Self-disclosure as a situated interactional practice

Charles Antaki[1]*, Rebecca Barnes[1] and Ivan Leudar[2]

[1]Discourse and Rhetoric Group, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, UK
[2]Department of Psychology, Manchester University, UK

Self-disclosure has long been a site of research in clinical and social psychology, where it suffers the fate of many interactional phenomena. It is operationalized (typically, into a set of bald statements of varying intimacy), and measured as a dependent variable (subject to the operation of factors like the age or gender of the discloser, the degree of acquaintance with the disclosed-to recipient, the expectation of reciprocity and so on), or manipulated as a causative independent variable (which affects such things as the perception of the discloser, the effectiveness of therapy, and so on). This treatment of self-disclosure, embedded in a research culture of a-contextual, experimenter-defined phenomena, risks missing the point that in ordinary life, self-disclosure is a social performance which must be *brought off* in interaction, and has its interactional context and its interactional consequences. When we examine examples of such brought-off disclosures, we start to see patterns in their design as voluntary revelations of personal data, and patterns in their social function, which are invisible to the standard factors and measures paradigm of experimental social psychology.

The concept of revealing one's inner self to other people has its roots in existential and phenomenological philosophy, but the phrase 'self-disclosure' was introduced into the psychological and communication literature by the work of Sidney Jourard (Jourard, 1968, 1964/1971; Jourard & Lakasow, 1958). For Jourard, a humanistic psychologist and practicing psychotherapist, self-disclosure was 'the process of making the self known to others' (Jourard & Lakasow 1958 p. 91). His message, to put it simply, was that in appropriate circumstances it was healthier to reveal feelings, and other personal matters, than to suppress them. Disclosing oneself was a positive and desirable thing to do.

Jourard and his associates, and later followers, were not inventing or discovering a new form of language. Far from it; the term self-disclosure although apparently technical, refers to a range of things within the realm of everyday experience, and for which we have recognizable expressions such as 'revealing something of oneself', 'sharing information about one's past' and so on.[1] But naming the concept did spark an

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*Correspondence should be addressed to Dr Charles Antaki, Department of Social Sciences, University of Loughborough, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK (e-mail: c.antaki@lboro.ac.uk).

[1] There are, of course, other uses of disclosure in technical discourses, such as in legal proceedings, for example.

empirical interest in charting its causes and effects, as conceived by traditional experimental social psychology. Since 1981 the term self-disclosure has appeared in the title or abstract of nearly a thousand journal articles, and no doubt in a further number of books, chapters, conference presentations and so on.

Clearly self-disclosure must refer to something significant about human relations. Yet coming to it freshly and with some distance and technical interest as part of a study of psychotherapy from a discursive perspective, we notice something that gives us pause. In reading the background literature, we see that the overwhelming majority of empirical work on self-disclosure is of what the discursive psychologists Edwards and Potter call the 'factors and variables' (Edwards, 1997, chapters 1 and 2) or 'factors and outcomes' kind (Potter, 2003, Potter & Edwards, 2001). First, the phenomenon is operationalized: here, most usually into a set of statements about a person's life, as first proposed by Jourard in his self-disclosure questionnaire (Jourard, 1964/1971; for an illustrative recent example of a specialized version of this kind of scale, see Snell, 1998). Operationalization then allows the phenomenon to be treated as a dependent measure – usually, the research subject is asked to tick off which items she or he would be prepared to reveal, and less frequently, subjects' talk is coded into a pre-given category system. This measure is then correlated with a characteristic of the research subject (e.g. their personality type, see Levesque, Steciuk, & Ledley, 2002;[2] gender, see Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003; or cultural identity, see Barry, 2003), or examined for its susceptibility to the working of some situational factor (often, the characteristics of the recipient of the disclosure, e.g. whether a sibling (Howe *et al.*, 2001), or, recently, the medium of the communication e.g. the Internet (Joinson, 2001). Alternatively, self-disclosure might be used as an independent factor itself, with the research subjects asked, for example, to rate out-group members (Ensari & Miller, 2002) or physicians (Aruguete & Thomas, 2002) who are presented as differing in the degree to which they disclose personal information.

In all of this, the psychological community has taken a robust (but to our mind, misleadingly simple) stand on what counts as a self-disclosure that can then be set into the matrix of cause and effect experimentation. In the standard account, self-disclosure can be defined by the analyst, and is no more than information about oneself shared with another person. Here is a definition from the late 1970s: '(1) it [self disclosure] must contain personal information about the speaker; (2) the speaker must verbally communicate this information; and (3) the speaker must communicate this information to a target person' (Chelune, 1979 p. 19). And here is another, more recent example: 'the process of deliberately revealing information about oneself that is significant and that would not normally be known by others' (Adler & Towne, 1999, p. 358).

But self-disclosure (or rather, the sort of activity that is ordinarily recognized as 'revealing something of oneself' and so on, and which has been given the technical term self-disclosure by psychologists) is something people do in some contexts. Psychology's definitions are of little help in recognizing it as an action; they do no more than capture some conceptual features of what the term disclosure must mean as a member's normative term. Here psychology is liable to the sort of objection raised by Coulter (1990) for example, in observing that much psychological definition is mere

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[2] *In what follows in this paragraph we cite only recent work, so as to remind the reader of the continuing currency of the factors and outcomes paradigm in social psychology.*

restatement of features already latent in a psychological term itself, or indeed what Smedslund (1997) calls psycho-logic – the circular route between a term and its definition. Psychology of the causes and effects, 'factors and outcomes' (Potter & Edwards, 2001), kind has said nothing about how someone would go about making themselves understood to actually be disclosing something. Indeed, such a consideration is, so far as we know, quite absent from the literature, other than in lists of topics which are taken to be conventionally disclosive if talked about (e.g. at what is judged to be the most intimate level, 'my interest in pornographic books, magazines or videos', from a list in Farber & Hall, 2002). But it is not enough to know that a person has stated[3] their interest in pornography to judge that he or she has self-disclosed. If what they say is in response to a courtroom cross-examination, it might be better described as 'an admission', or in a Catholic confessional, 'a confession', or in a locker room bull-session, a 'boast'. These examples are enough to show that topic alone is not enough to determine whether something is a self-disclosure. Something more is needed. Our aim is to try and find out what that is, how self-disclosure is brought off, and how the circumstances of its bringing-off will colour what it does in the interaction.

