

## Avoiding Ownership For Alleged Wrongdoings

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On occasions when a first speaker is understood to be alleging wrongdoing toward another, and/or is treated by another as having performed such an utterance, one typical course of action involves a rejection-implicative next response by second speaker (e.g., denying, avoiding, delaying, justifying, counter-challenging/accusing).<sup>1</sup> Evidence of this type of adjacent response (cf. Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) has surfaced across rather diverse sets of conversational data, involving a wide variety of naturally occurring interactional activities, and displays an identifiable shape of organization. Such activities have included, for example, how courtroom cross-examination is marked by witnesses providing justifications/excuses as in extract (1) and alternative descriptions as in extract (2) to what lawyers were understood to be achieving in prior (accusatory) queries (see Appendix for Transcription Conventions):

(1) (ST:96, 16C) (Drew, 1978; Atkinson & Drew, 1979, p.137)

C: You saw this newspaper shop being bombed on the front of Davis Street? W: Yes.

2

Wayne A. Beach

C: How many petrol bombs were thrown into it? W: Only a couple. I felt that the window was already broken and that there was part of it burning and this was a re-kindling of the flames. C: What did you do at that point? W: I was not in a very good position to do anything. We were under gunfire at the time.

(2) (Da:Ou:45/2B:2) (Drew, 1985, p.138)

C: An you went to a: uh (0.9) ah you went to a ba:r? (in) Boston (0.6) iz that correct?  
(1.0)  
W: It's a clu:b.  
C: it's where uh (.) uh (0.3) gi:rls and fella:s meet, isn't it? (.09)  
W: People go: there.

This type of response can also include minimizing responsibility and wrongdoing attributed by first speaker's report of being inconvenienced:

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

3

(3) (D.Z.:I) (Pomerantz, 1978, p.115) ((arrow added)) D: Yeh that's what yih told me

Thanks a lot ha ha rhhh

Z:

<sup>l</sup>N:o no last semester they kept it open on Friday night

The organization of dispute activities among urban black children also allows accusations, including accusation/response pairs during female gossip confrontations:

(4) (Maple Street group) (M.H. Goodwin, 1980, p.677) ((arrow added))

Ter: Well cuz you= you said that she wrote it.

Flo: UHUH. UHUH CUZ I ONLY WROTE *ONE* THING IN *RED*.

We also find this as reciprocal counters among male children, such as a challenge/threat with second speaker's counter to it:

(4a) (Maple Street Group) (M.H. Goodwin, C. Goodwin, 1987, p. 3) ((arrow added))

Chop: Ah you better sh:ut up with your little= *di*: ngy sneaks. (1.4)

Tony: I'm a dingy your hea:d. =How would you like *that*.

Response to accusations is also a factor in the placement of denials, and counter-assertions to prior announcements in children's arguments, as in extracts (5) and (6) respectively:

4

Wayne A. Beach

(5) (Wilkinson data) (Maynard, 1985, p.13) ((arrows added))

Don: You're a pig, know why Jim: Why

Don: You're hoggin' everything Jim: I am not

Don: Yes you are

(6) (p.20)

Ralph: Barb you= you don't beg people of

invite= vite you over Barb: I'm not begging Ralph: Yes you

are

The turns marked by arrows above reflect a range of circumstances in which second speakers withhold displays of agreement (e.g., by not admitting to and/or apologizing for an alleged wrongdoing) in orientation to their actions having been called into question. In these ways, minimizations of responsibility are recipient-designed to what prior speakers were understood to have projected in their initial utterance and, in turn, positioned adversarially, oppositionally, or combatively (cf., Atkinson &

Drew, 1979; Drew, 1985; Maynard, 1985; Goodwin & Goodwin, in press). Within such sequential environments, second speakers' actions may not only display an orientation to problematic features of prior utterance(s), but also be designed so as to mitigate or even cancel the projected force giving rise to the response in the first place (cf. Heritage, 1989). Disaffiliative utterances of this type may be oriented to by first speaker not only as next speaker's unwillingness to agree or defer, but also as functioning to delay and possibly avoid addressing first speaker's concerns (cf. Pomerantz, 1984). These features mark the uniquely disaffiliative, and inevitably

## Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

5

collaboratively produced, character of alleging and responding to wrongdoings (and/or challenging/threatening, as in (4a) above).

This case study (cf. Schegloff, 1987a) focuses on a range of interactional features and emergent consequences as second speakers attempt to avoid ownership for actions called into question.<sup>2</sup> The data are unique in that they allow for analysis of the continuous, negotiated character of a Grandmother/Granddaughter conversation. The focus of interaction rests with issues of health behavior, such as following advice and visiting a doctor. An array of devices are deployed in the course of inducing and withholding agreement, denial, and even confession. However, particular attention is given to second speaker's *techniques for achieving avoidance*. Just as first speakers employ a variety of resources for constructing, attributing, and pursuing responsibility for another's wrongdoing (cf. Beach, 1988), so do next speakers invoke and rely on various methods for excusing, reducing, averting, and perhaps altogether eliminating the need to take ownership of alleged wrongful (e.g., immoral, unethical, unhealthy, unwise, etc.) actions.

Five methods for avoiding ownership are examined: (1) Discountings; (2) providing accounts or explanations to minimize wrongdoing; (3) withholding response through no-talk (silence); (4) seeking closure on troubling topics (i.e., the focus of the alleged wrongdoing); and (5) downgrading the seriousness of attribution through humor.

