'Where are you from?': Identifying place[1]

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Many social research projects, such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys, take local place as a given: they choose participants from a particular place, take this place as background for what the participants say, ask them about place-related issues, and correlate responses with different places. But people can identify places in different ways, in geographical or relational terms, and in different levels of scale. This study analyses passages in focus groups in which participants say where they are from, shows that participants generally take the question and answer as routine, and then shows the ways the interaction develops when this routineness is broken, amended, or called into question. When a participant revises their statement of where they are from, they adapt to what they see as the knowledge and stance of their interlocutor, they re-present themselves, and they create possibilities for further talk, defending, telling stories, or showing entitlement to an opinion. I argue that the ways people answer this question, interactively, can tell us about them, and us, as well as about their map of the world.

KEYWORDS: Place-identity, conversation analysis, focus groups, stance, stories, arguments, qualitative research methods

INTRODUCTION

Stephanie Taylor and Margeret Wetherell say in their analysis of interviews in the U.K. with New Zealanders: 'It is perhaps a temptation in the analysis of talk to treat the sites and contexts, whether assumed or referred to, as fixed entities, like stage sets and backdrops to the play of discursive interaction' (Taylor and Wetherell 1999). As researchers, we do treat sites as fixed entities whenever we write the place on the cassette box, or at the top of the transcript, or in a blank on the questionnaire. Even when participants are asked to talk explicitly about place and identity, researchers often treat it as something already out there to which everyone can refer, something that remains stable in different contexts. And researchers usually give only the statements of participants, not the interactions leading to such statements (as noted in Laurier 1999). The processes of asking about places, choosing from various ways of referring to them, making them relevant to other participants, and relating them to the ongoing talk are often taken for granted. Afterwards, these

passages may be treated as part of the warm-up before the real data begins, or deliberately excised to preserve anonymity. In this paper I am suggesting that researchers should look at *how* people talk about place before they try to categorise *what* participants say about it. This shift in perspective has implications both for social research on place, and for the study of talk in place.

For such a common question, the answers to 'Where are you from?' can be surprisingly complex. Consider how I respond when a plumber who is repairing my sink asks me, 'So where are you from?' The right answer cannot be my address, neighbourhood, or town, because he knows those, or my place of employment, since that could hardly matter to him. I assume he has noticed that my accent is not local, and I must be 'from' somewhere else. But the right answer at this moment is not 'the United States', because he can probably tell that too, or he wouldn't have asked. So I say I grew up in the Northwest, or if pressed, I say I'm from Boise, Idaho. That usually stops the conversation dead. So answers to this question are routine (I am not the only person who is asked this sort of question all the time), flexible (I had several responses to choose from), relational (I tried to guess why he was asking), and they affect what comes next (they could provide a basis for his stories or comments, if I'd been from a place more likely to be visited by or known to a Briton).

In this paper, I will look at answers to questions such as 'Where are you from?' at the beginnings of focus groups, and at later passages where participants again have reason to refer to where they are from. I will look at smooth sequences that suggest the routineness of the question, and at more complex exchanges with insertion sequences and self corrections that show the flexibility of possible responses. But this flexibility is not completely open-ended; participants choose their responses in terms of whom they are talking to and how they are presenting themselves. References to place project further possibilities for talk, evaluating and defending, telling stories, and arguing. So references to place are important, not just for finding out about places, but also for finding identities in talk.

TALK, PLACE, AND IDENTITIES

Several lines of academic work have charted the complexity of talk about place, from sociology, anthropology, cultural geography and social psychology, as one might expect, and also from sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. I start with a classic study of formulating place in situated interactions, then draw on a range of studies of the meanings of places in discourse, and then consider ways that place can signal identities.

Indexicality

Emanuel Schegloff's 'Notes on a conversational practice: Formulating place' (1972), argues that the naming of place is flexible in the form of reference and

the scale of referent, and is situated in ongoing interaction. For Schegloff, the formulation of place is a side issue that arises from his interest in 'insertion sequences' (examples of which I will discuss later). Schegloff analyses the routines for giving, checking, and confirming that the description of place one has given is that needed for the current interaction:

> The 'problem' of locational formulation is this: For any location to which reference is made, there is a set of terms each of which, by a correspondence test, is a correct way to refer to it. On any actual occasion of use, however, not any member of the set is 'right'. (1972: 81)

Of course the same indexicality might apply to any reference in talk: there are various possible formulations for referring to a person, or a thing, or a time (Harvey Sacks deals with the vagueness and range of time references in his *Lectures on Conversation* 1992: I, 739–741). But we expect these references to be potentially problematic, while the flexibility of place references may come as a surprise, because we think we have unambiguous ways of locating places, for instance with grid references or directions. Schegloff analyses place formulations as either Geographical ('3 miles north of Preston') or Relational ('just ten minutes up the A6'). Geographical formulations assume an objective overview from a point outside the map; Relational formulations are situated in the current interaction.

When Schegloff discusses formulations of place in relation to members, he means that we adjust what we say to take into account who the other person is (a stranger, an official, a local), and where they are (here, at the other end of the phone, on another continent). He also means that participants consider the function of this reference to place in the mutual activity in which they are participating. Schegloff was analysing calls to an emergency help line, where the answerer has to determine which area the call is from, and which address within that area. Someone giving directions uses a different set of turns (Psathas 1991; Basso 1996). And calls to a local radio phone-in would require other kinds of naming, enough to give a sense of the identity of the caller, and the range of the broadcast audience, but not enough to locate their address (Myers 2004).