In looking at how self-disclosure is situated as a practice in interaction, we are squarely in the territory mapped out by the discursive psychology of Edwards and Potter (1992). The central feature of this kind of discursive psychology is its insistence that such classically psychological, in the sense of internal and mental, phenomena like disclosing – and any other action described in mental terms – are in fact better treated as matters of external, public business, conducted in talk. Examples of such successful treatments were well established in the early 1990s: for example, the discursive psychological investigation of remembering (Edwards, Middleton, & Potter, 1992), explaining (Potter & Edwards, 1990), and categorizing (Edwards, 1991) among others. In each case the investigation starts with a very close look at recordings of how such things as remembering actually come up in interaction, and what they achieve. So discursive psychology is well fitted to seeing what we can make of people reporting on their lives in ways they make work as disclosures.

This article, then, reports a study of how it is that people design their talk to come off as disclosive, and what such a disclosure does in the circumstances of its performance. It is not the first to look at how intimate personal information is introduced into an interaction; we have the background in Pomerantz' work on 'my side tellings' (Pomerantz, 1980), where speaker A can set the scene for speaker B to disclose information 'fished for' by A. As for the disclosure itself, we have a very illuminating precedent in Kitzinger (2000, 2002), who uses the example of how people bring off disclosures of their sexual identity (how they 'come out' in group discussion) to make a case for the application of conversation analysis to feminist issues. We follow Kitzinger in using conversation analysis, but we shall have a wider brief, looking for the general design features of any disclosure (without restriction to disclosures of sexual identity, or to the specific interactional context of small-group discussion). As for the therapeutic benefits of disclosure, a theme prominent in the psychological literature since Jourard (1964/1971), we are agnostic; but we do make the point that if psychologists want to assess it, it would be better if they first had the means of recognizing it, and what it does in interaction.

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[3] *Even to use the verb 'stated' attributes a certain meaning to the act.*

Some features visible in two recognizable examples of self-disclosure

Our examples of self-disclosure come from an inspection of two very different data sources. One is a set of psychotherapy sessions, transcribed by ourselves, comprising both cognitive-behaviour therapy and humanistic therapy. The other is a large set of mundane telephone calls collected by Elizabeth Holt and transcribed by Gail Jefferson. We chose these two sources because they embody the canonical locations of both clinical and the social-psychological literatures – the explicitly therapeutic environment (with its institutional premium on disclosure) and the highly variable interactions of everyday life, where disclosure is one option among many.

Consider two examples below, one from each domain, which are cases that we think would be seen by fellow cultural members[4] as self-disclosure. It is important that we are clear about our logic here. We say that these examples would be seen by any culturally competent member as self-disclosures in the circumstances visible in the extracts, while another piece of talk, apparently similarly about personal information, would not be. That is where we start; then we spend the rest of the article teasing out the features that make the difference. The independent, intuitive, member's recognition is essential to the argument; otherwise, we would be risking a circular definition, where we claim that X is a self-disclosure because it has Y and Z features, and that Y and Z make something a self-disclosure because they appear in X. The question we invite the reader to consider is the following: What is it about the extracts that seems to make Examples 1 and 2 recognizable as disclosures in their circumstances, and different from Example 3, which we present as something *not* recognizable as a disclosure, in its circumstances?

Example 1: 'The world's worst cook' (UV/JR, 110698)
The therapist is asking a client what further training he would like to have.[5]

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      1   T:   .hh (.) have you ever *had a desire to > I don't know what
      2        people do < (.) cook or er* ((*smile voice*))
      3   C:   no- not [( ° °)
      4   T:          [PAIN:t or
      5   C:   No paint
      6        (0.6)
 →    7   T:   .hh I've always had a desire to cook which is
 →    8        > why I say at- < °I can't- I'm the° < world's wor∷st
 →    9        cook. > (Michael) I REALLY am .hh but I've always
 →   10        had vis:ions that one day I might just n(h)ip into the
 →   11        k(h)itchen [and R(h)USTLE something lovely up
     12   C:             [m
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Example 2: 'Dogs in kennels' (Holt 2.01)
Leslie has just told Fos that her family have gone on a skiing holiday.