### METHODS FOR AVOIDING OWNERSHIP 1. Discountings

In extract (7) below, first speaker (G) proffers an unsolicited evaluation and also explicitly claims knowledge of second speaker's (S's) motivations and actions:

6

Wayne A. Beach

(7) SDCL:G/S: 139-148

G: We:ll Sissy. (0.8) let's I face it no:w (.)

*yo:u kno: w hh that ch'u are so: e::ager: (.) ti be thin: (0.2) that you sometimes. go in the bathroom. (0.2) and throw up your food?*

*I kno: w it's true! 1*

1 -> S: "GRAM MA YOU ARE SO:: FULL O(F)

2 - SHIT! I am so: *su:re*.

Aside from the fact that the response "YOU ARE SO:: FULL O(F) SHIT!" might be construed as an exceptional and perhaps novel way for granddaughters to speak with grandmothers, what interactional work is being achieved in this instance?

First, S offers what is clearly a straightforward and exclamated discounting of the knowledge G is claiming to possess. By so denying the legitimacy of G as a viable source, one whose grounds for assertion are deemed inadequate, S forestalls (at least for the moment) being held accountable for wrongdoings projected in G's prior turn. In effect, the responsibility not assumed to be taken up in the first instance can be dismissed by second speaker, when and if prior speaker attributing lack of responsibility is made out to be "full of shit" - literally satiated with displeasing and/or unsuitable information, and labeled as such in derogatory fashion. In extract (7) above, S is therefore not compelled to "face" a problematic circumstance which is treated as fundamentally excremental, such as the imputed motive that S is purposely "throwing up" because she is "*so: e::ager: .(.) to be thin: .*". Instead, S's discounting is upgraded by claiming *disbelief* with a tag-positioned "I am so: *su: re.*". This tag casts additional doubt on both the truth-value of G's description and assessment, and also on the relevance and appropriateness of even raising such possibilities in the first instance?

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

7

Second, by discounting and claiming disbelief in the fashion evident in extract (7), S is noticeably *not* offering an explanation, explicitly admitting guilt, nor denying alleged wrongdoings. As noted, such withholdings effectively delay, however briefly, further consideration of topics-at-hand: In this instance, deliberately throwing up food and taking responsibility for such actions. Yet withholdings of this sort also display second speaker's unwillingness to address the truth and/or falsity of alleged wrongdoings, as one form of disputation involving return and exchange moves (cf. M.H. Goodwin, 1980), in favor of drawing attention *back* to the original source. By discounting (1-) and displaying disbelief (2->), however, S also engages in an activity other than counter-accusation: It is not the first speaker's problem with deliberate "throwing up" with which second speaker is concerned; rather, the substantive basis upon which allegations of wrongdoing are being constructed occasion, in turn, S's next actions.

Upon examination of the subsequent environment of interaction, preceded by extract (7), S's actions are themselves found to be implicative. As second speaker G, who first alleged the wrongdoing, reprimands the apparent inappropriateness of S's discounting via "full of shit":

(8) SDCL:G/S:147-158

G:

(0.2) that you sometimes. go

in the *bathroom*. (0.2) and throw up your food?

*I kno: w it's ,true! 1*

1-4 S: <sup>1</sup>GRAM , MA YOU ARE *SO:: FULL (O)F*

SHIT! I am *so: su:r, e*

G: <sup>1</sup>(S i::ssy stop) T saying

8

Wayne A. Beach

such a thing as tha t

2~ S: *T WE:LL: I can't believe*  
> *that ch' u would even say something like tha: t. >*

(0.2)

G: Well it's *tru:e* isn't it?

(0.4)

G: *You know I:? know more about this than you*

think? I know.

(0.5)

3-\* S: *Gra: mma. you (a)re so we:: ird (.hh aghhh)*

((disgruntled sigh))

In overlap (2-) S now elaborates and further specifies the disbelief initiated in (1--)), in lieu of offering what reprimands hearably project (e.g., deferring, apologizing). This is met with G's query and noticeable, transitional silence (addressed below in a subsequent section), followed by what is yet another attempt by G to substantiate a knowledgeable basis for pursuing wrongdoing. Once again, however, S orients to G as illegitimate in (3-), thereby laying grounds for withholding response to prior speakers' knowledge claim. Here it is seen that S's attribution of "weirdness" to G begets a disgruntled reaction (.hh aghhh), one noticeably provided by second speaker in the course of discounting and continuing to delay direct consideration of first speaker's allegation ("throw up your food").

In short, G's claims for viability as a knowledgeable source, and positioning through an attempted reprimand, are transformed by S into a focus of first speaker's own culpability. By making G out to be "full of shit" and "weird", the initial wrongdoing attributed to S is discountable by means of re-focusing upon G's inadequacies - a shift from *self* to *other* as responsibility gets negotiated turn-by-turn (cf. Goffman, 1955). In these ways, discountings involve explicit re-focusing on other's vulnerabilities while remaining void of self-evaluation.

#### Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

9

Such a *self/other* shift is explicitly marked in extract (9) below as S responds to G's pre-announcement (cf. Terasaki, 1976), recommendation to see a doctor, and attempt to inform her of activities comprising such a visit:

(9) SDCL:G/S:347-365

G: You know what I would like to do (.) I would like to *take* you. (0.6)  
to a doctor. and we'll *talk* it over and *you* can tell em: (0.8)

G: you know they have ways of

1-a S: *Wha::(t)Oh Ga*

2- hh *Gramma* you are so: weird

3-4 I *can't* believe that *you'd* even *think* that

4-\* hh *Y: ou* wanta go to a doctor you take *yourself* to a doctor

(1.8)

G: Sissy () I'm *tellin* ya (.)hh *you*  
need *HELP* *hhh* and I mean *big* help (.)

