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**“Should we make a start then?”: A Strange Case of (delayed)
Client-initiated Psychological Assessment**

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“Should we make a start then?”: A Strange Case of (delayed)

Client-initiated Psychological Assessment

Starting with Harvey Sacks’s conjecture about there being “omni-relevant devices” in specific kinds of conversation (but by no means in all), we subject that conjecture to empirical analysis. To accomplish this, we examine a data fragment taken from a corpus of materials in which “re-settled” mental patients are undergoing “quality of life” assessments. Part of the analysis shows how such devices are produced and oriented to in an actual case of talk. Another part of the analysis shows the artfulness, skill and competence that so-called “mentally retarded” persons can exhibit in their use and appropriation of such devices. It turns out that these two matters are interestingly connected. Finally, we reflect on how this analysis may have consequences for the supposed difference between “conversational” and “institutional” versions of language and social interaction.

At one stage in his lectures Sacks (1992, pp. 312-319) addresses the issue of “omni-relevant devices” for categorising persons. He refers in particular to devices that contain pairs of categories such as THERAPIST + PATIENT(S) and TEACHER + STUDENT(S). By “omni-relevant” he does not intend that any given person carries with them, at all times, incumbency in that device.¹ Hence, because one is a therapist (for certain purposes) that does not mean that belonging in that category (from the paired device) would necessarily be relevant at, say, a barbecue or a concert. What it does mean is that, in particular, in therapy sessions, that one is the therapist and the others are the patients is a classification of persons that can be invoked, depended upon and hearably mentioned or implied under pretty much any circumstances during such sessions. That is, along with other such categorization devices, even the “omni-relevant” varieties are locally occasioned. More specifically, the omni-relevance of devices is an available resource in particular single conversations; for example, in the talk analyzed by Sacks, where a group therapy session is being conducted. Hence it is the therapist and not the patients that, for example, introduces a new member to the group. Or, in other cases, it’s incumbent on a teacher (rather than any of the students) to announce that the seminar is over. (Below we set out more exact criteria for the operational presence of omni-relevant devices.)

The question then remains: how could we see that an all-parties orientation to a local rule such as “there is an omni-relevant device operating in this talk” is occurring for any given empirical case? In early ethnomethodology, one way would be to construct a “breach study” (Garfinkel, 1967) where, for example, one party

(teacher, therapist, etc.) was deliberately instructed to act as something other than an incumbent of that category in interaction with the others (students, patients...).

Today, such research techniques are regarded as unethical (Mehan & Wood, 1975) – since deliberately structured breakdowns of local social relations can have (and, in the past, have had) far-reaching consequences. The best we could hope for would be to chance upon a naturally-occurring breach study where, as it happened to turn out, an incumbent of a locally possible category in an omni-relevant device simply did not act as if the rule for such devices (see above) was in force for a particular stretch of talk – and, moreover, without announcing that fact. Then we could look to see how the other or others in the interaction might work with its absence and/or to bring the rule into operation, or how they might not as the case may be.

Such instances would be where, for example, teachers, for whatever reason, went into a classroom without an interest in “doing being teachers” and were, again for whatever reason, bringing off a seminar as, for example, “mere chat” between non-incumbents of the categories TEACHER and STUDENTS.² And, as it turns out, we have a data fragment (and a necessarily long one) where we take it that pretty much any hearer or reader can see that the professional – here, an administrator of a psychological assessment instrument – is (at the very least) delaying or (at the most) hearable as showing little interest in getting the formal business of the talk (the assessment) underway.³ Our research question is, then, as follows: if omni-relevance is pertinent to this setting (and a major part of our analysis will turn upon showing whether or not it is), how does that omni-relevance actually appear in the materials

when the “professional” (who should, if it is operational, clearly be the initiator of the business-at-hand — since it’s his reason for being there at all) does not orient the talk in that (the appropriate) direction but, on the contrary, does anything but, as it were, take his proper place? If we could show its appearance under these (presumably rare) circumstances, then we would have good empirical evidence for holding that such a rule actually exists as a concrete social object. And if it does so exist, there may be speculative consequences for at least one other possible categorization of persons: that which provides for persons to be (called) “intellectually disabled,” “mentally retarded,” and so forth.⁴