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[4] *We speak as members of at least a middle-class educated British culture, to choose three traditional cover-sheet membership categories which are likely to be relevant to recognizing the self-disclosures in our data set, in which the speakers use a recognizably British idiom.*
[5] *In all our extracts we reproduce the talk as faithfully as a basic conventional transcription allows (for a description of the standard CA symbols, as developed by Gail Jefferson, see the Appendix to this article).*

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  1  Fos:  D'you go: yourse:lf or-
  2  Les:  No: I[ ::  c a -   ]  [No ah- u-we've guh-
  3  Fos:        [And you stay]'t [home.
→ 4  Les:  you see ah- I can't bear the idea'v putting the dogs in
→ 5        kennels.
  6  Fos:  No:.
  7        (0.3)
→ 8  Les:  So: uh,h (.) in any case I hate snow,
  9        (.)
 10  Fos:  Yes.
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Let us first imagine that we extracted, from the flow of talk, the arrowed lines, and tidied them up, perhaps as preparation to forming a new list of self-disclosures to work as a checklist in a questionnaire study. Surely there would be no problem? 'I'm the world's worst cook', 'I can't bear the idea of putting dogs in kennels', and 'I hate snow' sound like they would be solid candidates for items on a self-disclosure checklist. They compare favourably, for example, with items from Jourard's own scale (Jourard, 1964/1971): 'What are your food likes and dislikes?', 'What are your personal religious views?', and 'How do you feel about your own body?'.

But treating these statements as checklist candidates would be wrong. We would have been lulled into a comfortable assumption – as are readers of checklists – that we are to think of these items as disclosures in themselves, as if the circumstances did not matter. But it is quite possible to imagine situations in which these same statements would not be disclosures at all. 'I'm the world's worst cook' could be delivered as a plea for help (perhaps when preparing for a dinner party) or as a self-deprecation (perhaps after praise if the party goes well). 'I hate snow' might be a rejection of an invitation to take a walk in a winter landscape, or a sniffy disapproval of a winter scene in a painting, and so on.

Rather than invent examples of non-disclosure, consider this extract from a British telephone call (from the same corpus as Example 2 above). It has a piece of personal information in it which does not come across as a disclosure, though on the face of it, 'I'm a relief teacher' could be categorized as something like 'the job I do', which is just the kind of thing that, stripped of its context, could go on a disclosure check-list. Again, it is worth making our logic plain: we invite the reader to consider whether they think, if they feel they are fellow members of the culture, that the arrowed line comes across as a self-disclosure. The intuitive, members' judgment comes first; then we see what the extract contains to make it come across as such (or, in this case, to not make it do so).

Example 3: 'I'm a relief teacher' (Holt 1.3)

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  1  Les:  .hh Mister Bathwick (.) uh:m I did ask if you c'd do me an
  2        order on Thu:rsday if I came in an'got it ready:,
  3  Bat:  (C'rrect.)
  4        (.)
  5  Les:  .hh Uh this is Leslie Field h[ere,].hh] =
  6  Bat:                              [Yes]yes] =
→ 7  Les:  = uhm (.) but you know I'm a relief teacher I've been asked
  8        t'teach on Thursda[y.
  9  Bat:                    [Mmhm, =
 10  Les:  = .hh An' (.) I'm coming in t'morrow: or I could pop in
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11   quickly on We̲dnesday, I wo̲nder .hhh a:re you able t'do: (.)
12   deliver another da:y (.) o:r: w-wha̲t d'you think.

Even though the base content of Leslie's turn in lines 7-8 involves personal information, the social action she is engaged in has (we would say as fellow members) no element of self-disclosure, as the term is meant ordinarily and in the psychological literature. It is personal information, but in the service of something very different from self-disclosure. She is preparing the ground for proposing a change in arrangements; she uses her work obligations to explain and justify her inability to come on the Thursday previously agreed. We would hardly say that she self-discloses her occupation, as we might say if she designed what she said differently, say (to borrow the prototypical example from the psychology laboratory) in order to get acquainted with a stranger. That is all we need for the moment as an analysis of non-disclosure; but we shall return with a more detailed analysis of another example towards the end of the article, once we have a better idea of what features to look for.

Our argument, then, is that if some piece of personal information works as a self-disclosure, it does so only *in situ*: that is, it comes across as self-disclosure only in the local circumstances of the production of the talk (most obviously, in the environment produced by the immediately preceding talk). No list of topics can hope to capture what works to come off as a self-disclosure. We can return to Examples 1 and 2 to delve into how the speakers design their talk to come across as a disclosure in the circumstances. We note three things in brief form, and expand on them in the body of the analysis.

(a) The way the interviewer in Example 1, and Leslie in Example 2, design their talk is to be heard as a report of a personal experience: one the speaker owns or of which they have privileged knowledge ('A-events' in Labov and Fanshel's terminology; Labov & Fanshel, 1977). This of course, looks like a definition given in the psychological literature, but is worth restating as a matter of something the speaker has to achieve. Not all personal information is identical; Pomerantz (1980, p. 187) makes a very pertinent distinction along Labov's lines in noting that: 'Type 1 knowables are those that subject-actors as subject-actors have rights and obligations to know.' Pomerantz draws on Sacks' (1975) observation of 'a difference between the way two sorts of statements are dealt with. For the first, if, for example, a little girl comes home and says to her mother, 'Mama, I'm pretty' or 'Mama, I'm smart', the mother could say, 'Who told you that?'. For the second, if someone says 'I'm tired' or 'I feel lousy', etc., no such thing is asked. One is responsible for knowing some things on one's own behalf in contrast to the situation in which one is treated as likely to be repeating what another has told about himself by 'monitoring'' (p. 72). The disclosure has to be of something said 'on one's own behalf', as Sacks puts it.

(b) Of course, while personal information must be necessary for something to sound like a self-disclosure, it is not sufficient; the speaker must do other work besides. One of these further features is to make what is said in some degree significant in the circumstances. The traditional social psychological view is that some kinds of information are implicitly significant by convention; for example, whether one is pregnant, or has passed an important examination. But as we noted above, it is perfectly possible to imagine scenes where such conventionally intimate or significant information is merely routine or impersonal. Informing a nurse you are pregnant before receiving a vaccination hardly sounds like self-disclosure, nor does responding to a question that asks for your 'highest educational qualification' on a government form. It is safer to look and see how the information is conversationally managed to come

across as significant, dramatic or newsworthy in the circumstances of the interaction; for example, to notice that the speakers in the two examples above go out of their way to describe their experiences in highly exaggerated terms ('world's worst cook', 'I hate snow'). Note that we do not say that making your talk newsworthy alone makes it a self-disclosure; news-casting must work in tandem with other features.

