Soliciting Accounts With Why-Interrogatives in Conversation

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This article investigates the action of directly soliciting accounts with why-interrogatives (e.g., Why did you do that?). Using conversation analysis, this article argues that why-interrogatives are Janus-faced. On one hand, as types of questions, they index an epistemic gap between questioners and answerers and thus the possibility that answerers are able to provide accounts that questioners did not previously know about. On the other hand, why-interrogatives claim some epistemic access to the accountable event and communicate a stance that it does not accord with common sense and thus is inappropriate or unwarranted. Why-formatted interrogatives display a challenging stance toward the accountable event and responsible agent(s) and are, thus, frequently coimplicated in complaining, criticizing, and blaming.

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In conversation, the action of directly asking someone to account for some event frequently involves the simultaneous, and sometimes tense, management of sense-making (Mills, 1940) and social/moral order (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1971; Scott & Lyman, 1968). This article is a conversation-analytic examination of direct account solicitations implemented by why-interrogatives (e.g., Why did you do that?). We argue that account solicitations indicate that the event to be accounted for does not accord with common sense and is, thus, possibly inappropriate or unwarranted. Accordingly, why-interrogatives communicate a challenging stance toward responsible agent(s) and are frequently coimplicated in additional, negatively valenced actions, such as complaining, criticizing, and blaming. We show that account solicitations play a role in negotiating issues of interactional (dis)alignment and interpersonal (dis)affiliation. In the introduction, we situate this study by reference to prior research on accounts and accountability in social interaction.

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Two different foci of research on accounts

There are at least two distinct senses of what it means for people to “account,” which have been reflected in two distinct foci of research. The more general sense was developed by Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1992), who were interested in how people “understand” various types of social activity, and who considered the task of producing an activity so as to be understandable (i.e., detectable, reportable, and analyzable) as one of making it “accountable” (for an excellent review, see Buttny, 1993). This conception of an “account” is reflected in conversation-analysis’ focus on explicating the practices and structures of interaction that constitute social actions and activities (for a review, see Heritage, 1984b) and in social psychology’s focus on how people use stories, narratives, and explanations to organize views of themselves, others, and their social worlds (e.g., views about relationship development and dissolution, stressful life events, and morality; see Shotter, 1984). A more narrow and traditional sense of an “account” (which is nonetheless commensurate with the more general sense) was developed by Scott and Lyman (1968), and it refers to the provision of an excuse or justification for a socially undesirable or problematic event. In this sense, “accounts” are typically distinguished from more neutral “explanations,” which are “statements about events where untoward action is not at issue” (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 47). We argue that even apparently “neutral” why-interrogatives communicate a stance that an event is socially “problematic” and thus are produced and understood as soliciting a Scott-and-Lyman-type of “account” (i.e., for a problematic event). In the remainder of this article, unless stated otherwise, we use the term “account” generally, that is, as a covering term for defenses, excuses, justifications, explanations, and so on.

Theoretical background

A theoretical understanding of why-interrogatives as direct account solicitations is provided by the writings of Heritage (1984b) on questioning and social epistemics and Schutz (1962) and Garfinkel (1967) on intersubjectivity. On one hand, Heritage (2007) argued that

the act of questioning, however it is managed, invokes a claim that the questioner lacks certain information (or lacks certainty about it)—we can think of this as the “lack of knowledge” (or K−) position, and that the addressee has this information—we can think of this as the knowledgeable (or K+) position (p. 2).