One kind of flexibility noted by Schegloff is in the scale of the formulation. Any place can be described in broader or narrower terms, as a child writes his or her address in a book, from street address up through town and nation to the universe. Participants are not consistent in which level of scale they consider appropriate for their answer, just as my response to the question 'Where are you from?' might in different situations be 'over there', 'Derwent Road', 'Lancaster', 'Lancashire', 'the North', or 'the U.K.'. Gale and Golledge (1982) say that differences in scale call for different bases for human geography – 'perception for the immediate sensory experiences, cognition for the vaster areas beyond immediate experience' and different epistemologies – 'empiricism at the immediate sensory level, constructivism at the cognitive level' (1982: 64).

Instead of making the distinction on epistemological grounds, Schegloff, typically, starts with the situated interaction, the location and relation of the participants and the turn-by-turn exchanges. For instance, after an event that might endanger someone (his example is the 1965 Watts riots), distant relatives and friends call people anywhere near the event to see if they are okay, not realizing that the local sense of scale might be different (someone at UCLA in Westwood might not think of themselves as being anywhere near South Central Los Angeles).

Distinctions of scale might seem logical in terms of a Geographical view of places, a matter of degree of precision on the map. Any particular place is necessarily included in other, larger places, as Blackburn is in Lancashire, Lancashire is in England, England is part of the United Kingdom, and the U.K. is (arguably) in Europe. But in Relational terms, place names are not neatly nested systems of attributes, the more general including the more particular. We will see later that to say one is from the Callen Estate in Blackburn does not convey the same thing as saying one is from Blackburn or Lancashire, with more particularity; it conveys, to those who know it, its own associations. Similarly saying one lives near Sellafield is not the same as saying one is from Cumbria, saying one is from Austin is not the same as saying one is from Texas, even though being from the smaller place necessarily means one is from the larger place too.

Meanings

Schegloff's distinction between Geographical and Relational formulations is complementary to other distinctions used by geographers and anthropologists. There is, first of all, the standard distinction in cultural geography between *space*, considered as a pre-existing grid of physical locations, and *place*, a specific location given meaning by people's practices, language, and beliefs. The philosopher Edward Casey (1993, 1996) has argued that we tend to think of space as a pre-existing reality to which we then give cultural meanings, while it would be truer to see space as a generalized sense of particular places. Tim Ingold (2000) draws a distinction (based in Heidegger) between a perspective based on *building*, a construction on pre-existing, uniform space, and *dwelling*, in which life and its practices precede the organization of space (cf. Szerszynski 2004). He makes a similar distinction between *map-making* as the inscription of fixed image of landscape, and *mapping* as the re-enactment of movements through a landscape, in time, as part of one's tasks. What links these various perspectives is the sense that place is not just a set of coordinates on a grid; it is meaningful in terms of participants' practices and beliefs.

Identities

If we are to look to participants' practices for meanings of places, the answer to the question 'Where are you from' does not just give a location; it defines what

Proshansky and his colleagues have called 'place-identity' (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983). Geographers have a long-standing concern with place-linked identities, most recently in response to debates about globalization (for introductions, see Massey and Jess 1996; Thrift 1997). So, for instance, Allan Pred (1990: 182–227) has shown how workers developed an alternative set of names for places and streets in Stockholm as the city went through its most rapid growth in the late 19th century. Karen I. Blu (1996) finds different place names, and different senses of place, among Native American, African American, and White residents of Robeson County, North Carolina. Jon Anderson focuses on the relations between talking, walking, and memory in 'constitutive co-ingredience' of place and identity (Anderson 2004).

There are, of course, many definitions of identity. If we take it to be, in Penelope Eckert's definition, 'one's "meaning in the world" ' (Eckert 2000: 41), then practices around place are crucial; by saying where I am from, I take on a location in the world, and the place has a meaning or meanings for the world. A different but not inconsistent definition is used by social psychologists drawing on Harvey Sacks: 'a person's identity is their display of, or ascription to, membership of some social category, with consequences for the interaction in which the display or ascription takes place' (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998). This definition gives a sense of the ways people try on identities (gender, age, profession, ethnicity), or other people ascribe identities to them, as part of ongoing talk in interaction.

This tentative, contingent, ongoing ascription of identity might not seem to apply to place: everyone has to have a place. I must write down where I was born on a form every time I enter the U.K. Even in everyday, non-institutional conversations, 'Where are you from?' is a question that has to have an answer, however complicated. (If one Googles the phrase 'be from somewhere', one will find it collocates often with the phrase 'have to . . . '.) As we will see, the participants in my data are always ready to give some formulation of where they are from, even if they may be unsure which formulation they choose.

If place-identity is useful because everyone has to be from somewhere on the map, it is productive in conversation because it can lead on to more talk, further meanings, and practices. If strangers find themselves talking to each other on a plane, or at a party, they are likely to find themselves describing their place in one way or another, possibly even before exchanging names. References to place can provide a basis for what someone says next, for instance for a moral lesson (Basso 1996), a story (Becket 1996), or an argument (Dixon and Durrheim 2000), or just talk about commuting.

How does sociolinguistics fit in among all these philosophers, geographers, and anthropologists? One can place oneself even before one answers the question 'Where are you from?', as I did to the plumber with my American accent, and as some participants do in the examples that follow. More recent sociolinguistic studies have developed a more complex sense of what it means to be from a place, as they studied migration, change, and contact. Lesley Milroy (1980), for instance, reconceived the relations between her informants in

terms of overlapping networks. Penelope Eckert (2000: 33) defines her subjects in terms of practices, and she raises the issue of boundaries as problematic. Barbara Johnstone reviews a number of recent studies in which local dialect is used to construct a stance in interaction (2004, forthcoming). Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon have reformulated interactional and semiotic approaches to discourse, taking situation in place as the starting point (2003). In sociolinguistics and discourse studies, as in geography, researchers are moving from the assumption that place defines identity, to studies of the ways participants may *make* place relevant to their identities in situated interactions.

