
- 33 Saima = they're not for us, that's why there isn't many things to do (.) erm

In this case, we see an example of a 'pitch' for common experience on the part of the interviewer being effectively overridden by the respondent, who instead imposes a frame of ethnic and religious difference on the interaction. Throughout, Jackie is attempting to work up a construction of common experience, on the grounds of a claim to first-hand personal experience of the subject (Dundee) that Saima has introduced to the discussion.

In her first reported turn, Jackie simply invites Saima to provide an evaluation of Dundee, posing the question, 'So Dundee was alright then, was it?' In response, Saima produces a hedged negative reply, the gist of which hinges on the statement 'there aren't

many Asian people in Dundee'. At this point, Jackie produces a response designed both to signal agreement ('No, there's not'), and also to demonstrate her category entitlement to provide such an assessment, by indicating that she herself 'was there'. Saima's response, however, indicates her receipt of Jackie's intervention as an unwarranted claim, both to the floor, and to shared experiences and category entitlement to knowledge. Saima first 'trumps' Jackie's reference to her experiences 'six years ago' by stressing the comparative recency of her own experiences: 'But now, I went recently this year, I went about two months ago' (line 7). Saima then goes on to work up the ethnic-specific grounds of her own claim to experience, by emphasising the personal emotional significance of there being not 'many Asians': 'you get stared at, don't you' (line 10). In this case, it is clear that the tag, 'don't you', is using an addressee-exclusive 'you', inviting by way of response from the interviewer a receipt token, rather than a token of 'common knowledge'.

In her next turn (lines 12-15) Saima continues her account of 'western Asian' experience in a 'white city', again using an addressee-exclusive 'you', and ends with a negative evaluative gloss, 'It's so dull.' At this stage, Jackie regains the floor, and in order to prompt more talk from Saima, provocatively refers to her own different experience of Dundee: 'I remember it as being a thriving, throbbing place full of pubs, clubs' (lines 16-17), but then softens this by implying that this different experience might be due to differences in the areas referred to, 'But I lived right in the centre' (line 17). Saima's claim to not being able to remember (line 18) avoids a direct challenge to the interviewer's version of Dundee (see Edwards, 1997, Locke & Edwards, 2003). Jackie repairs her previous challenge by appealing to a shared knowledge of what the place

looks like, and as such offers this as an explanation for the difference in views about Dundee (line 19). By way of response, Saima initially engages in a set of side-sequence exchanges concerning various areas of Dundee (lines 18-29). However, whilst the self-disclosure about living in Dundee is deployed by the interviewer as a strategy for challenging and then repairing the different accounts of the city, this attempt at shared experience is received by Saima as evidence of cultural differences between herself and the interviewer. On line 30, Saima returns to the theme of cultural difference, and explicitly casts Jackie's claim to have not experienced Dundee as 'dull', but rather as a 'throbbing' place 'full of pubs', as a function of her different cultural background: 'we're Asians, and we're Muslims...we don't go to pubs and clubs'.

#### *Self-disclosure and the negotiation of category entitlement*

So far we have considered how interviewees may receive displays of 'shared experience' on the part of interviewers, ironically, as potentially evidence of difference. In the case of Jackie Abell's interview with Saima, we also saw how a respondent can recast an interviewer's claims to 'different experiences' by challenging her claims to common identity, and may challenge the relevance of an interviewer's self-disclosure by asserting their own distinct category entitlement to speak. From our data, it seems that self-disclosure can inhibit interview talk when it might convey the interviewer's *greater* category entitlement to talk about a particular topic than the interviewee. This was most common in our data when male interviewers were interviewing other men.

The following extract is taken from an interview conducted by Stephen Gibson with an undergraduate student, Lee. This extract illustrates how self-disclosure by the

interviewer may be received by the interviewee as evidence of greater category entitlement to talk about a topic than the interviewee, and may thereby function to take the floor from the respondent.