As types of questions, why-interrogatives index an epistemic gap (K−/K+) between questioners and answerers and thus the possibility that answerers are able to provide answers that questioners did not previously know about, which could render the accountable event as, after all, according with common sense and being socially nonproblematic.
On the other hand, Heritage (2007) noted that, depending on the type and format of interrogatives, questions can embody different grades of members’ relative access to, and rights over, knowledge. Along these lines, Schutz (1962) argued that intersubjectivity—that is, the question of how people can share, and communicate about, common experiences, including “how people grasp the subjective meanings of each others’ actions” (Heritage, 1984b, p. 57)—is possible not because people come to have identical experiences (which Schutz, 1962, argued is impossible) but rather because, in the absence of counterevidence, people assume, and act as if, their experiences are identical-for-all-practical-purposes. Schutz argued that this idealization process (which he termed the “general thesis of reciprocal perspectives”) is made possible because people share stocks of typified knowledge, including typical actions performed under typical circumstances. Schutz’s ideas were advanced by Garfinkel (1967), who demonstrated that the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives is not merely a cognitive task but a socially accountable matter. In a series of conversational breaching experiments—where, for example, experimenter asked people to clarify the meaning of “perfectly understandable” utterances, such as I had a flat tire . . . What do you mean?—Garfinkel found that people typically “trust” each other to use the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives (e.g., to understand what it typically means to “have a flat tire”) and that violations of such trust (e.g., by asking What do you mean?) can incur moral outrage and social sanctions. Schutz’s socially shared stock of typified knowledge includes motives and other types of accounts for behavior (Mills, 1940).

Thus, although why-interrogatives are interrogatives, they have the capacity to claim some measure of access to, and rights over, the knowledge being inquired about. That is, at least when the speaker of a why-interrogative has (and is recognized as having) an epistemic capacity to “competently” assess the accountable event, their why-interrogative embodies a type of suspension of Garfinkel’s (1967) notion of “trust” by claiming that they cannot make “typical” sense of the causes of, or motives for, the event (Sacks, 1992). Along these lines, scholars have considered direct account solicitations (or reproaches) to be valuative inquiries (Scott & Lyman, 1968) and have considered accounts to be attempts to neutralize, remedy, or transform events that are “typically” unjustified, inappropriate, offensive, and so on (Goffman, 1971; Schönbach, 1990; Scott & Lyman, 1968). We build on this line of investigation by examining how issues of social epistemics—that is, participants’ relative access to and rights to know about events and to their relative ability to assess them—are negotiated during episodes of social interaction whereby accounts are solicited and provided.

Prior research on accounts and their direct solicitation
There is a vast literature on types of accounts (McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983; McLaughlin, Cody, & Rosenstein, 1983; Scott & Lyman, 1968), their theoretical functions (Schönbach, 1990; Weiner, 1986), and their relative credibility and “success” (e.g., Dunn & Cody, 2000). In contrast, there is far less research on actions that are
Account Solicitations designed to solicit accounts (i.e., actions that make accounts conditionally relevant; Schegloff, 2007). The bulk of the research on account solicitations has focused on “severe reproaches” that, by virtue of their turn design, clearly communicate the relevance of a “failure event” and/or project-specific types of accounts. For instance, research has examined reproaches that project concessions, excuses, justifications, and refusals (e.g., “Why haven’t you been filling these out with the truth?”—McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983) as well as direct rebukes (McLaughlin, Cody, & Rosenstein, 1983). There is very little research on seemingly more “neutral” account solicitations, where a person “only ask(s) for an explanation” (Cody & Braaten, 1992, p. 213), such as Why’d you go into marketing? (McLaughlin, Cody, & Rosenstein, 1983). Although prior research tacitly acknowledges that why-interrogatives tend to solicit accounts (McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983; McLaughlin, Cody, & Rosenstein, 1983; Schönbach & Kleibaumhuter, 1990; Weiner, 1992), we know little about how people understand why-interrogatives as a type of social action in terms of the types of responses that why-interrogatives make relevant.