One comment should be made on the implicit evaluative thrust of most of these studies. For Schegloff, Geographical and Relational formulations are just two possible second parts. But for almost all the other writers I have quoted, there is something richer about the alternatives to a grid-like sense of space, something more embedded in practices, time, everydayness, even wisdom. And almost all these writers assume that their discipline – whether it is anthropology, sociology, physics, or geography – has tended to overlook this Relational, situated sense of place, while privileging the systematizing overview of Geographical formulations.

DATA

In this study I will look at passages from 40 transcripts of focus groups held in England between 1994 and 2003 (for references on focus groups, see Macnaghten and Myers 2003; Myers 2004). Groups had six to eight participants, and were led by one or two moderators who were usually not identified as being from a particular place or institution until the end of the session (I was moderator on two of these groups). The focus groups are drawn from six different projects on different topics (see Note 1 for details); some of these transcripts deal explicitly and at length with participants' feelings about the places where they live, but in others place is not highlighted in any way.

Critical qualitative researchers have often noted the importance of the location of interviews (Becker 1998; Elwood and Martin 2000; Sin 2003). Examples of critical approaches to place using focus group methods include the work of Jacqueline Burgess and her colleagues (Burgess, Limb and Harrison 1988a; Burgess, Limb and Harrison 1988b), who used in-depth focus groups to explore people's feelings about local parks and open space, and the work of Peter Jackson and Beverley Holbrook (1995), who related shopping to neighbourhoods, identities, and daily practices.

Several aspects of focus group design constrain the kinds of questions and answers found in these transcripts. Focus groups are typically held in what the researchers take to be 'neutral' places: a room at a pub or hotel, a living room, a community hall (see Elwood and Martin 2000 on the difficulty of finding neutral places). There is a moderator, who in all cases here presents herself or himself as a stranger to the place where the session is being held.

There are other participants, who are always (in these groups) from a more or less local area, but who are, except in four groups, strangers to one another. Finally, there is the tape recorder, the evidence that unseen others will be listening to this talk for their own purposes.

ROUTINENESS

Despite all the complexities of response to questions about place that I have outlined, participants seem to know what to do at the beginning of a focus group. This routineness is important in itself; the participants and even the researcher may barely notice the question. Participants may know what to say based on conventions about being asked where one is from, or they may just follow the patterns set by the first person to respond, if the moderator seems to signal that it is an appropriate response. Most groups begin after the moderator's introduction, with the moderator calling on each participant successively, and asking them to introduce themselves.[2]

The exact form of the question may vary:

- 'but perhaps we could just begin by each of you telling us your first name and where you come from' (group 18) *(the most usual form for these focus groups)*
- 'perhaps we could just go round . start by going round . saying what your first name perhaps and where it is you're living at the moment' (group 20) *(reduces the ambiguity by asking only where they live)*
- 'and just tell me . so . oh you're not all from Thornton are you?' (group 16) *(presupposes that one place is the reference point, and marks his realization as news)*
- 'if we could start off if you could just tell us your Christian name and perhaps say where you live . if you work . what do you do . and how long you've lived here' (group 40) *(like the previous example, presupposes a shared place, but names it only as 'here')*
- 'what I'd like to do is just go round and find out who you are and it'd also be quite helpful if you just give me an idea of how long you've lived in the area . just to have some sense of how local you are' (group 34) *(like the previous example, but gives a reason for wanting to know)*

It might seem that these are hardly the same question. But they have one significant word in common: *just*. This minimizing adverb with the directive presents it as a small request, and the responses generally treat it that way. These questions are part of a standard three-part sequence with the moderator's imperative or question, the participant's response, and the moderator's confirmation that this response is appropriate before going on to the next participant.

23.44

 1   Mod: Um (3.0) what I want to <u>start</u> with is just some introductions um (2.0) where you live and your names so probably the simplest thing is just to go round starting at the left here

2 Dave: Yeah my name is Dave . Nolan and . I come from Leyland
3 Mod: uh huh
4 Dave: and . I have a travel business,
5 Mod: OK (3.0) and
6 Bob: Bob . Bob Jackson
7 Mod: uh huh
8 Bob: I live in Ashton at Preston
9 Mod: °OK°
10 Bob: I am a retailer hardware retailer
11 Mod: OK?

Dave's response provides the pattern for other participants, and it is worked out gradually with the moderator. He gives his first name (2), pauses, and when there is no response from the moderator gives his surname as well. Then he goes on to say where he comes from. This is all that was asked for, but when he just gets a continuer in response (3), he goes on, after a pause, to give his job. Then he gets an 'OK', and a pause while the moderator writes this down, and then the moderator turns to the next participant. The moderator's 'and' (5) suggests that the participants know enough now to produce a next answer without further prompting. In general participants follow the pattern set by the first person to respond, when the moderator accepts it, and the moderator's responses can be more and more reduced when the pattern is established. In this case, the first participant takes the question to be asking for the name of a village or neighbourhood, not for instance a city (Preston), region (Lancashire), or employer. Only one first speaker, in the 40 groups, is more specific than Dave and gives an address. Very few speakers take the opportunity to say anything more than a name and a place. The brevity of responses and the lack of response from participants other than the moderator suggest that they do not take this information as a possible starting point for conversation before everyone in the circle has been identified.