ANALYSIS

We will shortly proceed to the presentation of the data. Prior to that, however, we need to be clear about what particular kind of detail, in the present analysis, we are inspecting the materials for, so that, armed with this way of looking, readers of the transcript can see our interest in it as they read. What specifically concerns us, as we have said above, is the operationalization (or not) of something called an “omni-relevant device,” and this is how Sacks defines that particular thing for conversation:

An “omni-relevant device” is one that is relevant to a setting via the fact that there are some activities that are known to get done in that setting, that have no special slot in it, i.e., do not follow any given last occurrence, but when they are appropriate, they have priority. Where, further, it is the business of, say, some single person located via the “omni-relevant device,” to do that,

and the business of others located via that device, to let it get done (1992, pp. 313-314).

In the following transcript, then, we are looking to see whether or not there are indeed (a) “some activities that are known to get done” in this setting which (b) “have no special slot” but do (c) “have priority,” and such that (d) it is one of the parties’ business to do those activities. If any one feature of the array of features (a) to (d) is not provably oriented to in the transcribed talk, by the participants in the talk, then we do not have an omni-relevant device operating; if all four features are provably oriented to by the participants, then we do.⁵

1 Bob: (— this) in 'e:re (2.0)
2 Mike: [˘t] w'lll it's in a state >isn't it<
3 B: eh?=
4 M: =eh? (.) >when you got [(-)<
5 B: [for Chris:mas
6 (2.0)
7 M: °oh°
8 (2.0)
9 B: (we got er:::) (.) we got from Asda
10 M: oh very good (..) lots of chocolate
11 (2.0)
12 B: >(there's me- there's me)< (cake up there) .h
13 M: you save it up for Christmas
14 B: yeah
15 (7.0) ((shuffling and chair scrapings))

16 B: do y' take sugar
 17 M: oh there's some here on the table (..) Bob
 18 B: d'y' take (.) do you take sugar
 19 M: yes please (.) >let us have<=
 20 B: =how many?
 21 M: just one of them (.) °please° (..)
 22 B: (————) I take two you [see
 23 M: [do you? (..)
 24 B: ((sniff)) hh I (-) do us a drink later (..)
 →25 later on when:: (..)
 →26 M: when we're done
 →27 (5.0)
 →28 (?): ((choking syllable))
 →29 (1.0)
 →30 B: whereabouts do you: come from
 31 M: I come from Marlinton (..) >this morning<
 32 B: what part (.)
 33 M: erm (.) >well I've got an office< at the County
 34 Castle (.)
 35 B: office at th- so you go back there (when:)
 36 you've bee:n
 37 M: [yeah
 →38 B: [.hh when you've finished ere:
 39 M: yeah
 →40 ((Bob can be heard breathing for 16.0))

41 B: I went to Portugal last June

42 M: did you? (.) [whereabouts?

43 B: [yeah (..) Algar:

44 M: Algarve?

45 B: (eah) yeah

46 M: I've been to Lisbon (..)

47 B: eh?

48 M: I've been to Lisbon

49 B: been to Lisbon

50 M: <yeah> [that was nice

51 B: [that's that's where they have all the

52 big ships in it?=
53 M: =yeah (.) that's right (..) yeah (.) °yeah°

54 B: (-) we couldn't go to where the: (the bo-) (..) we couldn't go to where the: >th- the< docks

55 was cos it was a mile off you see

56

57 M: right (.) so (.) did you sit on the beach (..)

58 B: ye- yeah

59 M: yeah?

60 B: (no) we went in that (.) went on that (..) (-)

61 (.) (-) went to that 'ut (1.0) >y'know< that

62 like a café (bur) it's a hut

63 M: oh right (..) no I °don't° (..) >I've not I've

64 not< been to the Alga:rve (.) I've only (.)

65 when I went to Portugal I only went to

66 [°Lisbon°

67 B: [(—) ?

68 M: °er° no I don't >I don't< know that (..) Bob

69 B: that's in Port:ugal

70 M: (oh)? (..)

71 B: (—) been to Lisbon though have yer (..)

72 M: where are you going (..) next time (.)

73 B: J- (.) next year J- Jer:sey

74 M: Jersey (..) oh that's nice (.) have you been

75 before (.)

76 B: yeah

77 M: >yeah< whereabouts

78 (2.0)

79 B: Saint Helier

80 M: yeah I know it (1.0) >°yeah°< I know it well

81 (..) have some friends who live there (.)