Conversation-analytic research examining why-interrogatives has focused on those that serve as vehicles for actions other than soliciting explanations, excuses, and justifications. For example, Koshik (2005) argued that, under certain conditions—such as when wh-questions (including why- and how come-) are asked in environments of ongoing complaining and disagreement and are asked from a position of epistemic strength (i.e., about something that the questioner has more rights to know about)—why-interrogatives can function as “reverse-polarity questions” that are treated as assertions that accomplish challenging/complaining rather than questioning (e.g., What difference does it make? meaning It makes no difference). According to Koshik, when deployed as reverse-polarity questions, why-formatted challenges/complaints convey speakers’ stances that “no adequate account” for the targeted problematic action is available (Koshik, 2005, p. 51). Yoon (2007) found similar results in her study of complaining in Korean. In some languages, such as German (Egbert & Vöge, 2008) and Italian (Sterponi, 2005), there are different lexical forms for why and thus for why-interrogatives (e.g., weiso and warum in German and perché and come mai in Italian). According to both Egbert and Vöge, and Sterponi, one of the two lexical forms is primarily reserved for soliciting explanations (weiso and perché, respectively), whereas the other is reserved for various negatively valenced, morally imbued actions, such as complaining and reproaching.

In summary, prior research on direct account solicitations has implied, if not overtly argued, that some why-interrogatives are completely “neutral” (i.e., doing “simply questioning” or “mere explanation seeking,” with no critical/challenging undertones), whereas others are completely “nonneutral” (i.e., are not doing questioning at all, but rather criticizing, challenging, etc.). This article provides a less binary interpretation. Using conversation analysis, we argue that all account solicitations implemented via why-interrogatives are Janus-faced, at least when their speakers have (and are recognized as having) the epistemic capacity to competently assess the
accountable event. On one hand, as types of questions, why-interrogatives claim a moderated (K−/K+) position that indicates that an unknown or unanticipated “satisfactory” answer (e.g., an explanation) might be available (Heritage, 2007). On the other hand, as actions, why-interrogatives simultaneously communicate a stance that the accountable event does not accord with common sense, and thus is possibly inappropriate or unwarranted (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1992). As such, why-interrogatives communicate a challenging stance toward both the accountable event and the agent(s) responsible for its production. For this reason, why-interrogatives frequently adumbrate additional actions, such as complaining, criticizing, and blaming. However, and importantly, because addressed speakers are not always responsible for the accountable event, and because it can be normative to challenge certain events (e.g., others’ self-deprecatory claims; Pomerantz, 1984), the challenging stance taken up by why-interrogatives can either affiliate/align or disaffiliate/disalign with recipients (on alignment vs. affiliation, see Stivers, 2008).

Data and method

The data are drawn from 360 telephone recordings and 29 video recordings of naturally occurring English interactions among friends and family members. All data were transcribed and analyzed using conversation analysis (for review, see Heritage, 1984b). In line with this methodology, we made a collection of 332 instances of the action of directly soliciting an account, which were implemented through a variety of turn formats, including why, how come, what . . . for, and so on. We focus on why-formats because they represent the vast majority of the collection and because we wanted to compare our results to extant research, which is almost exclusively on why-formats (e.g., Koshik, 2005). This study does not analyze why-formatted turns that do not involve the action of soliciting an account. For example, why-formatted turns can also implement suggestions, offers, and invitations (e.g., Why don’t you come over?) or “go-aheads” to actions that initiate preliminary sequences, such as pretellings (e.g., Max got in trouble today → Why?; re. presequences, see Schegloff, 2007). Furthermore, for reasons dealing with “adequate proof,” this study analyzes only positively formatted why-interrogatives (e.g., Why did you say hello?), because negative formatting (e.g., Why didn’t you say hello?) can be a practice for formulating someone or something as a failure, which can independently accomplish complaining and criticizing (Schegloff, 1988). The cases analyzed herein are particularly clear examples of the phenomenon and are also representative of the cases in the larger collection.

Analysis

This article argues that, as direct account solicitations, why-interrogatives communicate a stance that the accountable event does not accord with common sense and thus is possibly inappropriate or unwarranted. As such, why-interrogatives communicate
a challenging stance toward the event and the agent(s) responsible for its production and are frequently coimplicated in additional actions, such as complaining, criticizing, and blaming. We support this argument using conversation analysis, which is an emic (vs. etic) and inductive methodology that prioritizes a particular type of empirical evidence involving participants’ (vs. analysts’) understandings of social phenomena. At issue is interactants’ visible conduct (e.g., their verbal, vocal, or nonvocal conduct) and how it “displays their orientation” to, or their understanding of, the why-formatted account solicitation as an action. In the following sections, we support our argument by first examining evidence for recipients’ orientations by analyzing how they respond to account solicitations and then present evidence for account solicitors’ orientations by examining how they deal with recipients’ answers and how they format why-interrogative turns.