In whatever form it is asked, the answer to 'Where are you from' is part of a set of routine identifying characteristics. Participants may give a place even when they have only been asked for names:

13.24

1 Mod: so you know perhaps. perhaps we could just go round . so Phil .
         Sue and your name is
2 Nick: I'm Nick from Kirkham
3 Mod: Nick from Kirkham
4 Nick: right

The moderator has asked for names, not places, but his echo of Nick's turn (3) signals that this pairing of name (given name) and place (name of town) is an acceptable form of response. From here he just needs to say 'OK' to prompt the next speaker to give a similar response, a name and a place.

The conventional nature of these sets of introductory information is suggested by the joking intervention of a participant in another group:

24.17

1	Mod:	OK right . if we could start by maybe going round the group and saying . um what your name is and where you come from basically . and then everybody will get to know each other . do you mind starting
2	Mike:	Mike Hannah . and I'm from Preston . I work for um BT (3) 41=
3	Mod:	=that's OK h h h h h
4	?	favourite colours
5	Mike:	yeah h h h
6	Mod:	actually if you do say where you work as well . yeah

The moderator's hedge 'maybe' and his 'basically' signal a small request, the way *just* would do. He pauses before the request, and then groups name and 'where you come from' together as a unit. Mike continues beyond name and place (2) when there is no response from the moderator, and he pauses for three seconds before going onto the additional identifying material. The latched response of the moderator in (3) cuts Mike off, the moderator's laughter suggesting there is something evidently comic about this additional information, and another participant takes up the idea of laughability by adding a field of information that seems trivial and irrelevant in this context: 'favourite colours' (and perhaps pets, leisure activities, favourite song . . .). Mike accepts this and takes up the laughter. The moderator (now not laughing) reformulates his question to suggest that though age (and favourite colours) are not relevant, place of work, even though he did not request it, *is* relevant.

The rapid rhythm of the questions and answers, the reduced form of the moderator's responses, the participants' references to game shows and other genres in which introductions are conventional, all suggest that answering questions about place is routine in introductions. The identity work done in this routine way may only be apparent when the routine breaks down or the initial statement is revised. Then we may see signals of the relation between the moderator and the participant, or alternative identities for participants, or signals of what might follow conversationally from questions about place.

IDENTITIES

Placing the Moderator

When this routine of question and answer breaks down in the introductory sequence, the problem is not usually that the question is hard to answer, but that it is difficult to choose the right formulation for this situation. Insertion sequences, the conversational devices that Schegloff was investigating in his paper on place (1972), are one way these problems are indicated; they occur

when a question is followed, not by an answer, but by another question that is nonetheless heard as relevant, not as a failure to give an answer. So, for instance, a participant might echo back the question to signal part of it as problematic:

18.31

Q1➔	1	Mod:	but um perhaps we could just begin by each of you telling us . telling us your first name a:nd . where you come from (4)
Q2➔	2	Dave:	do you mean which company or which/
	3	Mod:	/no
	4	Dave:	country or h h h
	5	Mod:	which <u>country</u>? . what- what
A2➔			what <u>place</u> do you come from . you'll see that we're going to talk quite a lot about *place* in the . discussion . what
Q3➔	6	Dave:	>where do I live<
A3➔	7	Mod:	yeah
	8	Dave:	my name's Dave
	9	Mod:	Dave yeah
A1➔	10	Dave:	and I uh I live in Holmes Chapel in uh Cheshire . just off . the M6

Q2 displays the ambiguity of the question 'Where are you from', and the moderator responds, not by disambiguating the question, but by justifying its relevance (5) – they will talk about place. (In a previous example (24.17), we saw that the relevance was 'everybody will get to know each other'.) The participant tries again, and in Q3 reformulates the question in terms he can answer unambiguously (6). He then goes back to give his name (8) before giving the answer (10).

The continuation of turn 10 of the last example shows how a naming of place tells about the questioner, as well as about the answerer:

10	Dave:	and I uh I live in Holmes Chapel in uh Cheshire . just off . the M6 (2) if you're not at all familiar with it it's just off junction eighteen
11	Mod:	h h so that's how you indicate it by <u>junction</u> h h h

As with the previous example, the elaboration of the answer comes after a rather long pause (2 seconds) does not get a response from the moderator. Dave's answer projects the moderator as the sort of person who just drives through Cheshire on the M6 (the main North–South motorway) unaware of its towns. Schegloff notes that 'It is by reference to the adequate recognizability of detail, including place names, that one is in this sense a member, and those who do not share such recognition are "strangers" ' (1972: 93). Usually these moderators are happy to present themselves as strangers, since this technique seems to get participants to talk more explicitly.

Placing and re-placing oneself

As the response may ascribe an identity to the moderator (as a stranger), it may signal the participant's identity for present purposes. Here the moderator has said the group is 'just about people's attitudes to animals', and the first participant presents himself in a way that projects his authenticity on this topic.

40.28

1	Mod:	so perhaps if we could start off if you could just sort of tell us your name- your Christian name and perhaps . say where you live . if you work what you do . and how long you've lived here . and then we'll start off . so would that be OK=
2	Henry:	=yes . Henry Brown
3	Mod:	Henry
4	Henry:	I farm at Parkfoot Farm which is about a stone's throw from here
5	Mod:	oh? right (2) and how long have you been farming
6	Henry:	all my life

Henry gives his full name (though he is asked only for Christian name) and says, not that he is a farmer who lives at this place, but 'I farm at Parkfoot Farm'. He gives the name of his farm, even though it is apparent that he does not expect the moderator to recognize it, since he also says without prompting where it is. 'A stone's throw from here' suggests not only that it is close, but that the direction, address, and directions for getting there are probably irrelevant. There are similar kinds of phrases in other groups ('local . a spit from here' (7.800)). The moderator's response (5) takes it as news ('oh?' (5)), and builds on it with a question relevant to it, confirming that this is the sort of answer wanted.