5- S: *you need T ther- a- pe::*  
> I need *help* fer my grandmother <

In overlap S's "*Wha::(t) Oh Ga-*" (1-4) treats G's prior turn as problematic, while also mitigating the essential force of the recommendation offered. Heritage (1984) has convincingly shown how placements of "oh" in conversation

routinely display user's change

of-state in knowledge and/or orientation to what is being attended-to and thereby noticed (e.g., as a response to informing actions). In cases such as (1 --) above where an "oh" is built into a turn-initial response, however, Heritage (1990) has further evidenced alternative, yet nev-

10

Wayne A. Beach

ertheless systematic, deployments of "oh-prefaces." Several recurrent features originally noted by Heritage appear particularly relevant to the present analysis. First, "oh-prefaces" are embedded within turn-initial positions by recipients treating prior inquiries and/or questions as inappropriate, inapposite, or even as "questioning the unquestionable" (p.4). Second, "ohs" can be heard to preface what turns out to be not only "my world" proposals by recipients, but also reassertions designed to "hold a position" rather than displaying alignment with what was taken to have been projected by prior inquiry and/or question (pp.6-8). Finally, "oh-prefaces" may project subsequent topic shift, as though recipient is unwilling to consider or address issues

occasioned by first speaker (e.g., see 4- and 5-> in extract (9) above.

In light of these considerations, it can be observed that S's "*Wha.: (t) Oh Ga-*" (1->) adds substantively to a sequential environment giving rise to the next-positioned discounting (2-p) and elaborated statement of disbelief (3-). And these moves-in-a-series are prefatory, in this instance, to recipient's counter-recommendation in (4-p). This turn-at-talk displays both an unwillingness to seriously consider G's recommendation, *and* treats G's advising as best followed by the *source* of the recommendation; it is constructed so as to imply that G could benefit from the same solutions available for S's "problem" (e.g., "we'll *talk* it over and *you* can tell em: "). Regardless of G's subsequent attempt to stress the critical nature of S's predicament, an escalated three-part list construction (help - big help -4 therapy) (cf. Jefferson, 1991), in (5-3) S overlaps and once again discounts by shifting responsibility to G's vulnerability.

To summarize, S's discounting of what G is "up to" in the pursuit of information can be understood as one means of forestalling direct consideration of alleged wrongdoings. By casting doubt on the viability of claims offered and shifting the focus of inadequacy back upon first speaker's construction, second speaker displays an unwillingness to align responses with what first speaker projected. This is not to say that explanations are always withheld by second speaker in the course of receiving alleged wrongdoings, however, as is evident in the following set of instances.

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

11

## 2. Accounting as Avoidance

As Heritage (1989, p.133) observes, a range of instances have been identified wherein "a second speaker's failure to accomplish a projected, or looked for, action is accompanied by an explanation or account of some kind." Such instances include, for example, mitigated rejections of invitations (cf., Drew, 1984) and the absence of an expected answer to a question (including ignorance as an account, e.g., "I don't know".) (cf., Schegloff, 1984). In these and related instances, accounts are often provided in ways that frustrate, deny, delay, and/or avoid first speaker's pursuit of a response, constructed so as to elicit from second speaker descriptions and/or confirmations of issues/problems addressed.

In and through the production of an account, second speakers may seek to reconcile the trajectory of first speaker's utterance (e.g., by excusing or justifying actions), and/or treat such actions as normal and thus morally and ethically acceptable (cf., Mills, 1940; Heritage, 1983):

G: Well why? are ya so *tir:d*

an can-<sub>1</sub> (*canky*) I

S: Beca: a se? I have to  
I work such *long* hours (.) Gramma

It is worth noting that S is not simply providing an answer to a question, but *accounting for* the actions attended to by G (cf., Schegloff, 1984). S's response is not designed as a denial, however, but rather a provisional acceptance to what G's query is noticeably asserting. In confirming being "*tir:ed* an can- (*canky*)" S also provides, for G's consideration, an activity consequential for and thus responsible for such behavior: Working long hours. By offering this activity as a

12

Wayne A. Beach

reasonable and legitimate explanation, recipient can be heard to minimize wrongdoing by averting attention away from alternative and perhaps *illegitimate* reasons for behaving in this manner (i.e., behaving "for no good reason").

Similar to extract (9) above where G attempts to recommend that S visit a doctor, in extract (11) below G's description of S's "activity" and subsequent recommendation is received with a discounting (1 -\*) and statement of disbelief (2-). However, S next provides an explanation or account in (3-->), thus: Discounting - Disbelief -\* *Account*:

(11) SDCL:G/S:31-48

G: Well honey yer so *thin: no:w:*  
(0.6)

G: I don'(t) know () I think yer just (0.2)  
o(well you're)?just wearin yourself out with all your activity > I think iff you  
*slo: w* down a li(tt)le bit and rest a little  
bit more < (0.4)

1- S: GRA: M M A , , YOU'RE SO *WEIRD!*

G: Maybe

2-> S: > I don't even know why you say that I- <D

3-\* .hh I am f:i:: *ve thr: ee::* and I still  
*weigh* a hundred an ten- fifteen po:unds?