**Extract 6:** Lee (21, youth and European identity project, pilot interview)

- 1 Lee um (.) I really like Lancas[ter=  
2 SG [Mm  
3 Lee = and I'm looking to do a Masters here  
4 SG °Oh right°  
5 Lee um (2) but outside the university I think it's pretty limited  
6 SG Mm  
7 Lee uh (.) the best (.) part of Lancaster is certainly the campus  
8 SG (.) yeh (1) w-w-what do you want to do your Masters in?  
9 Lee um (.) I'm looking to do one of the MRes courses [um  
10 SG [Oh right  
11 Lee um, looking at (.) uh sort of computers controlled by gaze and uh  
12 (.) headmounted (.) uh sets with the RAF using them  
13 SG Oh right yeh I've got a brother who's in t'RAF actually  
14 Lee (.) Oh  
15 SG (.) w-what sort of stuff (.) would uh do they do with uh those sort of  
16 things?  
17 Lee Um like the people flying um (.) a fast jet or um (.) some uh helicopters  
18 um

19 SG (.) yeh

20 Lee they've got the headset where they can control all the weapons and (.) y'know the

21 targeting systems with the gaze of their eyes, that lo-that looks quite

22 interesting.

23 SG Sounds interesting

24 Lee Does your brother fly [or

25 SG [he-he does, he's just uh (.) in the process of

26 learning at the moment he's only been in less than a ↑year so he's not

27 got into gaze controlled weapon systems yet he's just (.) doing small

28 small jet uh trainers (3) actually I didn't know they did those sort of

29 things, it's probably a bit like uh (.) you see the weapons things from the

30 last Gulf War and that, with the smart bombs and so on

31 Lee yeh

32 SG going in (.) those sort of things are th-controlled with (.) eye

33 [move↑ments?

34 Lee [yeh

35 SG (.) yeh um

36 Lee like all the fire and forget missiles like, um, that can kind of be controlled

37 from a distance (.) they can target like anything, different things, by um (.)

38 looking around the visor

39 SG yeh

40 Lee uh fire off and just leave them to

41 SG yeh

42 Lee (.) let the missiles do their own job so  
43 (2)  
44 SG So would you see, try and make a career out of that, maybe even part  
45 of the RAF it[↑self?  
46 Lee [um possibly (.) I've looked (1) um going into military  
47 intelligence or  
48 SG okay  
49 Lee (.) something like that  
50 SG Yeh

In response to a direct question from Stephen concerning the kind of course he would like to pursue at university (line 8), Lee provides a fairly specific account of his interests in the RAF. In response, Stephen discloses that his brother is 'in t'RAF actually' (line 13). The short pause and the minimal response from Lee ('Oh', line 14) indicate some trouble in responding to this piece of news. This is recognised by Stephen who turns to repairing the self-disclosure and re-position himself as a naïve speaker. This is done in a series of questions and downgraded and mitigated accounts of knowledge about the RAF.

Although Lee responds with some information it is a much more vague account than previously in this extract (lines 17-18). In a reversal of the question-and-answer format of interviews, Lee now asks Stephen for further information concerning the extent of his brother's involvement with the RAF. In response Stephen produces a mitigated and downgraded account of his brother's activities in the RAF and a confirmation of his own naïve position. The information he provides is littered with references to his brother's

relatively low status in the RAF ('he's just', line 25; 'he's only been in less than a year', line 26; 'he's not got into gaze controlled systems', lines 26-27; 'he's just doing small jet trainers', lines 27-28), and his own lack of knowledge about the activities of the RAF ('I didn't know', line 28; 'it's probably a bit like', line 29). Stephen ends this extended turn with a question that again re-establishes Stephen's position as the interviewer, and offers the floor back to Lee as the informed speaker. Lee's minimal response is echoed by Stephen (lines 34-35), and Lee returns with a specific account concerning the function and relevance of the computers he wishes to design for the RAF. As the topic comes to a close, Stephen asks a question to shift the topic onto Lee's future career plans (lines 44-45).

In this extract we can see how the business of self-disclosure may be interpreted as a display of the interviewer's greater category entitlement to talk about a particular topic than the interviewee. As such the interviewee's role in the interview interaction becomes problematic and potentially redundant. In the final extract we consider how self-disclosure may function not only to display the interviewer's greater category entitlement to talk about a particular topic, but also how the mere act of self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer may 'wrong-foot' the respondent in so far as it disrupts the normative question-and-answer format of the interview.

Throughout this extract Clifford Stevenson (an Irish man currently living in Lancaster) is trying to provoke Richard (a young English man living in a village in East Sussex) into national talk. As Condor (2000) has demonstrated, in England talk about nationhood tends to be treated as a 'delicate' topic, which needs to be managed carefully in an interview setting. In this case, Clifford is attempting to elicit national-talk in the



context of a discussion of recent events, including the Queen's Golden Jubilee, the Football World Cup, and St George's Day.