(c) What the therapist in Extract 1 and Leslie in Extract 2 say is designed to be understood as *volunteered*. The ordinary meaning of self-disclosure has the strong implication that the speaker is saying more than they need to, that no-one is 'squeezing the information out of them'. A self-disclosure is not accounted for by the necessities of the situation, as would be, say, the courtroom admission or the Catholic confession. 'Volunteered' is a members' term that does not offer simple purchase on the details of the talk, and we need something more precise. Conversation analysis has a very handy candidate: the speaker's production of something over and above what is mandated by the interactional business at hand. That is, some piece of news or information that would not make the speaker liable to sanction, or risk non-normative implication, were it not to be produced at this point. Consider Example 1 above: the therapist's self-description of her cooking habits is over and above the requirements of the turn (which might otherwise have proceeded to next business). In Example 2, Leslie could merely have said that 'we've got dogs which have to be looked after', or something similar (as indeed she seems to start to say in line 2). Sounding as if you have chosen to say something over and above what is required by the circumstances is not enough, by itself, to make what you say a disclosure; it must join, in some degree, with the other features we have outlined above.

Above and beyond these features specific to the talk that sounds like a self-disclosure, the speaker (and the listener) will also be alive to the usual normative expectations of talk, as established by the accumulated insights of conversation analysis that is at heart of discursive psychology: that the utterance be hearably relevant to the business at hand (to prefigure the analysis, as, for example, 'second stories'), and that it perform a certain action and make relevant a certain class of next turn from the listener. We will say more about these issues as they come up, but as a source for reference to these and other conversation-analytic concepts, see, for example, Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) among many other sources. Quite what occasions a self-disclosure, what action it performs (over and above self-disclosing) and what kind of receipt it makes appropriate, are matters we shall take up below.

Analysis

Let us proceed by taking each of the design features we listed above (making the information sound like a voluntary, significant, personal report) in turn, keeping in mind that these are always indexical, that is, dependent for their effect on the local environment. We note here that our list of these found features is not meant to be exhaustive; no doubt further work will reveal more about how self-disclosure is brought off. Nor do we mean to say that these features, singly or together, are sufficient: a piece of talk assembled with some combination of those features would not be guaranteed to come off as a self-disclosure. Nor do we mean to say that every case that will strike a member as self-disclosive must have all these features below in equal measure; the resemblance among cases is likely to be a matter of family resemblance, with membership of the family dependent exclusively on no one feature but on some mix of

all features, and perhaps others as well. Having said that, here then are what we claim to be at least some of the more prominent features of how some talk is designed to come off as a self-disclosure.

Designing information as a report of personal information

As we noted above, it must be a defining feature of a self-disclosure that it be a report of some matter 'owned' by the disclosing party. But the report has to be achieved as just that *in situ*. It is not enough that the topic of the information 'refer to'[6] a private preference, for example, or some piece of personal past history. Such references may do work other than report a disclosure (as Leslie's reference to being a relief teacher worked in Example 3). The speaker must work to make the information hearable as a report and not some other conversational move. In examining our data, we find two sorts of work that the speaker can do to realize that.

Casting the information as news in the circumstances

In Example 2 we saw that the speaker prefaced her two packets of information with 'you see' and 'in any case', respectively: both of these act to signal that what she is doing with the information is reporting it (as opposed to any other action, for example remembering it, or puzzling over it and so on). Such prefaces and other news announcements are quite pervasive in our collection (see for example the use of 'you see' and 'ac'shly' in Examples 7 and 8). In this next and more distressing extract, there is a complicated interplay of exchanges between therapist and client. We can summarize it as follows: the client has (before this extract starts) spoken of sexual abuse by 'Grace', and the feelings it left her with. We can summarize the therapist's interests in lines 1–17 below as being reassurance and soliciting agreement to a proposal that they talk about this at a later point. She asks explicitly at lines 18/20 ' ↑would ↑that be something that (.) you might be (willing) to do.'.

Example 4 (CI/HD 020398)

```
 1   Th   an (you're not alone) > in it < kinov ↑ still being ↑ with you.
 2          (.4)
 3   C    ↑ h ⌈mm
 4   Th        ⌊.h an ↑y'know, (.) (in some other people) it might
 5          have accounted for a ↑ lot of ((tape glitch)) (in ther) (lives)
 6          or ↑ par:tly (.3) acccounted for a lot of the difficulties
 7          you've ↑ found yourself having la ⌈ter
 8   C                                        ⌊yea:h
 9   Th   > ↑ y'know, ↑ y'know, < (.9) (tsk ((tape glitch?))) = > what
10          (y' bin ↑ doin' some) kinduv < (.) s:creaming an
11          all those ⌈ > sortuv things- <
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[6] *Again, there is no neutral verb to introduce this discussion. We use 'refer to' in scare quotes to signal that any verb we could have used would carry a strong implication of what the speaker is doing: cf 'report', 'admit', 'recall', 'introduce' or of course 'disclose' personal information. What the speaker is doing is just the thing we want to analyse. So we use 'refer to' as a comparatively neutral initial description, for want of an alternative.*