As noted previously, actions such as recommendations needn't be taken seriously, when and if second speaker fails to recognize the import (e.g., displays an inability to grasp the relevance) of first speaker's reasons for offering advice-relevant information. This appears to be the case through S's discounting and claiming disbelief above, actions functioning to forestall attention given to G's agenda.

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

13

Yet in (3-p) it is evident that S seeks to further substantiate both G's concerns as unnecessary, on one hand, *and* the basis upon which discounting and disbelief are legitimately offered on the other hand. While (3-) functions as a counter to G's initial assertion ("honey yer so *thin: no: w:* "), the counter is

substantiated by explaining or accounting for "height" and "weight" as indices of normality.

Thus far S's explanations or accounts have been shown to occur in immediate response to G's assertions, in extract (10), and/or as apparent upgrades to discountings and statements of disbelief, in extract (11). In essence, S's reliance upon "working long hours" in extract (10) and "height and weight" in (11) appear as offerings of suitable evidence for effacing what G is noticeably orienting to. However, it should be made clear that neither placement guarantees the suspension nor automatic deletion of concerns held by a speaker such as G. Accounts can themselves occur as moves-in-a-series (see 1 - through 4- below), provided by S in evolving fashion as continued responses to G's hearable failures to accept the viability of explanations offered (a-4, b-p, c-):<sup>4</sup>

(12) SDCL:G/S:46-77

- 1 - S: > I don't even know why you say that I- < .hh I am ,•I:: ve thr: ee:: and I still  
w eigh a hundred an to n- fif I teen p- unds? ((noise)) (0.6)
- a-\* G: oh,I you don't weigh a hundred an fifteen T pounth hh all your clothes  
are fallin off of ya everybody tells you ya look thi:n?
- 14  
Wayne A. Beach
- 2- Ya:: but finally I I
- b-\* G: You're b o:ny look at acrossed your chest an yer hh your collar bo:nes stickin o::ut > r  
why d'ya wanna be so thi:n! <
- 3- S: Gra: mma:. T it's not: hh if I could to:: se more weight an git it off my thi:: ghs?  
I wouldn't. hh I wouldn't wanna lose any more weight > but I T can't help it if my  
shoulders look. ba: re! < =
- c-4 G = Well dear< (.) You do that with exercise. no:t di::eting (an le) an not getting th  
right foods? >=
- 4-\* S: = Gra:mma. (.) I a:te good the other night didn't I you an(d) I both went out for a big  
salad an:(d) s:oup. (.) why are you: sitting here sayi:n my:- ( ) (0.4) > should be  
with exerci:se. <

In extract (12) co-interactants collaboratively produce a series of twoturn sequences, chained-out in such a manner that each utterance re-occasions the relevance and subsequent placement of a next positioned, reciprocal counter. In (a-\*), for example, G's turn-initial "oh" and subsequent response (marked with disagreement and reference to "everybody") clearly renders S's prior utterance as untenable. And

while S relies upon a transitional moment to begin offering what would appear to be a preface to an account in response (2-), G elaborates in (b-\*) by countering with further "evidence" and offering a tag-positioned "why d'ya wanna be so thi:n!".<sup>5</sup> In turn, S explains via a partial excuse and minimization of responsibility ("but I T can't help it...") in (3-\*). As the interaction unfolds with G's disagreement-rele-



referencing an occasion of eating appropriately).

From instances (10) - (12) it is clear that interaction can proceed through ongoing attempts to defend actions as understandable and acceptable orientations to alleged wrongdoings. Explanations or accounts are, in these ways, second speakers' resources for situating motives, actions, and/or occasions in attempting to legitimize what may otherwise be treated as problematic.

### 3. Withholding Response: No-Talk (Silence)

The examination of discountings and accounts provides an opportunity to inspect two *explicit* techniques for minimizing and/or avoiding ownership for alleged wrongdoings. By discounting the viability of claims and offering explanations to legitimate actions, second speakers may be heard and seen to have withheld alignment by failing to agree with and/or affirm first speaker's projected concerns.

In contrast, withholdings may also occur not from what second speakers explicitly provide as a response, but rather the *noticeable absence* of responses such as discountings and accounts (i.e. through "no-talk" or silence):

(13) SDCL:G/S:155-160

- S: TWE:LL: *I can't believe > that ch'u*  
would even say something like *tha:t*. < G: Well it's *tru: a* isn't it? (0.4)  
G: *You know I: know more about this* than you *think?* I know.

16

Wayne A. Beach

Silence is itself a response that has been shown to signal both delay and/or potential rejection following assertions (Pomerantz, 1984), invitations and offers (Davidson, 1984). By failing to provide an explicit answer to G's query in extract (13), S averts (if only momentarily) owning up to what G suspects is true nonetheless. Yet S's silence may nevertheless be heard and treated as "admission." This possibility is further substantiated as G resumes speaking following S's failure to provide affirmation. Through G's resumption it becomes evident that, even though silence may display a problematic orientation to prior turn and thus trouble with what prior utterance projects, it needn't constrain first speaker's orientation to silence as non-compliant action. As Heritage (1989, p.139) observes:

At all events, *the failure is treated as requiring explanation* and, indeed, it is a positive signal for us to initiate a search for an explanation that is appropriate to the circumstances. The explanations which may be arrived at under such circumstances are almost always negative in their implications for non-reponding parties and this factor may be a major motivation for them to produce either compliant actions or, alternatively to produce their own accounts for non-compliance which forestall the negative conclusions which might otherwise be drawn.