The self-identifications are not always so univocal; Pat in this session in Birmingham first categorises himself as Irish, but then recategorises himself to fit the category he assumes applies to this focus group:

27.40

1	Pat:	um . Pat . Patrick . Pat . >everyone calls me Pat<
2	Mod:	OK?
3	Pat:	yeah I was actually born in in Ire- County Ire- in County Galway in Ireland
4	Mod:	right
5	Pat:	but I've lived here for forty odd yhhhears so I'm really a Brummie and
6	Mod:	right h h
7	Pat:	I live in a place called Whittingham just outside uh Lichfield ( )
8	Mod:	OK
9	Pat:	so it's about fifteen miles away
10	Mod:	okay . thanks

Pat corrects himself three times, in parallel instances, first to give his name as Pat, then Patrick, then Pat (explaining why he finally chooses this formulation), then to change his description for 'Ire-' to the more specific 'County Galway in Ireland', and finally to say he is Irish but is really now 'a Brummie' (the locals' name for natives of Birmingham). He has a slight breathiness to 'years' (5), suggesting he presents it as potentially laughable, someone who has lived 'here' so long still being Irish, and the moderator takes up the laughter. He has placed himself in relation to the moderator's knowledge (of Ireland), purpose (in convening a group from Birmingham) and location (here).

Sometimes this assertion of an alternative geographical identity comes later in the group. When Ellen introduced herself the exchange was:

19.101

1 Mod: live in town?
2 Ellen: uh- live in Burnage

But later she adds an alternative place:

19.990

 1 Ellen: y'know people say couldn't live or work in London but I <u>could</u> . in New York . I could-
 2 Alan: °can't stand Americans too much °
 3 Steve: yeah I ( )
 4 Ellen: I love . you know my family are sort of from . you know Jam<u>ai</u>ca . so: and I've spent some time out the:re and I've got quite a you know relationship there/really
 5 Mod: right whereabouts in Jamaica from Kingston?
 6 Ellen: um no I mean . St . Anne's and Kingston . I <u>worked</u> in Kingston for two years =
 7 Mod: =right
 8 Ellen: so: I- you know . it was during the time that they had hurricanes as well so: . it was quite a <u>strhohnhg</u>/
 9 Mod: /sure
10 Amy: /h h h
11 Ellen: link . with it because that was the first time/I'd been out and they
12 Mod: /so you've still got family there that you=
13 Ellen: =yeah
14 Mod: you know talk to on a regular basis so obviously/
15 Ellen: /yeah
16 Mod: you know what's going on=
17 Ellen: =but also I mean it's a mixture New York Jamaica and LA . I really like I really like . being out there so

Unlike Pat, who wanted to dismiss the relevance of his other place, Ellen builds a case that allows her to claim this alternative identity: she worked there, has

family there, and was with them through a difficult time. She signals the possible laughability of saying that the hurricane was a link (8); another participant takes up this laughter, while the moderator responds without laughing. Ellen goes on to sexplain how this could be a link (it was her first visit (11)), before the moderator breaks in to present a formulation of her turn as showing she can claim belonging based on her having family there (12, 14, 16). But she cuts off this formulation to say that she liked other places outside Britain (17), taking her back to the assertion in turn 1, and the topic of America versus Britain.

In neither Pat's case nor Ellen's is this newly asserted identity their 'true' identity. Both revisions are occasioned by something in the ongoing talk; the identity as Brummie is relevant to the focus group introduction, and the identity as Jamaican/American is relevant to an argument about where one could live. Pat gives evidence for his Brummie status ('forty odd years') and Ellen gives evidence for her bond to Jamaica (the hurricane), suggesting that both feel the need to give some account to support their revision of identity.

Stigma

Perhaps no place one can be from is neutral in listeners' evaluations of one's identity. But some places are treated by other participants as bearing a stigma: it could be near a nuclear plant, or a rough neighbourhood, or a name associated with a disaster or tragedy (on the use of the term 'stigma' in an environmental context, see Gregory, Flynn and Slovic 1995). When participants signal that something is problematic about this place, the person who is from the place can go along, reject the stigma, or disaffiliate from the place.

This example is an unusual case where other participants comment during the round of introductions; they bring out the negative associations with this estate (what in U.S. English would be a public housing project), apparently for the benefit of the moderator:

42.2

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 1  Mod:   thanks John . all right . you couldn't sort of say who you are?
 2  Carl:  all right my name's Carl
 3  Mod:   Carl . yeah?
 4  Carl:  lived in Preston all my life
 5  Mod:   all right . OK
 6  Carl:  married 20 year
 7  Mod:   yeah
 8  Carl:  same address twenty- uh twenty year now . Callan Estate
 9  Mod:   right
10  Ken:   whew
11  Jack:  (hard work there)
12  Mod:    why what's what's
13  Ken:   (  )
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14	Jack:	(gun shop)
15	Mod:	h h h what it it's a rough estate is it
16	Ken:	definitely
17	Carl:	I find it all right
18	Mod:	you find it all right
19	Carl:	it has a bad reputation
20	Mod:	has it . yeah?
21	Carl:	a few lunatics there . that goes for every=
22	Jack:	=every/estate
23	Ken:	/well it's just like everything else isn't it? there's good and bad everywhere isn't there?
24	Mod:	yeah (2) what- what estate was that again? sorry
25	Carl:	Callen/Callen Estate
26	Mod:	/Callen . right . right . OK . yea:h (2) OK thanks

The 'whew' response (10) suggests that other participants recognize 'Callen Estate', and expect others to recognize it, as a meaningful place, and that this meaning is relevant, while not actually making a verbal comment. Ken and Jack (who have been introduced and have already done a lot of talking) chime in repeatedly with humorous comments (some of them barely audible) on this estate. When the moderator displays his ignorance of this place (12) and formulates their comments as an explicit evaluation (15), Ken confirms this negative evaluation. But Carl immediately comes in to assert, in hedged form, that 'I find it all right'. The 'whew' suggests there is something more to say about Callen, so there would be conversational opportunities if Carl had taken up their invitation to assert he lived in the roughest estate in town, but he turns down this offer and offers a general defence – 'that goes for every' (21). Then there is a kind of remedial work: Ken and Jack overlap to echo and complete forms of this commonplace ('every estate' (22), and more generally 'everywhere' (23)), suggesting they are not stigmatising Carl. The moderator's very hesitant closing of the topic before moving onto the next introduction marks this again as a potentially sensitive topic.