```
12  C                  ⌊yeah m-
13  Th  .h 'n ↑what ↑w'll do is w'll try'n look (at it/a bit) an
14      kinov try'n put the relationship (.4) an' ↑try an deal
15      with some of the issues that (it ((tape glitch?)))
16      ↑left you °with° (.3) ⌈'n (get that)
17  C                         ⌊°°mmhm°°
18  Th  ↑would ↑that be something that (.) you migh⌈t be
19  C                                              ⌊yeah.
20  Th  (willing) to do.
→ 21  C   that's ((tape glitch)) (very/fair e-) ↑can'I ↑jus say that
→ 22      *((tape glitch)) (I wasn't only abused kinov) (.) Grace
→ 23      (an' her dad an-)*⁷(.4) once er- er ((tape glitch)) (th' w's)
→ 24      a ↑group of people(.)°(who h (.) °°abused me°° ↑y'know)
→ 25      (s'uv) close frie:nds°
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The client offers an early agreement token in line 19 and an incomplete, possibly affiliative, assessment of the plan in line 21 ('that's (very/fair e-)'). What interests us is that here, faced with the therapist's proposal to set aside her experiences, the client introduces, with the metalinguistic '↑can'I ↑jus say', further (newsworthy and significant) distressing details of the events. This seems to us to be a way of marking it as a further disclosure, and as implicit resistance of the therapist's move to defer discussion of these events to a later date. If we show a bit more of how the talk develops we can see that the therapist allows the client to expand, then offers her news receipt: 'that sounds pretty grim'.

Example 4(a)(Cl/HD 020398) (follows immediately on from 4, above)

```
26      (1.1)
27  C   so (.) that wasn't very ny- just ↓once t- ((tape glitch?))
28      ↑y'know (.) °but that was em°
→ 29  Th  that sounds: (.) pretty grim =  (([ paper shuffling ]))
```

The therapist, in other words, ratifies the client's disclosure as 'news' that wants receipt, and her original move to closure is suspended.

Exploiting an environment which makes a personal report a relevant next turn
The information need not be marked as news for it to come across as a report: the speaker can exploit the environment set up by the previous turns. That was the case in Example 1 ('I'm the world's worst cook'), where the interviewer had asked the client to name things he might be interested in, without much success; in that environment, the interviewer's information about her cooking habits is hearably relevant as reporting (comparable) personal information.

Here is another example of information in an environment which supports its hearing as a report of personal information. Again it is a therapist (a different one from Example 1) and again what the client has said offers an environment which makes what the therapist says relevant as a report of personal information (here, reciprocal likes and dislikes).

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⁷ *Material between asterisks is difficult to hear because of scratchiness of tape and also C's slurring and low volume.*

Example 5 (CI/HD 020398)

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    1  C:   can- (.) affect you (.) y- you (.) wun'ty watching something on
    2       the tee ↑vee as well (.5) somethin; violent or something.
    3       (.4)
→   4  T:   ↑yeh I don't ↑like [to watch anything like that =
    5  C:                      [(- -)
    6  C:   = yeh [an (cem ca-) gets in your ↑brai:n an' [( )
    7  T:         [°(on telly)°                          [an'
→   8       I ↑can't- I can't bear it when they're kissin [and s:loppin'
    9  C:                                                 [°noh: no:h°
→  10  T:   [all- = I have to switch = HAH [HOFF THE Set: hee hh =
```

The client has been talking about not liking to watch violence on television.
The therapist in line 4 joins in with what turns out to be a disclosure that she too has
strong tastes about what she will not watch. We turn later in the paper to speculate on
the consequence of the reciprocity of such disclosures, but notice in this instance the
vivid detail of the speaker's preference: she can't bear it 'when they're kissin' and
sloppin''. She 'has to switch it off', which implies, like being 'the world's worst cook'
and hating snow, a long-standing personal state of affairs.

Designing information to sound significant in the circumstances
As we noted on first seeing our starting examples (above), for the utterance to work as a
disclosure, it must be seen to try for some level above routine or publicly knowable
details of the person's life. Standard social psychological practice would be to find this,
and code it, in the thematic content of the information (seeing in Example 1, perhaps
'my habits at home', and in Example 2, 'things I dislike'). Such codings, however, gloss
over the detail of the coded material, systematically avoiding telling what it is about
the description of 'home habits' or 'likes and dislikes' that actually sounds significant
(as revelatory, piquant, ironic and so on) in this context. For that we have to inspect the
details of the speaker's delivery in its local environment.

One of the most pervasive features we find in our collection is that the speaker casts
their descriptions in highly coloured terms, using what Pomerantz (1986) calls 'extreme
case formulations'. Consider again Examples 1 and 2. In both cases the speaker inflates
the newsworthiness or drama of the information by casting it in vivid terms: in 1, the
interviewer is the 'world's worst cook', in 2 Leslie 'can't bear' putting dogs in kennels,
and she 'hates' snow. All of these are extreme descriptions. In Extract 5 we again have a
'can't bear': formulation (the speaker 'can't bear' the television), and 'has to' turn it off.
This use of extreme case formulations enhances the speaker's commitment to the
importance or significance of the state of affairs they are describing (see the discussion
in Edwards, 2000, and Pomerantz, 1986, specifically on speakers' commitment). This
extremity seems to be a regular feature of utterances that work as disclosures (though
we note, as we said above, that these features are not all-or-nothing; they are present to a
greater or lesser degree in any case of self-disclosure). Here are some further examples,
though to save space we only report the descriptions of the events, leaving out the
context that originally made us see that these were self-disclosures (though note the use
of 'you see' and 'ac'shly' in Examples 7 and 8, respectively, and compare them with the
examples in the section above on 'newsworthiness').

Example 6 (SH/JRs1)