It is through first speaker's resumption of speaking following silence, and what is achieved via resumption, that an affirmation and/or explanation may be treated as noticeably absent and thus "due"

Within the material examined for the present case study, withholdings via silence recurrently appeared within a three-part sequence in each of extracts (14)-(16) below: Specific queries by G (1-p) were followed by S's withholding of explicit responses (2-), which were themselves received by G as further substantiation and/or continuation in the search for information *and* confession (3-i):

(14) SDCL:G/S:155-160

S: T WE:LL: I can't believe > that ch'u would even say something like tha:t. <

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

17

1-\* G: Well it's *tru:e* isn't it? 2-- (0.4)

3- G: *You know!?: know more about this* than you think? I know.

(15) SDCL:G/S:132-136

1-4 G: Well you al:ways eat just fine?  
is's amazing that you don't *weigh?* more.  
.hh so what happens to the food that you eat?

2- (1.1)

3-> G: you- > you're not getting any bigger? but. <

(16) SDCL:G/S:92-96

1- G:>Well Sissy do you? think you're gonna look good < (.) when you're so: *thin:* 2- (1.6)

3- G: that chu'll be > pretty in your wedding on that beautiful wedding gown  
((continues))

Just as "well" is employed as a disagreement-relevant preface in each instance above, the following indicates an alternative preface in the form of a pre-announcement (cf., Terasaki, 1976). This preface is also receipted silently, however, followed by a three part sequence mirroring extracts (14) - (16):

(17) SDCL:G/S:165-171

G: Sissy I wanna tell you something (0.8)

18

Wayne A. Beach

1 \_\* G: I: ? *know.* (0.8) that ch'u are throwing up your food *purposehy.* (.) hh > and do you  
*realize* that this is a (.) ill:ness <

2-\* (0.4)

3-\* G: and the *m:ore* > you do it (up) < ((continues))

In the absence of articulated response to prior query, S's failure to deny, admit, and/or display common knowledge contributes to G's orienting to the contingencies of the moment as "unfinished busi-

ness." By S's withholding of possible "incriminating evidence" (cf. Heritage, 1989), however, G may nevertheless display an understanding of what was not offered as though information withheld is

"hearable" in its absence. Consider, for example, a continuation of (10) above:

(18) SDCL:G/S:231-266

G: Well why? are ya so *tir:* ed

an can- *i(canky)* |



3- S: (How do you )<sup>j</sup> think I learned? it Gramma? <

20

Wayne A. Beach

initial query, "Well why? are ya so *tir:ed* an can- (*canke*)", was immediately treated by S as problematic and, by implication, tied to "throwing up her food".

#### 4. Topic Closure

It has been suggested, but only in passing, that topic-shifts may occur following user's placement of "oh-prefaces", in line with Heritage's (1990) analysis of features built into sequential activities possessing an "inapposite character". As it turns out, the interactional work of terminating a troubling, and initiating an alternative topic, evidences yet an additional resource available to second speakers when and if prior utterances are treated as problematic. For example, explicit attempts may be made to coerce first speaker to change and even terminate the issues/concerns being addressed.

While the conversational organization of "topic" has received considerable attention (cf., Maynard, 1980; Button and Casey, 1986; Button, forthcoming, a, b), of particular relevance to the present analysis is moving away from a topic involving "troubles-talk" (cf., Sacks, 1976; Jefferson, 1984; Beach 1990a). In cases when talk about troubles is problematic for one or more interactants, it is normal to enter into a closing of current topic by restarting an alternative topic:

(19) (JG:II:(a):3-4) (Jefferson, 1984, p.193)

M: But anyway I figure that maybe he can,  
hh give me something to: uh (.) you know  
bring this do:wn. Cause *God* I can't afford  
to you know. (0.2) get like tha:t? (0.3)

S: Ye:ah (0.6)

M: hhh tch How are you.

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongoings

21

In referencing Sacks's work (1976) on getting off troubling topics in conversation, Jefferson (1984, p.193) notes how a variety of devices are employed by interactants upon entry into closings, each of which:

specifically marks that a new topic is going to be done; something that proposes "let's start a new topic"; for example, "So what have you been doing lately?" Just such a device is recurrently used as a way to move out of talk about a trouble. Such a device may be characterized as not merely proposing to start a new topic, but as proposing to start the conversation afresh; thus the name "conversation restart".

Just such an instance appears in extract (20) below, where G seeks S's commitment to keep an appointment through a "promise":

(20) SDCL:G/S:522-533

G: T O:ne > step at a time < Sissy (0.5) we'll go the one ti:me (0.7) that ch'u  
(0.4) promise me

that I'll make the appointment ( )

1\_\* S: T OKA:::Y ALright (.) OKAY I'LL GO n- le(t)'s just drop it for t'night okay? ( ) I don't

wanta talk about it anymore. (1.5)

2- S: hh hhh I'm exhausted I havta work tomorrow are you still gonna go *walk* with me  
tomorrow: () hh and it's *not* because I'm a bule:mic I just like to get out with some *fresh*  
air:.