82 B: (now:) (there's a por:t [there —)

83 M: [°yeah° (.) (yeah) are

84 you interested in boats (.) Bob (>°are you°<)=

85 B: =ye- yeah

86 M: yuh?

→87 (4.0)

88 B: (we) got (to) take the pla:ne=

89 M: =hmm (..) to Jersey

90 B: from Manchester yeah=

91 M: =yeah

92 (4.0)

93 M: how long will you go for (..)

94 B: just a wee:k=

95 M: =°huh° (1.0) and who you gonna go with

96 (2.0)

97 B: °Henry° (..) Ste:ven: ('t) (1.0) the other

98 Steven (.) Rod >(no- no)< Steven Pallister (..)

99 you wouldn't know 'im [°would you°=

100 M: [no::

101 M: =°no° is he staff? (..)

102 B: eh?

103 M: is he staff?=
 104 B: =no: (.) °err° res:ident

105 M: hmmm

106 B: .hhh he lives >er he lives< on: Dane Green:

107 (1.0)

108 M: [right

109 B: [°.hhh° (..) (—) as th the bus tur- (.) the

110 buses turn round to get (.) into Marlinton

111 M: mm hm?

112 B: °.hh hhh .h° <ahh> da da da di di di dum: (..)

113 <daa> da di di di di di dah: (..) I ma' I made

114 this cup a while ago: (1.0) >I ma'< I made

115 (this) (-) (.)

116 ((2 quiet knocks)) (1.0)

117 M: you made that? (..) that's very good=

118 B: =(—) but err (1.0) at Wes:ton Roa' long

119 before i' (..) shut (.) long before the: (1.0)
 120 the class shut down:
 121 M: hmm: (..) so pottery classes hm?
 122 B: there is a pottery class yeah but >th th< it's
 123 not (now) I go to Green Lane now (..)
 124 M: that's quite a trip isn't it?
 125 B: eh?
 126 M: that's quite a trip
 127 B: .hh yeah
 128 M: °yeah°
 129 (7.0) ((2 knocks and [pouring sound]))
 130 B: [((sings)) °Sa:nta Claus
 131 is comin' to town (.) Sa:nta Claus is co:ming
 132 to town .h San:ta Claus is co:::ming: to:::
 133 tow::n:°
 134 ((stirring sound)) (16.0)
 135 B: there y'are
 136 M: thank you
 137 B: (Rod) made this
 138 ((tapping noise))
 139 M: yeah? (..)
 140 ((scraping noise for 2.0))
 141 M: >that was nice<
 →142 (5.0) ((2 scrapes))
 143 (?): ((whistles))
 144 B: hhh (do you know more) than the residents

145 there?

146 M: erm?

147 B: (at the County Castle)

148 M: I think so [yeah (..) I know quite a lot of them

149 B: L((slurping noise)) eh?

150 M: I know quite a lot of them (.) there's not many

151 people left there now though

152 B: no: (.) °er° .h >most of< um:: died didn't

153 they?

154 M: hmm died or moved out (..) °hm?° did you used

155 to (..) °hhh° be at the Castle

156 B: yeh=

157 M: =°yeh°

158 B: I didn't like it much

159 M: no:?

160 B: .hhh I'd sooner be 'ere

161 M: yeah (.) how long have you been here Bob

162 B: since from nineteen eighty nine

163 M: (right) that's about >(so)< for five years now

164 (..)

165 B: yeah

166 M: yeah (1.0) and you wouldn't wanna go back

167 B: <no> ((throaty syllable)) °y' can: sti-° (..)

168 you know what you can do: with it?

169 M: what's that then

→170 B: .hh stick it up °where° the monkeys keep their

→171 nuts

172 M: °uh huh huh hu° ((sniff)) <yeah> it's not ter

173 (1.0)

→174 B: er >sh we sh we< make a start then

175 M: yep (.) okay (1.0) erm=

176 B: =((slurping noise))

177 M: what >we're< what I'm trying to do is find out

178 (.) what people think about (..) life (.)