```
   1   T:   I:(.) *I like choc'late.* ((high, breathy 'stage whisper'))
   2        (.4)
→  3   T:   right, = I- I'm an [absolute choc'late fan = .
   4   C:                      [°yh°
```

Example 7 (JP/Ronnie 28022000)

```
   1   C:   °righ-° () you see b- (.) before when I worked in (.3) ((clears
→  2        throat)) say Germany, (1.3) I- I worked > an < incredibly long
   3        day
```

Example 8 (JP/Ronnie 28022000)

```
   1   T:   > ↑ cz ahm ↑ ac'shly < doing the same my ↑ self really, (.3)
→  2        I'm doing (>all this- s- stov- < ) ↑ studying and the ↑ reading
   3        I'm doing, (.).h it's a kind of latency pe:riod, (.3) °it's all
→  4        very ↑ valuable° (.8) I'm just building up = I'm not actually
   5        making money but I'm building up my knowledge
   6        ↓ base::. (.) and I'm building up conn ↑ ections in the world
   7        I want to go into °an° (°w' ↑ like to go°°into°°) (   ) (.) I'm
→  8        ↑ thoroughly enjoying doing ↑ that.
```

Not only do those examples show the use of extreme case formulations, 'an absolute chocolate fan', an 'incredibly long day', 'thoroughly enjoying', they also suggest another way that the speaker can ratchet up the significance of the event she or he describes. The descriptions all work (to a greater or lesser degree) to establish the events or feelings described as telling of information about the person as a personality. We saw in Example 1 that the speaker insisted on the long-standing nature of her desire to cook ('I've always wanted. . .'), and in Example 2 that the speaker reported established traits (she can't bear putting dogs in kennels, she hates snow) rather than momentary whims. In the examples above, we see the speaker (in Example 6) reveal herself as being an absolute fan (implying a constant aspect of her personality), or doing things (in Example 8) that change her as a person (building up her knowledge and connections in the world).

To formulate your experiences in extreme terms does not, of course, turn anything into a self-disclosure; it must go along with the other features in combination. Let us turn to the third of the features that we have identified in our sample.

Designing information as volunteered

The third and last feature of the self-disclosures we want to explore is their design as being volunteered, This feature of self-disclosure, perhaps still more obviously than the ones above, relies on the sequential location of the speaker's utterance: the speaker designs what they say as somehow over and above what would be expected given the run of talk so far. This overlaps with the design of the talk as revelatory, but takes its colour from the *conditional relevance* (Schegloff, 1968/1990) of the speaker's utterance in its immediate local context. That is to say, the speaker seems to enhance the hearing of what they say as a disclosure if they manage to make it sound a bonus not strictly required by what the previous speaker makes relevant. This is perhaps one of the prime reasons why we hear what happens in the confessional not as a self-disclosure but

as an expectable take-up of the opportunity to confess, or in the courtroom as a take-up of the obligation to admit.

Consider again Examples 1 and 2. In both cases the speaker offered more than what their turn required. In the case of Example 2, the speaker offered two personal pieces of information (designed as vivid and significant, as we have seen) where none was specifically required; she could, as we noted before, merely have given a generalized reason for staying at home while the family went off skiing. In Example 1, the speaker launches a new topic in the space ostensibly available to the other speaker, from whom a reply is pending. In both cases then, the talk is volunteered.

Consider these two further examples, in which 'actually' (Example 9) and 'matter've fact' (Example 10) help in the display of the speaker's turn as supernumerary:

Example 9 (JP/Ronnie 280200)

```
  1   C:   °(c-) I wanna do it now.°
  2        (.6)
  3   C:   eh heh HEH HUH huh hh = z sort've [(   )
  4   T:                                     [w'll I know
  5        the feeling, (.) ↑ahh-hah [hh (.)] ↑yes I ↑do know that
  6   C:                            [°yer:°]
  7   T:   feeling very well, (.) yes, (.3) ↑er-↑ but- but there are
  8        times in your life when you're- °y'know you think°
  9        you're ↑moving forward, (.3) and you may not be
 10        getting everything you want, = but you = er laying
 11        >↑uhl- < = the foundations.
 12        (.)
→13   T:   >↑cz ahm ↑ac'shly < doing the same my ↑self really, (.3)
 14        I'm doing ( > all this- s- stov- < ) ↑studying and the ↑reading
 15        I'm doing, (.).h it's a kind of latency pe:riod, (.3) °it's all
 16        very ↑valuable° (.8) I'm just building up = I'm not actually
 17        making money but I'm building up my knowledge
 18        ↓base∷. (.) and I'm building up conn↑ections in the world
 19        I want to go into °an° (°w'↑like to go°°into°°) (   ) (.) I'm
 20        ↑thoroughly enjoying doing ↑that.
```

The client has been talking about his desire to achieve things immediately. When T offers an assessment (line 4) it is in the form of a personal recognition ('w'll I know the feeling'). This is followed by a generalized and axiomatic formulation (lines 7-11). At the point where C might take the turn (line 13) the therapist's ' >↑cz ahm↑ac'shly < doing the same my↑self really' does a number of things at once. It preserves her turn in a 'rush-through' (Schegloff 1982; for more recent systematic work on what rush-throughs accomplish, see Local & Walker, 2002), and introduces the material to be conjunctive (with 'cos'). What is of most interest to us, though, is that the speaker uses a corrective ('actually' which specifically marks what is to come as at least inconsistent with previous information (see Clift, 2001). Turn-extensions like this are hearably an 'extra' continuation (Schegloff, 1996): not specifically mandated by the shape of the speaker's own turn. Colloquially, we could say that the therapist did not have to say anything at all about her 'studying and reading'. It comes across

as a volunteered disclosure. In Example 10, the same is achieved with the aid of 'matter've fact'.

Example 10 (Holt U/88 2-2)