An ascription may be presented as a joke, though it is not always taken that way by those stigmatised. In the following example, the place comes up later in the group, and Simon (who now lives on the other side of the country) claims it at this point as his home town. First James doesn't seem to hear Simon's very quiet interjection:

4.1679

1	James:	I mean, if anybody's ever up in: . Cleveland . up in Middlesborough/
2	Simon:	/°my home town°
3	James:	Jesus Christ I mean you see it from miles away at night when you're driving there . the whole place is lit up . what the quality of the air must have been up there over the last forty or fifty years
4	Simon:	°my home town°

5	James:	/must have been horrendous
6	Mod:	/h h
7	James:	put the lights off and see if his head glows
8	Mod:	h h h
9	Bob:	then again prior to that you know they didn't have much of a- life in any case (down in the pits) silic<u>os</u>is in any case
10	James:	h h
11	Bob:	so: . all you've done is replace one pollutant with another

James is using the place as an example of environmental damage, but nothing in turn 3 explicitly stigmatises the people who live there. Only when Simon repeats that it is his home town does James makes the stigma explicit, in joking form. People (or sheep) who live near nuclear or chemical plants are often said, in these groups, to 'glow in the dark'. (Waterton and Wynne give a similar example where people living near the Sellafield nuclear processing plant say jokingly that 'we probably er, glow' 1999: 140.) The joking both exaggerates and mitigates the ascription of stigma to the people: mitigates apparently by exaggerating (the mockery is not meant seriously since he does not in fact glow). Bob goes on to develop the idea of the place and its people as stigmatised (9), as others, including the moderator, laugh. But Simon did consider it important enough to make sure that James heard that he was from there, before James continued to denigrate the place.

Stigma is, then, a special case of the ascription of place-identity. It is the marked exception to the rule that place identities are given in a routine form, without comment. When someone is associated with a stigmatised place, it is too salient to pass unnoted by the person or the rest of the group; it is seen as an occasion for response, for mitigating work, or for elaboration. There is apparently no equivalent with positive place-identities, though there are other ways these identities can occasion further talk.

RELEVANCE

We have seen that participants choose place formulations that seem to be relevant to what has been said so far ('just off junction eighteen'; 'I'm really a Brummie'; 'I farm at Parkfoot Farm'). Place formulations can also set up further talk as relevant, for instance affiliating with or disaffiliating from a stigmatised place. When participants re-define the place they are from, later in the group, it often sets up a story or enables them to claim entitlement to a position in an argument.

Places and stories

Places are tied up in narratives: landscapes are constructed in moving through places (Ingold 2000), place meanings can be given in stories (Basso 1996), and mention of a place can cue a story. As we have seen, explaining where one lives

may involve narratives, to say why one is there, how one got there, what sort of place it is. So, for instance, when people ask where I'm from, meaning that I cannot be from Lancaster, it is often a prelude to asking how I got here, and perhaps exchanging their stories of going to where I am from, or of coming to Lancaster as outsiders themselves. There has been a great deal of work on conversational narratives (for examples and references, see Polanyi 1985; Schiffrin 1996; Ochs 1997; Schegloff 1997). Ochs gives as a necessary but not sufficient condition that 'all narratives depict a temporal transition from one state of events to another' (Ochs 1997: 189). One can elaborate the structural definition, but the key point for our purposes is that narratives are offered and taken as such by participants in the conversation, with signals of when a story is being told, when it is over, and how it is relevant to the ongoing conversation (e.g. Johnstone 1990; Sacks 1992; Eggins and Slade 1997; Thornborrow 2001). Stories give the chance for one participant to hold the floor, but they are inherently interactive, depending on a constant stream of responses by the moderator and other participants, signalling how they are taking each stage of new information.

In this passage, the moderator asks when they moved to their town, but both participants take it as a question about *why* they moved:

42

1	Mod:	perhaps if I could ask you to . just sort of briefly just say who you are. where you come from . a:nd perhaps . you know . when- when you moved to where you live now
2	Johnny:	OK I'll kick off . I'm Johnny
3	Mod:	OK
4	Johnny:	been in Preston for 6 years
5	Mod:	mm
6	Johnny:	moved from Drumchapel >quiet little fishing village on the Clyde<
7	Mod:	ok/
8	M:	/h h h
9	Jack:	/I know it
10	Mod:	you know it/h h
11	Jack:	/I live in- I come from East Kilbride myself
12	Mod:	oh . right so
13	Johnny:	moved down here for work
14	Mod:	yeah
15	Johnny:	there was no work up there? moved down
16	Mod:	yeah
17	Johnny:	met a . girl down here married her
18	Mod:	right
19	Johnny:	( ) that's it
20	Mod:	OK . thanks very much Johnny
21	Jack:	I'm Jack Wilson

22	Mod:	Jack OK?
23	Jack:	I moved down here September 1975
24	Mod:	right
25	Jack:	I was on the run from the army. I went AWOL . that's how I come to get down here
26	Mod:	right . OK? and a
27	Jack:	and married a Lancashire lass as well
28	Mod:	right
29	Jack:	still married
30	Mod:	so you're quite happy you moved then
31	Jack:	yeah