**Extract 7:** Richard (18, constitutional change and identity project)

- 1 CS There's been a lot of stuff in the press about the Royal family for the past ten  
2 years
- 3 Rich Yeh  
4 (5)
- 5 CS I suppose in Lancaster that I noticed was um, the Jubilee weekend  
6 was (.) put in the shade a bit by the er ↑World Cup.
- 7 Rich (.) yes, yes (.) just a bit yeh
- 8 CS heh heh heh  
9 (4)
- 10 Rich heh
- 11 CS (.) Was it like that down ↑here?
- 12 Rich Yeah, oh World Cup took over down here really.
- 13 CS ↑Yeh?
- 14 Rich (.) Even though we were ↑working upstairs with the telly on you know
- 15 CS Yes, very good
- 16 Rich We were running up to catch the game every five min↓utes.
- 17 CS The um (.) the atmosphere at the last England match was just absolutely  
18 electric like.
- 19 Rich Yeh it was crazy heh heh heh

20 CS Yeh, °it was really good°. Although I suppose after that erm decisive goal it  
21 was a bit of defensive match like erm (.)  
22 Rich Yeh  
23 (4)  
24 CS But um (.) I suppose that was another (.) reason why all the ↑flags were out  
25 like.  
26 Rich Yes.  
27 CS Lancaster was just red and white all over the place like.  
28 Rich Mm and cars and stuff had flags.  
29 CS Yeh, yeh (.) people wandering about the streets like you know with flags  
30 round their shoulders which was interesting because I hadn't really seen it  
31 just the year before that.  
32 Rich I no (.) I haven't (.) but it's never been like that here in previous World Cups.  
33 CS Mm  
34 (2)  
35 Rich It's just this one (.) heh heh went a bit mental.  
36 CS Yeah, yeah, it was good, it was good.  
37 Rich (.) Yeah it was good yeah  
38 (7)  
39 CS It feels a bit erm (.) one thing it felt a bit strange coming over from  
40 ↑Dublin for about four years before coming over here was that Saint  
41 Patrick's Day in Dublin is fairly crazy as you can imagine ↑like.  
42 Rich Yeh

43 CS But St. George's Day here isn't is it?

44 Rich No.

45 CS You don't see that many flags or (.)?

46 Rich No, it's more of a (.) religious thing here than a social thing.

47 CS ↑Really?

48 Rich Yeah (2) and things only really happen in church.

49 CS Right, right.

50 Rich Nothing else really.

51 CS Yeh

52 Rich Well here there isn't any round here, I don't know about anywhere else.

53 (2)

54 CS That's right because I think I saw the George's flag flying from (.) St.

55 ↑Mary's.

56 Rich Yeh.

57 (1)

58 CS ↑That's interesting

59 (7)

60 CS I suppose that's because of the Church of England?

61 Rich Yeah, mm

62 (4)

At the start of this extract, we see Cliff attempting to draw Richard into conversation concerning the Jubilee, a topic that he quickly abandons. Cliff's next move is to introduce

the topic of the World Cup. However, in the absence of a direct question, Richard simply provides minimal confirming responses. It is when Cliff asks a direct question requesting information about East Sussex (line 11) that Richard elaborates. Over a series of three turns Richard works up an account that illustrates how the World Cup ‘took over down here’ (line 12). Cliff follows this with an evaluation of the match that includes specific details (lines 20-21). However, this is received as a display of knowledge, and hence entitlement. This is evident in Richard’s token response and the lengthy pause that follows indicating trouble.

In response, Cliff shifts the topic away from football and onto the issue of flags. Again this receives a minimal agreement response, and Cliff turns to a short description of his own experiences of Lancaster to warrant his mentioning of the flags. Richard provides a generic elaboration upon the topic (‘cars and stuff had flags’, line 28). Again Cliff self-discloses information about Lancaster concerning the use of flags and another justification for invoking the topic (‘which was interesting because I hadn’t really seen it just the year before that’, lines 29-31).

Thus here we have a sequence of turns in which the interviewer is providing the information with respect to the topic he has raised, and the interviewee is offering token confirming responses. Moreover, in the absence of any extended talk from Richard, Cliff treats himself as accountable for raising the topic and is caught in a series of justifications. Self-disclosures from the interviewer offer the potential for a discussion on the basis of shared experience with the interviewee. However, here the normal question and answer format of the interview interaction has become disrupted as the interviewer, rather than the interviewee, provides the information. Although Richard agrees the

special status of this particular World Cup ('It's just this one', line 35), he offers no elaborated talk. Cliff's evaluation of the football as 'good' (line 36) simply produces a confirmatory echo from Richard ('yeah it was good yeah', line 37).