179 really

180 B: yes

181 M: yeah? (.) er:m (..) and so I got some (1.0)

182 questions which I'd like to ask you=

183 B: =questions

183 M: yeah? and (1.0) what I want you to (.) to do is

185 think about (.) where you live and (.) what you

186 do and: (.) how you have fun and your

187 [family and friends and staff

188 B: [ye- yeah (.) yeah

189 M: (.) yeah?

190 B: yeah

191 M: erm (..) there are quite a few questions an-

192 and there are (.) three choices of (.) answer::

193 (..) okay?

194 B: yes:=

195 M: =if I read them out to you (.) and you tell me

196 which one you think's (.) best how you feel (.)

197 yeah?
198 B: YEAH
199 M: is that okay:?
200 B: yes
201 M: erm: (.) >there's °nothing°< it's not right or
202 wrong (.) °(this)° and it's not a test (.) it's
203 ┌just just trying to find
204 B: └no
205 M: out (.) erm how you (.) how you feel about
206 things
207 B: yer ┌yer
208 M: └is that okay?
209 B: yeah
210 (1.0)
211 M: okay (.) can you tell me how old you are to
212 start with Bob
213 B: err (..) fifty four

The business in hand here is the administration of a psychological testing instrument, a “quality of life” questionnaire whose administration begins in the penultimate turn of the transcript. Yet, from the start, with his discussions about topics such as the state of Bob’s house and the upcoming Christmas festivities, Mike (the assessor) appears to display little interest in getting that business underway. That this business is expectable is, however, hearable in the various pro-terms for it that are used early in the transcript: for example in the joint completion in lines 25

and 26 (“later on when we’re done”) and in Bob’s “when you’ve finished here” (line 38). Something that both parties know is, then, to be “finished” or “done” – and what that is cannot be other than the business-at-hand, the assessment. No other candidates are available. One does not, for example, in “ordinary” conversation routinely advert to having to “finish it” at the outset of its prosecution: a conversation is not that sort of a thing.

It’s also audible, then, that, at lines 27-29, immediately following mention of the business’s being, at some later point, “done,” Bob is offering Mike (via the six-plus second pause in which he chooses not to self-select) an entrée into an initiation of the business (the test). An even more extreme example follows the second mention of the business (“when you’ve finished here,” line 38) where Bob leaves a very long gap of 16 seconds. Consequently, we can hear it that at least Bob is orienting to the identities ASSESSOR + ASSESSEE via the assumption that only the former (Mike) ought properly to initiate the test and that the most the latter (Bob) can do is to offer possible slots for that to happen, thereby producing his silences as hearable invitations-to-initiate. We can hear similar uses of silence by Bob at lines 87, 129 and 142, giving us five likely cases in all (along with some less definite candidates). What follows these relatively long pauses is not without its significance either.

In the first case (following lines 27-29), Bob offers a polite query: “whereabouts do you come from?” This may possibly be formulated as concerning Mike’s place of origin since “... do you come from?” rather than “... have you come from?” tends to do that kind of work. On the other hand, this is picked up by Mike as

a query about his current place of work and Bob does not repair that interpretation). In the second case (following line 38), the invitation-to-initiate (“when you’ve finished here”) is again not taken up, whereupon Bob starts out on a new topic – his holiday in Portugal the previous summer. In the third case (following line 87), Bob continues the topic of his projected summer holiday to Jersey. After the seven-plus second pause at line 129, Bob breaks into a festive song – albeit one that is seasonally relevant. And finally, following line 142, he returns to querying Mike about his job and whether he knows many (“more than”?) residents of the psychiatric hospital from which Bob has been “resettled.” So the pattern is:

1. Long pause + “Where do you come from?” + Place of work (Psychiatric hospital)
2. Long pause + New topic: holiday (Portugal)
3. Long pause + Topic continued: holiday (Jersey)
4. Long pause + Singing (Festive song)
5. Long pause + Topic: knowledge of hospital residents (being a psychologist)