Prior to S's request to "*drop it*" and explicit dispreference for continuing talking-on-topic, in (1 -p) S first overlaps G's prior turn by making a concession to the appointment. With heightened emphasis (cf. Goodwin, 1980), a question might be raised: Why are "okay" and "alright" employed by S at just this juncture in the talk? One probable

22

Wayne A. Beach

answer is that such "receipt markers" have been shown to routinely occur not only in environments such as closing down phone calls (cf. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), but also in a more preliminary fashion as pre-closing devices in attempts to terminate prior and move onto new topics (e.g., see Beach, 1990b). In a similar vein, Jefferson (1981) has argued for systematic procedures through which interactants rely upon various "acknowledgment tokens" (e.g., um hmm, uh huh, yeah) during movement toward speaker readiness and preparedness to shift topic. Thus, S's use of "okay" and "alright" above can be seen as working in topic-shift implicative ways. Even S's final "okay?" can be understood as a topic terminal inquiry in light of its placement in the construction of S's utterance (i.e., what S is noticeably *doing* to get off topic). This is reinforced by observing how S initiates new topic in (2-) above, including the qualification as to why she would like to go for a walk tomorrow ("and it's *not* because I'm a bule:mic I just like to get out with some *fresh air*."), apparently offered in anticipation of short-circuiting a next-positioned response by G.

Attempts to delimit re-emergence of avoided topics, however, may involve considerable effort with no guarantee of "success." The following instance occurred less than one minute following extract (20) above:

(21) SDCL:G/S:562-575

G: Okay. () wher- where are you getting any nourishment to *do* all  
these ( L r ~)  
1\_\* S: Grandma I thought we weren't  
gonna *talk* about it anymor:::e  
G: You go out there and lift twenty five pound weights of

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

23

(0.4)

G: [ of  
2-9 S: Grandma I don't wanna taT look do you wa> do you want me to go:  
< see that doctor? fine. (0.4)  
3-f S: Now let's just drop it for tonite. G: Okay

In response to G's persistence, S first announces surprise at topic reinitiation (1-\*) and then proceeds in (2-\*) to offer compliance (to see a doctor) *conditionally* upon the topic once again being dropped. In (2-) it can be seen that S's preliminary self-repairs indicate an orientation to the trouble being addressed, eventuating in a tag-positioned query to which S provides the response ("fine"). Following a (0.4) pause, and G's failure to assume speakership at this transitional moment, S reiterates (see 1 T in

extract (20) above) "let's just drop it for tonite" in (3-\*).

This interactional work involves, minimally, speaker's query, a noticeably absent response by recipient through silence, and speakership resumption. In extract (22) this organization reappears as G explicitly seeks admittance, but is subsequently receipted by S (1-) in a manner fashioned after extract (21) above:

(22) SDCL:G/S:644-668

G: Now *admit* just a little bit to me .hhh they'll (.) you do go in and have you noticed that your teeth (.) I noticed your toothbrush has a lot of T pink like your (1'ke)

24

Wayne A. Beach

you're kinda bleeding? (2.2)

G: Uh: (.) do you think that maybe this

1- S: <sup>1</sup>Grandma I thought

you said we were gonna change the subject.  
(0.6)

2-p S: Oka:y?=  
=Allright well (wh'ya) talk about.

3- S: Well I dunno but I'm not gonna stay up here  
if you keep talkin about that. (0.6)

G: T Well=  
=Well let's <sub>1</sub> turn (.) let's turn the t=  
G: Okay you've T made a promise

4-\* S: =Well let's <sub>1</sub> turn (.) let's turn the t=  
G: Okay you've T made a promise

5-4 S: =oka:: y (le-) forget it let's drop that

.hhh let's (.) let's turn the TV on:.

(2.0)

S: T Okay just turn= go ahead and turn the TV on.

6-4 G: Well *tell* me Sissy (.) now how much longer

is it before (.) uh the *wedding*?

Throughout this extended exchange, S again seeks to hold G accountable for reinitiating topic. In (2-\*) confirmation is sought in response to G's withholding, and in (3-4) S counters with a threat en route to turning the TV on (an apparent distraction ploy in lieu of self-selecting new and/or alternative topic). Once again, however, G's persistent concern with S's "promise" is receipted through concession and a recycled attempt to terminate topic (5-\*). Finally, in (6-) G formally initiates a new and different topic, one designed so as to

Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

25

engender S's interest and willingness to further engage in interaction (a move that initiates talk about "the wedding" for a period of time).

Additional resources are no doubt available to interactants for moving out of troublesome topics (cf. Jefferson, 1984), and/or for

drawing attention to specific agendas (cf. Beach, 1990a), each indexing the specific occasion of use and thus participants' orientations to moment-by-moment contingencies of interaction. Yet it is clear from the instances above that topic closure can be addressed through specific and explicit references to "dropping" a topic. It is apparent that such explicit references by no means eliminate the problematic nature of topical talk, nor guarantee that particular issues or concerns, once "dropped" by shifting onto new or different topic (e.g., see (6-\*) in extract (21) above), will remain suppressed. As momentary solutions to what prior turns address (e.g., "making appointments," "nourishment," "admitting"), however, avoidance can be achieved by second speaker's withholding from talking about specific topics.

## 5. Humor: Downgrading Seriousness of Attributions

A final technique for achieving avoidance involves the formulation and use of humor, particularly in moments when second speaker attempts to downgrade the relative impact and seriousness of first speaker's attributions. Prior attention has been given to situations where trouble-teller laughs so as to indicate an ability to take the trouble lightly (cf., Jefferson, 1984). This appears to be the case in extract (23):

(23) SDCL:G/S:192-211

G: > T Don't tell me that now.  
 you just better *stop < (,) ,denyin(g) 1\_\** S: *Gra.mma*  
 I've 1 o::nly done that a couple a ti:m:es,

26

Wayne A. Beach

G: I A couple -of ti::(mes)o ((disbelieving))  
 S: > It's *not?* that big of a deal.  
 2 > my friends used to do it in the sorority \$ all  
 the *t(hh)i: me. \$ <((laughing voice))*  
 (1.0)

3-4 G: Well listen? your friends used to do a lot of things in the sorority that you didn't have  
 to pattern after I'm quite sure?