The stories are built collaboratively by the two participants. As in other examples, the moderator's continuers (3, 5, 7) suggest that the answer could be continued and developed. Drumchapel (6) is a northwest Glasgow neighbourhood of concentrated public housing, not at all a 'quiet fishing village on the Clyde'. So he is not saying he is of traditional fishing stock; he is saying he is from a tough neighbourhood, and that he expects at least some of his listeners recognise this. How do we know this, if we don't know Glasgow? The laughability of the description is perhaps signalled in Johnny's speeded up description (6); it is taken up by other participants (8), and finally by the moderator (10). Jack has broken in to say he knows the place (and thus recognises the joke, though he does not say so). Then Johnny continues his narrative, ending it, 'that's it' (19), all one needs to know. In this and in other groups, one story leads to another, in a series. In 26 and 28 the moderator tries to close off Jack's narrative, but Jack continues to add details; participants are not done until they have signalled the ways the story is relevant and the parallels to the previous story are drawn out. (Nessa Wolfson 1976 has noted that this kind of explicit motivation may be especially characteristic of stories in interviews.) The moderator ends by formulating the point of Jack's story; he is now happy to be here rather than in Glasgow.

The anthropologist Karen I. Blu tells how she had to learn to stop ignoring the long lists of places her informants gave her. 'Place names abounded in Lumbee conversation. But they were bits of stories or news or reports of political activities that I usually skipped over or read "through" in my eagerness for what I imagined were the "meatier" parts' (Blu 1996: 201). Similarly in my data, a bare list of places can convey a great deal. Here Stan says he is 'not going to give you my life's history', but that is just what he does, in a sequence of descriptions of dwellings rich in associations for his audience. This list follows Mike's assertion that the problem with working-class communities now is that people are just 'moving through' without commitment to the neighbourhood:

24.8

1	Mike:	. . .but when they're moving through they don't care whether the place burns down or . you know .

2	?	yeah
3	Mike:	as long as their doors are locked and
4	?	yeah
5	Mike:	they they isolate themselves
6	Stan:	I'm not going to give you my life's history but
7	Mod:	yeah

8 Stan: I started off in um in a . a corporation <u>flat</u> . on Moor Lane and within 10 <u>months</u> of living in that flat my wife . uh >I'd been married previous and I was widowed with 2 children< she said I'm getting out of here and within 10 months we scraped and scrimped to buy . a . North British Housing Corporation house which is a . like housing unit and from there we moved to a big terraced house and then from there to a . a 3-bedroomed um . semi-detached with a garden at the front and the back . and from there we've progressed down to a 2-bedroomed bungalow >the kids have gone we've built a small house the buggers can't come <u>back</u><

9 Bill: so could I ask the question would you have moved if you hadn't been pushed . by your wife

10 Stan: um I/

11 Bill: /did you miss your original area where you came from

The descriptions – 'a corporation flat on Moor Lane', 'a North British Housing Corporation house', 'a big terraced house', 'a 3-bedroomed semi-detached' – are all specific to this culture and this location, but we as outsiders do not need a separate gloss to follow the narrative. It is clear from the sequence in which he presents them that they are to be taken as a story of moving up in the world. The artful shaping of the story as a progress is clear when he speeds up at the surprise ending saying they 'progressed down' to the bungalow, something smaller but appropriate for them just because there is now no room for the kids. His hearers are to recognise this implication (problems of grown children moving back in) as they recognize the other stages of his life. Bill then asks him to relate this story back to the issue raised by Mike: the effects of people moving on from local communities.

'I'm not going to give you my life's history'. In both these examples, speakers sketch out their lives over time in highly economical ways, carefully oriented to this group, by tracing their movements between places. These stories not only evaluate the places, they use the shared evaluations of the places to make a claim for the person in this group, to show how they are now different from what they once were. And they do this interactively, in relation to the moderator's questions and the prompting and previous turns of other participants.

Places and entitlement

Some of the examples of use of place as an indication of identity and as an opening for a story suggest a more general function: where one is from can be used to show

one is entitled to an opinion (Dixon and Durrheim 2000). Participants in these groups are very cautious about asserting opinions, particularly where they might lead to disagreement (Strauss 2004). Being from a place not only provides evidence, it warrants the speaker as entitled to have a view. So a participant might say she once lived near the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant, to support her claim to speak in favour of the plant, or another might say he grew up on a farm, to support his point about BSE (for these examples, see Myers 2004, Chapter 8).

Alternative places to be from are most frequently invoked as a comparison to the place currently under discussion, for instance the place one lives now. Here a participant is arguing that communities in the past used to be closer, and another participant chimes in with the example of where she used to live (I've incorporated the moderator's continuers into the turns, because they are so much a part of the rhythm):

21.769

Terry: . . . I mean even be<u>yond</u> work [ye:s] it's not like . I don't know . 30 years ago . like when my father was working you know . he knew everybody on the street 'cause they all worked at the same factory [mm] that he worked at [yes] and that doesn't seem to happen

Mod: yes comp<u>le</u>:tely

Lauren: yeah I mean I've got a si- similar example is when I was . a teenager . my father was a miner and we lived on . what is now- is <u>still</u> today is called the Miners Estate [mm] and everybody knew everybody [mm] more or less . or at least there was a connection [mm] through parents [mm] there was also a social club that allowed children [mm] they had a children's room and . you know . you could go in and there was a lot of <u>mix</u>ing [mm] in that way . that- <u>that's</u> what's missing from where I am now [mm h] now whether that's to do with <u>me</u> [mm] or to do with how the world's moved on <u>or</u> the community that I'm in [mm] I don't know [yeah] but certainly/it's a lot different now