Now while, with the possible exception of the singing (though as the interview was conducted two days before Christmas this is moot), these can be matters that are ubiquitous topics for chat (places of origin, one’s holidays, one’s job, persons possibly known in common) – and chat with pretty much anyone one happens to meet.⁶ However, it’s also the case (and this time including the singing) that they display a deep and abiding knowledge (on Bob’s part) of the kind of encounter this is. To wit: the other is a psychology professional, at Bob’s house to

perform an assessment (which he should initiate, and is being repeatedly invited to initiate), and that assessment has to do with Bob's happiness and well-being. And all this such that, moreover, should he be found wanting in the "quality of life" department, his place of residence could be officially altered – and, on his own estimation (lines 170-171), for the worse.⁷ Accordingly, it is incumbent on Bob (if the assessment is not to proceed formally, as such, at least for now) to display, nevertheless, that he is indeed extremely happy: he takes overseas holidays, he's looking forward to Christmas, he sings, and so forth.⁸ Add to this his other topics: taking an interest in shipping, being successful at pottery, having a sizeable group of friends, and so forth, and it becomes clear that this – doing having a great quality of life, or at least being content with his lot – is what is being accomplished in (or via) the chat. One further possible piece of evidence for this is that Bob does not resort to that ubiquitous topic par excellence, the weather. Being December in the North of England, of course, the weather is far from mentionable as contributing to anyone's happiness. On the contrary, it can only be a complainable. ("I really love all this rain and sleet and freezing wind" would, for example, clearly be prejudicial to the project of doing "being happy"; it would also, surely, run the risk of producing Bob as a little odd to say the least).⁹

Accordingly there is at least a strong suspicion that Bob, at certain points, by pausing for some seconds, is "hearably" inviting Mike to get on with initiating the assessment (the activity which the possible omni-relevant device might be said to "assign" him).¹⁰ For all this, though, there are other possible ways of reading the

pauses – such as that Bob is preparing cups of tea, or simply that he is trying to think of something else to say to this “professional” who has come to his house to “assess” him. But earlier work on this corpus has shown how “cover identities” are clearly operating in this transcript. (We will not rehearse that work here but refer the reader to the original analysis in Antaki & Rapley, (1996a).) This is significant for us because Sacks himself has shown how cover identities routinely work hand-in-hand with omni-relevant devices when such devices are, in fact, present. Accordingly, the conversational niceties, the tea-making, and the rest, can be seen as ways in which Bob and Mike (noting that Mike, too, initiates “chat” sequences (e.g., line 46)) engage in the production of cover identities; making themselves over into “acquaintances” – or as Antaki & Rapley (1996a) put it “not-psychologist” and “not-client” – who might easily engage in “mere chat”. This is a phenomenon we have analyzed previously in terms of “doing business” by “having a chat” (McHoul & Rapley, 2000).

In this respect, the “cover identities” and the “cover topics” they invoke can be seen as ways of dealing with the situation in which these members find themselves: working up to the formal “business” of the visit (the assessment of Bob’s “quality of life”) and so, in some “covering” (informal) way, actually doing it. It is therefore worth noting that the point at which the assessment-proper is initiated (line 174) comes just when the talk has started to turn away from everyday niceties and towards professional-evaluational matters; as though the cover identities and topics had begun to fray or otherwise wear thin. If this is the case, then we are not dealing

with a situation where the participants are, as it were, simply waiting for the omni-relevant device to show its face; rather, by invoking cover identities, they are mutually showing the device to be always potentially operable at any given moment. They are co-producing a similar process to the teenagers discussed by Sacks who systematically “cover” the THERAPIST + PATIENT(S) device by using others such as TEENAGERS + ADULT(S). In parallel fashion, a topic like “automobiles” can cover for the business of therapy as such. As Sacks puts it, “an automobile discussion”:

is, for teenage boys, a very special kind of topic; one which is perhaps as ideal a one as could be had if one wanted not simply cover identification but a “cover topic.” [A]nd that’s because of the range of matters which are expectable and in fact discussed at a place such as this, i.e., therapy topics, which can be discussed under the guise of “an automobile discussion”: Sex, guilt, independence, autonomy, authority, parental relations, the state of society, death, you name it. All can perfectly well be handled as sub-topics of “an automobile discussion” (Sacks, 1992, p. 320).

To put this simply: why else would “cover identities” or “cover topics” be needed by any speakers (“members”, “participants”) unless there were something to cover? – and what would need covering more than an omni-relevant device and the other-than-cover identities (ergo, topics) it entails? This is why we want to argue that Bob is, for example, discussing holidays, singing, talking about his circle of acquaintances; why, in short, he is doing displaying “happiness” (for want of a better

term). All these topics are perfectly feasible for “chit-chatters” or “acquaintances”; they are, to be sure, mere “niceties”, but what ties them together is that they all, and without exception in the long preliminaries to the formal assessment, equally accomplish evidence of a strong and positive “quality of life” on Bob’s part.