As the strategy of self-disclosing information fails to provoke extended responses from Richard, Cliff shifts to adopt the position of an outsider, disclosing information that marks being Irish, and thereby to position himself as relatively uninformed. Cliff's outsider status is emphasised in his description of arriving in England from Dublin ('felt a bit strange', line 39). Constructing himself as a naïve questioner, Cliff asks Richard two direct questions concerning the celebrating of St George's Day (line 43), and the use of flags (line 45). This provokes some engagement with the issue by Richard, whose response 'it's more of a religious thing', (line 46) serves to limit the personal relevance of the topic for himself or his community. In response, Cliff maintains his naïve outsider position through a series of news receipts and continuers. In response to a pause Cliff provides a tentative account of having seen a flag hanging from the local church. Although this functions to support Richard's claims of flags being 'a religious thing' (line 46), it also potentially undermines Cliff's naïve interviewer status as someone who has some knowledge. This is evident in the minimal response token that occurs (line 58) and the lengthy pauses. In a final attempt to provoke more talk Cliff adopts an outsider position asking 'I suppose that's because of the Church of England?' (line 60). However this also potentially further undermines Cliff's naïve position through the implicit revelation of knowledge, which, in conjunction with Cliff's self-positioning as Irish, effectively prevents any further elaborated talk about nationhood and religion.

## Conclusions

Researchers often advocate interviewer self-disclosure as a strategy for addressing power dynamics within interview interactions. It is claimed that by ‘doing similarity’ and invoking shared experiences, interviewers can provoke elaborated interview talk, particularly about sensitive or delicate issues. However, from our data we suggest that the success of this strategy may rely crucially upon acts of ‘doing similarity’ being received as such by the respondents. As we demonstrate, this may not always be the case. Often through a sharing of experiences the interviewer paradoxically exemplifies differences between themselves and the interviewee in terms of age, gender, social class, race, religion, and education. Moreover, such strategies may display an interviewer’s greater category entitlement to provide information about a particular topic than the interviewee. This can also occur when an interviewer alternatively adopts a strategy of self-disclosure in order to ‘do difference’. As interviewers shift from the standard question-and-answer format of an interview in producing a self-disclosure, it may be unclear to interviewees what their role is within such interactions as the expectation of providing new information to the interviewer becomes ambiguous. Also, the sensitivity of the topic does not appear to reliably influence the success or otherwise of an act of self-disclosure. Rather, strategies of ‘doing similarity’ and ‘doing difference’ may both, on occasions, be taken as a display of the interviewer’s greater category entitlement regarding the topic under discussion. In addition, in so far as the very act of self-disclosure may violate norms of interview interaction, in which an interviewee has the role of providing ‘new’ information, an interviewer’s shift from the standard question-

and-answer format may, on occasions, have the effect of positively suppressing further talk. Hopefully what this study of interviewer acts of self-disclosure begins to alert us to is that the identity of the interviewer should be as much a focus of study as that of the interviewee. It cannot be treated as a taken-for-granted assumption that the identity of the interviewer is unproblematic for the participant. Rather it is the case that both interviewee and interviewer negotiate appropriate identities for themselves within an interview interaction, sharing concerns about how to present one's self, one's knowledge, and one's similarity or difference from the other.

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<sup>i</sup> The first study to be considered here, 'Young people at risk', was concerned with experiences of youth and crime with young women aged between 14 – 25, who were deemed to be 'at risk' of committing criminal offences by Social Services. These interviews were conducted by a young female interviewer (Abi, aged 30 years), who recruited participants using strategic sampling. The second project, "Nationals and

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Migrants: Constitutional Change & Identity' (Leverhulme Trust, ref: 35113) was concerned with issues of inclusion and exclusion, national and local identity amongst England-born and Scotland-born people in the context of devolution. These interviews were conducted by either a young male interviewer (Cliff, aged 27 years) or a young female interviewer (Jackie, aged 27 years). Participants were recruited using theoretical sampling. The final study involved in this paper, "Youth and European Identity" (European Commission, ref: 7634) examined perceptions of European identity by young people born and resident in various European countries. For the purposes of this paper we have focussed on those participants resident in Manchester, England. These interviews were conducted by a young male interviewer (Stephen, aged 24 years), and participants were recruited using theoretical sampling.