Mod: /yeah yeah yes . I mean do people feel like they be<u>long</u> anywhere

As with the previous example of the two men who moved from Scotland, one story builds on another; Lauren presents hers as 'a similar example'. But there is also a contrast in the way she tells it. While Terry talks about 'everybody on the [unnamed] street', Lauren specifies a working-class neighbourhood exactly, with the name (once descriptive, now evocative of the past). She then leads us gradually into this place, from the estate, to the social club, back to the children's room. It is an artful account that enacts the sense of being enclosed in this world. The contrast with her present world is also artfully constructed: 'that' referring generally to this whole account, is what is missing, and it is missing because she in particular has changed, or the 'whole world' has changed, or she has moved. She then signals the end of her account 'I don't know' with a summary of her point. The moderator formulates her point in a

question to other participants, now in terms of whether they 'belong'. Lauren has claimed the social club and the neighbourhood as part of her own identity; having lived there (not just knowing about it) gives her entitlement to speak this way. The same sort of entitlement might be gained by participants referring to the location of their house, or their trip to work, or where family members live, or even where they've had a holiday.

PLACE, TALK AND RESEARCH

We have seen that the question 'Where are you from?' is typically treated in focus groups as routine, by both the questioner and the answerer. Researchers seldom notice the flexibility in possible responses, and the differences in meanings between the choices. But if we attend to these routines, and the variations from them, we can see the ways people construct places and identities as they negotiate the 'right' responses for this situation, for what they see as the audience, their role for present purposes, and the relevance to the ongoing interaction.

I started my review of place formulations with Schegloff's (1972) distinction between Geographical and Relational ways of referring to place. My study suggests researchers would benefit from leaving room for the flexibility of place formulations to emerge. Surveys that simply ask for an address miss the richness that more open responses can have. But so do interviews and focus groups that leave the opening identification of place as part of routine introductory exchanges, because, as we have seen, many of the relevant aspects of place emerge only when this exchange is disrupted or the answers reformulated. The hesitations and self-interruptions are often cues to the formulation of place being problematic. Schegloff shows how insertion sequences also bring out the problems of reference and scale, as participant or researcher tries to define what kind of answer is right here. And I have looked at re-placing after the introductions, where an alternative place is invoked as relevant in one way or another to the ongoing talk, for instance as a basis for a story or as entitlement to a position in an argument. If we take place-naming as automatic, without the hesitation or the insertion sequence, without the later revisions, we miss the ways place can be used.

I noted in my introduction a range of research that deals with different meanings of place. As Doreen Massey puts it, ' "the identity of a place" is much more open and provisional than most discussions allow' (1994: 168). And it is richer, because it is not just a position in space, but also a link to tasks, practices, everyday life. Social researchers can try to close off some of these meanings by restricting place references to locations in space: a set of place names, postal codes, or even pointing to a map. Or they can make place the explicit topic and ask further questions about how long participants have lived there and whether they identify with the community, town, or region, pre-supposing names, boundaries, and meanings of places for this research. These two approaches, pinning place down or making it explicit, still miss the 'Yes I am from here *but* . . .' responses. So they miss the ways place names are used to

open up talk about something else. Relational formulations are shifting and may seem vague, but they can lead us on to the categories and practices relevant to these people for this situation.

One of the ways people use place in interaction is as a resource for constructing identity, one's 'meaning in the world'. Being from here or there can provide ways of presenting oneself as like or different from the person one is talking to and other people. Even though we all have to be from somewhere, that somewhere can be presented in different ways as the occasion allows. When one says one moved here from the South, or bought a semi-detached house, or grew up in Miners' Estate, or that one lives near Junction 18, one is presenting a view of oneself and of the people to whom one is talking, in Goffman's sense, a 'line' for oneself in this interaction (Goffman 1967). This line is then taken up, or not, by others in the group, as the basis for further talk – developing the stigma, telling a story, supporting an argument. As the identity of a place is 'open and provisional', so is the place-identity of participants in talk. Of course, there is more to identity of a place and to place-identity in talk than just naming the place one is from. Place names may not be used at all, as when a participant gives directions to his/her home, or maps contrasts, distance, and boundaries in categorising people, or recalls family history, or talks about daily practices that give a temporal order to space (what Ingold calls the 'taskscape' 2000). But the simple naming, in response to a question, is a good place to start, because it is naming that opens up the questions about the place of place in this particular interaction.

I have argued that social research often assumes the relevance of the Geographical formulation rather than the Relational, building rather than dwelling, our pre-existing map of the world rather than the paths presented by participants. We make these assumptions because we want to get past the routine introductions to what participants have to say about the topics that interest us. The danger is then that we miss much of what is going on, and theorise these people as subjects in a grid rather than as actors constructing their worlds. We ask them where they are from, and they answer. That's that. But if we attend more closely to the relevance of place in their talk, we see that we keep asking this question, in one way or another, and they keep answering, in different and complex ways.

NOTES

2. Transcription conventions:

full stop .	for a short pause
(4)	longer pauses in seconds
<u>underlining</u>	for stressed syllables
angle brackets ><	for passages spoken faster than the surrounding talk
forward slash marks/	for the onset of overlapping talk
°°	degree marks for quieter talk
↑	sharply raised pitch
brackets [mm]	for backchannel utterances from the moderator
double brackets [[]]	for non-verbal sounds
parentheses ( )	for uncertain transcription
hhh	for laughter

Speaker identification is given in the different styles of the various projects. Names are pseudonyms, but place names are left unchanged; in none of the examples quoted does the place name identify a participant.

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