In response to G's initial command and explicit assertion that S should quit "denyin(g)", S provides a qualified admittance in (1-). With a reciprocal counter G challenges this qualified admittance in disbelieving fashion by repeating a portion of S's prior utterance in next turn ("IA couple of times"). In (2-\*) S overlaps and continues to elaborate by seeking to minimize and thus discount her wrongdoing. This response is recipient-designed to G's prior position of disbelief by first downgrading and invoking a well-known excuse of "safety in numbers" (see also extract (18) above), but also by S's "\$all the *t(hh)i: me. \$ <((laughing voice))*". In this way, S's admitted "couple of times" is offered in pale comparison with sorority friends who used to do it "all the time". The quickened and heightened delivery of S's laughing voice treats the seriousness of G's concerns as, literally, a laughing matter so as to add further impetus to the downgrading force of the utterance. Notice, however, that G's next disagreement-relevant response (3-) fails to treat S's laughing voice humorously. Instead, G provies a "po-faced" (cf. Drew, 1987) and thus serious response to what, alternatively, may have been treated as

an accepted invitation to share laughter (cf. Jefferson, 1979; Glenn, 1989) and thus a reinforcement of the "humor" of the moment.

The final instance displays recurrent features:

Avoiding Own for Alleged Wrongdoings  
ershi

27

(24) SDCL:G/S: 165-183

G: Sissy I wanna tell you something  
(0.8)

G: !: ? know:. (0.8) that ch'u are throwing  
up your food *purposeely*. (.) hh and  
do you *realize* that this is a (.) *ill*: ness <  
(0.4)

G: and the *m:ore* > you do it (up) <

I-p S: I *you don't stop right now*  
L T *You'r:: e so: FUNNY GRAMMA!*  
.hh this is an *ill:ness* I can't believe  
you're throwing up your food ((mimmick voice))

2- G: °Well you *ar:e?*°  
(1.2)

G: and T you know something ((continues))

In response to G's claiming knowledge and seeking affirmation, S overlaps and in so doing displays a sensitivity to what G's turn projected. In an attempt to take the attribution lightly, S not only calls G "FUNNY" but also mimicks the delivery and orientation G is treated as having displayed. Once again, however, this humorous discounting is treated seriously as G queries S in (2-\*) and is receipted with silence. Of interest here is the immediate transformation from seriousness to attempted humor and back again, transitions occurring through interactants' devices for managing allegations and avoidance of wrongdoing.

28

Wayne A. Beach

## CONCLUSION

This case study involving G and S has examined how second speakers attempt to avoid ownership for, and otherwise mitigate the attribution and pursuit of, wrongdoing. It has been shown that second speakers withhold affiliation and agreement by providing a variety of subsequent responses: Discountings (and claims of disbelief); accounts or explanations; no-talk (silence); attempts to close prior and restart alternative topics; and humorous responses to problematic and otherwise serious allegations. As interactional techniques for achieving avoidance, such responses function to deny, forestall, excuse, and even formulate the normalcy of actions purported to be troublesome. Such responses do not necessarily minimize nor guarantee subsequent orientations by first speaker, however, and passing attention has been given to ways in which ongoing "pursuit" is itself an organized phenomenon (cf., Pomerantz, 1978; Beach, 1988) meriting closer inspection.



From the data examined herein it should be evident that "avoidance" is thoroughly an interactional achievement, sensitive to and arising within ordinary, and thus collaboratively produced, circumstances of everyday life. In this sense, taking responsibility for one's actions needn't be, and frequently is not, an individual task. As apparent in cases like those examined, second speakers may display an unwillingness to directly admit, or even grant the plausibility, that a problem exists mirroring the attention given to it. Analyses of a wider variety of occasions may reveal recurrent features as those presently identified, speaking to the universality of interactants' methods for attributing and negotiating such global concerns as "right from wrong" and "responsibility." Yet in these and related occasions, the communication of alternative and at times contradictory orientations to "concerns and troubles" is in all cases problematic. This becomes self-evident, in the first instance, upon the noticing and examination of participants' solutions to evolving courses of action.

NOTES

1 This claim of "typicality" should not be taken as an observation of frequency of occurrence, i.e., that "more often than not" recipients reject an accusation or complaint in lieu of providing acknowledgment and implicit acceptance (e.g., "Sorry"). Any such claim of frequency is an altogether different task than the one undertaken here: The former task gives priority to percentages and not necessarily an unmasking of the ways interactants manage conversational activities of this sort. Rather, as the following data segments and discussion indicate, second speakers employ rejection-implicative responses in these and related sequential environments recurrently, through variously constructed techniques, and across a wide variety of everyday situations. The precise ways in which the techniques to be addressed recur - regardless of, but also sensitive to, topics being discussed, the nature of relationships involved, and/or features of a given "context" - is central to the present examination. However, it remains beyond the realm of what any given single case study might contribute to unequivocally resolve these issues when seeking an understanding of rejection-implicative activities.