```
  I   Les:   .hmhhhhh .p.tkl s:So we were not sorry t' khhh to uh:
  2          leave it,h
  3          (0.4)
  4   Les:   .h[hhhhh
  5   Kev:     [No I: u-I thin:k uhm (0.3) I'm:
  6          (.)
  7   Les:   .hh[hhhhh
  8   Kev:       [you know not over sorry the(.)t uh I don't go back
  9          there very often these days =
 10   Les:   = No:.hhh No[:.h
→ 11   Kev:                 [Matter'v fact I haven't been in Maidstone
 12          f'r a long time.
 13   Les:   No[:,h
 14   Kev:     [we:lls maybe but uh.p.hhhh (0.4) well that's 't
 15          least a year now?
 16   Les:   Ye :: s:. Ye:s.hh heuh. .p.tch.hhhh I jus' thought I'd
 17   Les:   give you a ring en see how Janet w'ss: is she uhm :: ,h
 18          alright now th-the tablets worked'n so on,h
```

Les has expressed dislike of a place (Maidstone) leaving open a space where what is expectable is a second assessment (Pomerantz, 1984). Kev provides one at line 8 using the same locution as Leslie, he's 'not sorry' (indeed not 'over sorry') that he does not go back there. This would have done; but he adds extra in Line 11, indeed overlapping Leslie's confirmatory ratification of his second assessment. 'Matter've fact', he says in a hearable elaboration (with a hint of correction, especially in its placement in overlap with Leslie) he has not been there for a 'long time'.

Contrast case: An example of personal information that is not hearable as a self-disclosure

It is important that we revisit our starting point, and think again about our claim that self-disclosure is an action that the speaker controls. We say that the speaker has to bring it off as a self-disclosure. The reader might reasonably say that the authors are obliged to show us, then, some reasonably similar piece of talk which seems to be about personal information, but which we (the sceptical reader) will agree is not a self-disclosure, and for just the reasons the authors claim, it is not designed as newsworthy, it is not designed as volunteered, and it is not presented in dramatic or vivid terms.

That is a fair point. We saw such an example briefly at the beginning of the paper (Example 3, 'I'm a relief teacher'), but that was before the detailed analysis of what we claim to be features that make something a self-disclosure. So here is a further and more closely-worked example. Leslie has rung Cou to remind him that he has not billed her for a job he had done for her in the garden. At a certain point we hear Cou say that he has 'had a bad fall'. It is describable as a 'piece of personal information'. It would fit at least the two definitions of self-disclosure in the psychological literature which we mentioned in the Introduction: that it must contain personal information, verbally communicated to a

target person, and that it deliberately reveal significant information not normally known to others. But no one would immediately hear it as a self-disclosure. The reader is invited to read the extract below with that in mind; the candidate 'disclosure' is arrowed.

Example 11 (Holt 2.07)