Finally, we can note that Bob makes it perfectly clear to Mike that he understands the practical consequences of the up-coming test. He understands, that is, that test “failure” (despite Mike’s later assurances, in lines 201-203, that the encounter is not a “test”) can lead to a return to the institution: for, at lines 152-171, he graphically compares his current public-housing situation to the hospital (the “Castle”), the latter being insertable “where the monkeys keep their nuts” (lines 170-171). Immediately following this, as Mike finishes his laughter (marked as “°uh huh huh hu°”) but not his turn, Bob again waits briefly (one second) and, perhaps because five invitations-to-initiate have passed without success,¹¹ he, Bob, the assessee, actually initiates the formal activity of the test with “Should we make a start then?” (line 174). This is very significant for us since we hear it as both highly artful on Bob’s part and as augmenting (rather than diminishing) the evidence for an omni-relevant device being invoked and oriented to in this fragment.

That is, we have already seen that our earlier items (a) to (d) are operational.

To summarize:

(a) There are “some activities that are known to get done”: namely a psychological assessment has to take place and, therefore, has to be initiated or pre-announced as about to take place. As we have seen, both Mike and Bob use a variety of pro-terms

early on to invoke and orient to “what it is we’re here for” and project the (other) sorts of interaction which may be possible once that business is “finished with.”

(b) These initiations (getting the test going) “have no special slot”: evidently, since initiations do not even follow (repeated) invitations-to-initiate. Therefore there is no particular place in the conversation where either party can easily predict when the assessment will actually start; initiations can – and in the instant case demonstrably do – follow on from any previous activity.

(c) These activities, the initiation, “have priority”: so much so that if they are not done by the one who should (see [d] below), then, in two-party conversations at least, there is only one other who can – and here does. In fact there is a clear sense in the transcript that, while there is no special slot for the assessment to get going, that does not mean that it can’t be hearbly “late arriving” or that it’s “about time” a start was made. Further, once testing, per se, is unavoidably and unambiguously initiated, it cannot but be taken up, and promptly is.

(d) It is one of the parties’ business to do those activities: the assessor ought properly to do the initiation.

It is item (d) that is particularly bolstered by Bob’s “Should we make a start then?” That is, it can be heard as (mild?) criticism of Mike’s incumbency of the category of psychologist/assessor. Firstly, it uses the pro-term “we” which, in this transcript and in transcriptions of many hours of similar assessment talk, is almost never used by the assessee/respondent to refer to the two present parties.

Accordingly, it can be clearly heard – only heard we would venture – as an

“appropriation” of the assessor’s position given that any such “appropriation” is simultaneously a display that the assessee must know the assessor’s position. Secondly, it has the unusual sequential status of, for example, a school student asking a dithering teacher “Can we start the lesson now, Sir?” or a job interviewee asking “Aren’t we going to talk about my qualifications?” and so on. All of these (“Should we...?,” “Can we...?,” “Aren’t we...?”) set up binary contrast classes: clearly implying a definite X (the formal business) as against an indefinite something else, Y, that we are now (hereby) being formulated as having been doing up until now (chat, gossip, idle banter, talk that anyone can do regardless of incumbency). How better, in its material effect than to show that a device should be present, and should be being oriented to, than by deliberately, artfully and symmetrically reversing one of its major features: namely feature (d), that it is (intersubjectively known) to be one of the parties’ business to lead (into) the expectable activities and utterly not the other’s – such that the other party should, to quote Sacks, merely “let it get done.” A rule such as this then may be even more audibly present in the breach than in the observance.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion we offer three points. The first concerns the omni-relevant device itself. The second has to do with the conversational status of “mentally retarded” persons. The third considers some possible upshots of our work here for studies of language and social interaction more broadly.

(1) An omni-relevant device can be provably heard in this stretch of talk even when, for a considerable time, it is not explicitly enacted by the expectable party but is demonstrably heard instead as pertinently absent by the other.¹² Moreover, in its absence, its work is achieved by various proxies for it in the form of “cover identities” and “cover topics”. This suggests confirmation of Sacks’s conjecture about omni-relevant devices. Moreover, it does so by using something close to his own confirmation procedures – cf. “He didn’t even say hello” as a way of showing that absent greetings can be pertinently absent and have consequences for the moral, professional, etc., status of the perpetrator.