Acknowledgment is due to anonymous readers for raising the need for clarification of this, and subsequently addressed, issues and positions. I also benefited greatly from a reading of John Heritage's paper, "Oh-prefaced responses to inquiry," a pre-publication draft he kindly shared with me.

2 Data for this case study were drawn from the SDCL (San Diego Conversation Library), a growing corpus of audio and videorecorded interactions within both casual and institutional settings. In particular, G/S is a thirteen minute audiotaped discussion involving a Grandmother (G) and Granddaughter (Sissy) (actual names have been withheld to protect identities of the interactants). Interactants themselves placed and operated a recorder in their living room as a means of preserving the discussion reported herein. The entire conversation was transcribed by utilizing the transcription symbols appearing in the Appendix, originally created and continually refined by Gail Jefferson (cf., Atkinson and Heritage, 1984, pp. ix-xvi; Beach, 1989, pp. 89-90).

3 A detailed examination of the interactional work achieved through such "tag-positioned queries" lies quite beyond the scope of the present case study (but see Beach, 1988). However, it might be noted in passing that a number of instances have been collected where it appears that such tags are employed as a means of ensuring the conditional relevance and impact of what a speaker is attempting to "get at." In this sense, a question or comment may be tag-positioned so as to constrain subsequent response, especially in light of the "discounting," "evidence" and/or "account" offered by current speaker. A look ahead to segment (12), for example, reveals that turns (b-p), (3-+), and (4-) contain tags, each

30

Wayne A. Beach

summarizing and/or drawing attention to basic concerns held by each speaker (i.e., the "gist" of what is being attended- to).

4 One method for receipting alleged wrongdoings is prefacing next response in a disagreement-relevant fashion. As Pomerantz (1984) has noted, "uh's" and "well's" are systematically employed to delay and set up displays of reluctance, discomfort, and weakened or qualified assertions and arguments. Such prefaces are routinely (though not exclusively) preceded by noticeable pauses:

(8a) SDCL:G/S:79-88

G: Well now Sissy with your T foo:d. (1.2) uh:: you don't always get the *benefit* of  
what ch'u eat? > now I happen to know that < (.) that's true

1- (0.8)

2-4 S: TWe:ll: ((high pitched voice)) (0.6)

3- T I know it's *hard*. right no:w

I mean I'm tryin to look good for my wedding? <  
((continues))

(8b) SDC/ 14-27

G: whadda you wanna go for a walk that's like the postman goin for a walk on (his) day  
off?

1- (0.2)

2~ S: T We r: ::(11) 1! ((high pitched voice))

G: <sup>L</sup>That's *stu pid*

3~ S: hh > Ya but Gramma you gotta realize

I work all day out < (.) in the *s:tore* i-it's nice to get outside hh ((clears throat))  
where it's (.) T you know fresh air and stuff..hh  
((continues))

#### Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

31

In the following instance, S's disagreement preface/delay device ("Weal") occurs in overlap with G's turn, but then is recycled (cf., Schegloff, 1987b) to initiate a possible agreement and explanation (instances of which are examined in a subsequent section):

(8c) SDCL:G/S:108-111

G: uh (.) > this is ridiculous if you wanna

look thinner? T why (do) yo u wanta *do* that

S: Well ((squeakie voice))

.hh well *oka:y?* I'm- (.) I'm no

5 This is but a partial reason for rejecting "canonical" explanations as universal structures governing the organization of account sequences (cf. Morris and White, 1989).

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34

Wayne A. Beach

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### Avoiding Ownership for Alleged Wrongdoings

35

## APPENDIX

The transcription notation system employed for data segments is an adaptation of Gail Jefferson's work (see Atkinson and Heritage (eds.), 1984, pp. ix-xvi; Beach (ed.), 1989, pp.89-90). The symbols may be described as follows:

*Colon(s):*

*Underlining:*

OKAY CAPS:

(.) *Micropause:*

(1.2) *Timed Pause:*

(Q) *Double Parentheses:*

Q *Single Parentheses:*

*Period:*

? *Question Mark:*

J. T *Arrows:*

*Comma: Degree Signs: Equal Signs:*

[ ] *Brackets:*

[[ ]] *Double Brackets:*

! *Exclamation Points:*

Extended or stretched sound,  
syllable, or word. Vocalic emphasis.  
Extreme loudness compared with surrounding talk.

Brief pause of less than (0.2).

Intervals occurring within and between same or different speaker's utterance.

Scenic details. Transcriptionist doubt. Falling vocal pitch.

Rising vocal pitch.  
Marked rising and falling shifts in intonation.  
Continuing intonation, with slight upward or downward countour.  
A passage of talk noticeably softer than surrounding talk.  
Latching of contiguous utterances, with no interval or overlap.  
Speech overlap.

Simultaneous speech orientations to prior turn.

Animated speech tone.

*Hyphens:*

> <     *Less Than/*  
< >     *Greater Than Signs:*

hhh     *H's: .hhh*  
ye(hh)s

((noise)) *Scenic Details:*

pt     *Lip Smack:*  
hah     *Laugh*  
heh     *Syllable: hoh*  
\$     *Smile Voice:*

Halting, abrupt cut off of sound or word.

Portions of an utterance delivered  
at a pace noticeably quicker (> <)  
or slower (<>) than surrounding talk.  
Audible outbreaths, possibly laughter. The more h's, the longer the aspiration. Inbreaths marked with period.

Transcriber's comments (e.g. ((mimmick voice))  
Often preceding an inbreath.

Relative closed or open position of laughter.  
Laughing talk between markers.