```
   1  Les:   [.hh[Yes cz you were in hospital[I think
   2  Cou:                              [Well that's
   3         right everything is i:t's such a long time ago it's very
   4         good'v you to remahh(h)i(h)nd me. .hh =
   5  Les:   = We:l[I
→  6  Cou:          [I I uh (.) thet's right I, (0.2) had a bad fa:ll.
   7  Les:   Didju::?
   8  Cou:   Ye:s[I
   9  Les:       [What didju do:.
  10  Cou:   Oh I: feh- I: you know I specialize in climbing wo:rk
```

What do we make of what Cou says in line 6? Our claim is that it would not normally be heard as a self-disclosure. The only point of correspondence with a disclosure is that the event he relates is indeed obviously a matter of his personal experience – it was he who had the fall. But at each other point the design of the talk turns away from disclosure.

As regards significance or newsworthiness, consider the environment that Leslie sets up for Cou's description. Leslie confirms some previous material (not shown) and suggests tentatively, '*you* were in *hos*pital I think'. Rather than suggest, she could have asked straight out 'where were you?', or 'what happened?', and so on, allowing Cou to tell the news. Conversely, she could have stated what she knew straightforwardly: 'you were in hospital, weren't you' (without the 'I think'), or 'you were hospitalized' or 'you had an accident', and so on, all of which would be strong descriptions of Cou's circumstances. The 'I think' is significant. It is, to our ears, a euphemism of the sort described by Bergmann (1992). That is, it hints strongly that Leslie knows that something more problematic has happened, but leaves it to Cou to explain – it is his story after all, for Leslie, it is only a 'B-event' in Labov's terms, something she has less right to know and tell than he does. She thinks it, but he must know it, and he is invited to explain it. So that is one feature that is designed out; whatever he says will not come across as volunteered or over and above what is expected. She has made him accountable for providing more information, and he is going to comply. When Cou does deliver the description of his state of affairs, we see another missing feature: he does not render it dramatically: 'I, (0.2) *h*ad a bad fa:ll.'. This is not an extreme, vivid description (compared with the extreme case formulations we saw in other cases: 'absolute fan', 'worst cook in the world', and so on). In the context that he ended up in hospital (a frame provided by Leslie, not he himself), then 'I, (0.2) had a bad fa:ll' comes across as something of a deprecation, something that makes less of a drama of what Leslie is alluding to.

Again it is worth repeating our logic: we hear a piece of talk and get a preliminary sense of it. Here is one which does not sound like a self-disclosure, though it seems to be someone telling personal information. We did the same small experiment earlier in the article, when we took the example of someone mentioning, but not disclosing, their job (the 'relief teacher' example). Now we have specific features to look for, and indeed, we see that they are absent. Our claim is that their absence (not designed as volunteered or significant) is what makes it pass as something other than a self-disclosure.

Discussion

We set out in this article to rectify what we argued was a significant fault in psychology's treatment of self-disclosure. We said that the experimental psychological research culture – where most empirical work on self-disclosure has taken place – systematically avoids what we considered to be the most interesting thing about disclosure: how the speaker brings it off *as* a disclosure.

Approaching real exchanges of talk with that in mind, we quickly saw that it was impossible to define a disclosure merely by identifying the topic being talked about – a significant corrective to the standard psychological practice of generating data on disclosure by asking respondents to rate items printed on a checklist, or by using topic-based category systems. We made the point that even such a topic as 'my job' (a standard item) would be in some contexts nothing like a disclosure, and we gave an example of someone saying 'I'm a relief teacher' in a context which made it clear that it was not to be understood as a disclosure, but something quite different (the speaker was making arrangements which hinged on her not being available at a certain time; see Example 3).

More positively, our search of real talk yielded a number of features of speakers' talk that seemed to be significant in making it work as a disclosure. All of them are indexical, that is to say, meaningful only in the circumstances of their production. We put these under three headings: the design of the talk as a report of personal information, as significant, and as over and above the expectations of the moment. No doubt there are other features of self-disclosure as a performed and situated social action, but these seemed to be prominent in our samples. In looking more closely at how they worked, we found a mixture of internal design features (like the use of extreme case formulations to bolster the newsworthiness and significance of the information) and external, sequentially sensitive locations (such as the placement of the utterance in a position where it was hearably relevant as a reciprocation of the previous speaker's personal information).

It is the work of a further project to track the kind of consequences that the speaker achieves by their insertion of a disclosure at just the moment they choose.[8] One example to emerge from our data is a close relative of the psychological notion of reciprocation: a fair number (but by no means a majority) of the disclosures in our set were hearable as 'second stories' (for Sacks's account of stories, see especially Sacks, 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 222-268). That is, they seemed designed to show the speaker's understanding of the point or gist of the previous speaker's story, and to contribute a corresponding account which maintained (or enhanced) the intersubjective trajectory of the talk.

This squares perfectly well with Jourard's (1964/1971) observation that a self-disclosure by one person regarding their problems or experience often leads to a self-disclosure by another person. In fact reciprocity has been one of the most popular topics for self-disclosure research in social psychology, where many competing theories have been advanced since the 1960s (e.g. attraction-trust, social exchange, and modelling;

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[8] *And it would be the work of a very different project to see if the performance of disclosures that led to these consequences were somehow a matter of individual differences, or any other traditional psychological paradigm which correlates counts of disclosures with some allegedly variable personal quality or status. That kind of work faces the objection that the whole tenor of the analysis has been to find disclosures in the joint work of two people, one setting up the circumstances in which what is to come might be heard as a disclosure (and not a confession and so on) and the other, who delivers an utterance that 'delivers the goods'. There is a useful summary of the counting issue in Schegloff (1993).*

see e.g. Davis & Skinner, 1974; Ludwig, Franco, & Malloy, 1986; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). But none of them have based their accounts on an investigation of the turn-by-turn deployment of talk. Had they done so they would have had much more telling detail to work with. In our therapy data, for example, second self-disclosures by the therapist may be carrying out some kind of operation on prior utterances, for example, as a sophisticated form of (re)alignment, a subtle way to do embedded correction, a form of other-clarification, or a way to locate/realign the boundaries of normality. Reciprocating disclosures are good means for providing a candidate understanding, stronger than utterances like, 'I understand', 'I know what you mean', or simply repeating, formulating, or reformulating what the first has said, which only presents a claim to understanding. It is important for therapists to be able to project a sense for their clients that 'my mind is with you': and that the client is not alone or particularly crazy. A disclosure produced in the second position to a first, delivered precisely on its completion, might do this very effectively, and be part of the resources of ordinary language that therapists may bring into institutional use.

That kind of speculation must be left for fuller consideration elsewhere. We have done enough here; if we have shown to the reader's satisfaction that self-disclosure is not a simply-categorizable single piece of verbal behaviour, but a social action which must be brought off in the circumstances of a given interaction. Once one accepts such a view of self-disclosure, then the way is properly open to the kinds of psychological investigation that were foreseen by Jourard at the start of his enterprise.

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Transcription symbols (derived from Gail Jefferson; see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984 ix–xvi)

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(.3), (2.6)	Examples of timed pauses
word [word 　　　[word	Square brackets aligned across adjacent lines denote the start of overlapping talk.
.hh, hh	In-breath (note the preceding fullstop) and out-breath respectively.
wo(h)rd	(h) shows that the word has 'laughter' bubbling within it
wor-	A dash shows a sharp cut-off
wo:rd	Colons show that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound.
(words)	A guess at what might have been said if unclear
( )	Very unclear talk.
word = = word	The equals sign shows that there is no discernible pause between two speakers' turns or, if put between two sounds within a single speaker's turn, shows that they run together word,WORD
Underlined sounds are louder, capitals louder still	
°word°	Material between 'degree signs' is quiet
> word word <	

< word word >	Inwards arrows show faster speech, outward slower
↑ word, ↓ word	Upward arrow shows upward intonation, downward arrows shows downward intonation
((*smile voice*))	Attempt at representing something hard, or impossible, to transcribe phonetically