(2) It also turns out that, in the instant case, the rule-required orientation to omni-relevance is, despite the professional assessor’s apparent lack of interest in it, maintained and eventually enforced, by the lay assessee (or “client”) – someone who, under other circumstances, and for all official purposes, is essentialized as an incompetent: a “mentally retarded” person, effectively written off as socially and interactionally incapacitated. That such (institutionally, officially) “non-persons” can and evidently do work in this way more than suggests to us that rules such as that in question here (the omni-relevance device rule) are ubiquitous for talk – that is, where they are properly operational, they can be hearably oriented to no matter what the putative supra-local statuses of the parties to the talk (e.g., one with a PhD in psychology and one with “severe intellectual disabilities”). In this respect, our first two points are linked. If so-called “mentally retarded” persons can and must do such things, then anyone can and must, and also: if the “mentally retarded” can and must,

then they are vastly more competent, by any measure, than the psy-complex (Rose, 1990) has ever given them credit for. If these things display order (as in “social order”), they display it as being “order at all points” (Sacks, 1992, pp. 483-485) – including those points where the (supposedly) least “orderly” participants are concerned. And that says something about both the order and the participants.

(3) Currently, there is considerable debate about the similarities and differences between “conversational” and “institutional” talk. Having just completed an extensive edited collection on a broad range of methodologies for the analysis of “institutional talk” (McHoul & Rapley, 2001), we are all too acutely aware of this debate.¹³ On the one hand, a certain “purism” in CA tends to read the latter in terms of the former as an a priori: institutional talk is little more than a variant dependent upon generally available conversational apparatuses. On the other hand, certain analysts insist upon a more-or-less pre-given political structuration of institutions, such that “conversational” processes become subject to those ends. And, at the margins of the debate, are a number of unique positions: for example, arguments that “institutional discourse is increasingly being conversationalized as a means for maintaining strategically the power differential between social groups” (Ilie, 2001, p. 214; Fairclough 1995). Or else: arguments that contest the very existence of institutional talk as a phenomenon (Hester & Francis, 2001). Behind such debates lies the always fraught question of the relations between EM/CA studies and more broadly socio-political concerns (cf. Wetherell, 1998). And this controversy routinely turns on the distinction between analysts’ and members’ concerns (Schegloff, 1998).

What we may have been able to show, in this paper, is that there can be occasions when parties to the talk (members) clearly – and in the technical senses, reflexively and accountably – orient to the institutional locus of their conjoint talk. But, at the same time, they necessarily do so locally and contingently. As we have said, they do so despite, for example, any supposedly “supra-local statuses of the parties to the talk.” What this means for us is that there is no effective (locatable-in-actual-materials) distinction between “conversational” and “institutional” talk.

“Institutional” talk arises for “conversational” participants (members) as and when they happen to do their talk as institutional – and such that they display that aspect of their talk (reflexively and accountably) to each other. Otherwise, again in the breach, there could be no “off the record” or “taking off my official hat” or “can we have a chat after the lecture?,” and the rest. Doing talk as “institutional” is in no ways distinct from doing it as “sexual,” as “advice,” as “trouble,” as “breakfast,” as “mere chat,” and the rest. What is important is that analysts show that (and how) members orient to devices that invoke their talk’s “institutionality” and that analysts respect (and locate in their materials) such members’ “device invocations.” Without such a recognition, analysts will be able to invoke whatsoever “institutional” conditions they happen to be interested in (regardless of materials) and “purists” will be able to ignore “institutional” talk even when that is what the materials manifestly show the members to be orienting to.

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NOTES

1. See Will Coleman (1990) and Derek Edwards (1998) on the impossibility of universal (supra-local) categories. Coleman advances the argument that it can't be universally relevant that a particular person is categorizable as "British" or as "a man." Edwards argues similarly with respect to the categories "Irish," "girl" and "married woman."
2. We have experienced this in end-of-year "seminars" where "drinks" and "chat" are more expectable than "seminar work" – the semester's business being already over – though we have no materials on this.
3. The psy-complex (Rose, 1990) rejoinder here might be to gloss the pre-initiation section of the talk we examine as "rapport-building" or some such other professional activity. Of course if we accept that the assessor's apparent lack of interest in formal business is, in fact, the doing of a variant of formal business, then the perspicacity of his interlocutor – which we examine in detail below – is that much more apparent, and the breach, when it comes, that much more startling.
4. The preamble to the assessment instrument being administered in our data begins by noting that it is specifically designed for use with "persons with mental retardation." Accordingly, for at least one of the parties to the talk (the assessor), that categorization of the other party (the assessee) is at least possibly relevant. To pre-empt the analysis perhaps a little, it appears from the data we have in hand that this identity is not locally relevant to any great extent. That is,

neither party appears directly to orient as such to the possibility that one of the speakers is formally describable as “retarded.” (However, as at least one reader of the transcript has noticed, it is possible to hear a note of over-done praise in some of Mike’s remarks to Bob – our thanks to Karen Tracy for this noticing. Much turns here on how one hears such items as, for example, “oh very good” in line 10.) We will return to this highly problematic matter (and its connection to the omni-relevance phenomenon) at the end of the paper.

5. The data we analyse here is part of a corpus partly described in previous work (see Antaki & Rapley, 1996a, 1996b; Rapley & Antaki, 1996). The transcript here is slightly modified from the original, transcribed by Helen Baker, Charles Antaki and Mark Rapley. The transcript uses the Jefferson conventions, except for the following variations:

(-----), “inaudible brackets” show the number of syllables uttered in them (one en-dash per syllable);

(. . .) marks a slightly longer untimed pause (about half of one second);

[^t] marks a dental click.

6. See the analysis of this in McHoul & Rapley (2000).
7. That Bob is not in any way an anomaly in this regard is demonstrated by other interviews in the corpus. In one instance (Rapley & Antaki, 1996), the psychologist’s post-preamble invitation to the testee to “ask any questions that they have” is met with the blunt statement “I like living here,” twice repeated.
8. Whereas Bob’s singing could be construed (for example, under standard psychological descriptions) as a “dis-inhibition” or as a “psychotic break,” we

- note that this putative description is less than compelling for the following reasons. (1) The very seasonal topicality of the particular song he chooses to sing (he is very clearly oriented to time); (2) The absence of any evidence of similar behaviour throughout the interaction (which extends some one-and-a-half hours); (3) The utter cogency and interactional sophistication of Bob's interlocution throughout.
9. We are reminded here of how, throughout his analyses of the Group Therapy Session materials, Sacks shows how the patients work hard to avoid being heard as "crazy."
 10. We are very grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of the first version of this paper for pointing this out. That reviewer rightly notes that, without recourse to the question of cover identities, our analysis could involve a circularity: "the authors suggest that an omni-relevant device might be operative in the talk, and then they interpret Bob's silences as invitations for Mike to start, which in turn demonstrates that the device is operative." This part of the paper relies extensively on a number of points taken almost verbatim from that reviewer's very useful comments. Again, our thanks.
 11. And/or perhaps because the topic has now reverted to Mike's official and professional status thereby making his duties in this encounter a mentionable.
 12. Another possible reading is as follows. Sacks (1972) distinguishes between a Device-R (then a "Collection-R"), a device with co-equal categories (such as FRIEND-FRIEND or STRANGER-STRANGER) and a Device-K (then "Collection-K"), a device without such co-equality (such as POLICEMAN-

SUSPECT or TEACHER-STUDENT). In the present materials, we could hear Mike constructing himself and Bob as, at least until line 177, Device-R co-members, while Bob constructs himself and Mike as Device-K co-members throughout. Significantly, Bob's device-construction "wins" any possible "contestation" between the devices. See Sacks (1972) and the exegesis by Silverman (1998).

13. The fact that our stretch of talk takes place in someone's house is neither here nor there in terms of "institutionality." The processes of "quality of life" assessment are routinely designed for persons released from (bricks and mortar) mental health institutions and their institutional consequences are, as Bob understands (and displays that he understands), critical. By comparison, while Sacks's data are of conversations take place in a "clinic," their psychiatric status (for example) is rarely an issue for Sacks except in cases where, as we have seen, "doing therapy" becomes an issue for the members on the scene. Moreover, Ken, Roger and the rest of the GTS participants are rarely constructed or construct themselves as anything like "mentally ill."