Although space limitations prevent a detailed description of how and where direct account solicitations emerge in interaction (this is the subject of Robinson & Bolden, 2010), some observations about their positioning can be made here. Our analysis will demonstrate that why-interrogatives communicate a challenging/critical stance toward the appropriateness or warrantability of some event. Because of this, why-interrogatives are commonly vehicles for disaligning with (e.g., rejecting or disagreeing with) prior actions and sometimes additionally disaffiliating with their speakers (e.g., if they are ‘responsible’ for the accountable event). As such, at least when why-interrogatives are disaffiliative, they are commonly “dispreferred” initiating actions (Schegloff, 2007). Consistent with findings about disaligning/disaffiliatory initiating actions (Monzoni, 2008), why-interrogatives are commonly delayed relative to the interactional emergence of the events that they target and are commonly positioned in environments of nonalignment (e.g., where aligning responses are relevantly missing) and/or disalignment (e.g., where disagreement has already been expressed) (Robinson & Bolden, 2010). In summary, although the interactional positioning of why-interrogatives contributes to the challenging stance that they convey, that same challenging stance contributes to their interactional positioning.

Responses to account solicitations as evidence for recipients’ orientations

Next-turn position is a primary place where evidence of participants’ understandings of prior actions can be found (Heritage, 1984b). Because account solicitations make accounting conditionally relevant (Schegloff, 2007), recipients typically offer accounts in their responsive turns. These accounts routinely display recipients’ (more or less overt) orientations to the challenging stance communicated by account solicitations. For example, respondents may overtly align with the challenging stance (Excerpt 1) or reject its appropriateness and justify the reasonableness of the accountable event (Excerpts 2–4).

Excerpt 1 is drawn from a call in which Chris is telling Natalie about a highly publicized case of infanticide. The accountable event is the story-protagonist’s (a mother’s) homicidal behavior. (For an explanation of the transcription symbols, see, e.g., Schegloff, 2007.)
Excerpt 1 (CH 4247)

01 CHR: .hh An’ she made an app-:al .h over two: (. ) weeks. like
about ten days or two wee:ks, (. ) .hhh where she was
03 saying (. ) you know please bring my babies ba:ck an’ all
of this kin’=of stuff=an’ peop- thuh whole nation was just
05 sho:cked .hhh (well/what) they were even m:ore shocked when
she f i:nally admitted that she had duh .hhh pu:shed her car
into thuh lake with them strapped into their car seats. an’
dro:wned th’m. (1.0)
08 CHR: They fo[und her-]
11 CHR: =.hh Oh::. j ust (. ) unbeli- w↓e:ll thuh- thuh- thee only
reason th’t= (. ) w’d- you know lo:gi:cal reason we can think
is thuh fact that she was eh- h she was in (. ) in a div:orc:e
14 .hhh with ‘er: fir:st husband a:nd duh: .hhh an’ she was uh:m
15 .tch uh haying an’ affair with another gu: y that she wan’ed
tuh marry .h but he ’ad written ’er a letter thuh day that
16 she .hh h- d↓id this, (. ) saying I do not want children.
17
Natalie reacts to Chris’ “shocking” news (lines 5–7) with an enactment of incredulity by requesting an account of the mother’s negligent/homicidal behavior: “Why did she do th↑a↓:t” (line 10; note the exaggerated falling/rising intonation contour marked by the upward and downward arrows). Here, it is the third party (i.e., the mother, the story’s protagonist), not Chris (the storyteller and recipient of the why-interrogative), who is responsible for the accountable event. We argue that Natalie’s account solicitation challenges the sensibility (e.g., appropriateness) of the mother’s behavior, holds her accountable for this behavior, and thereby aligns with Chris’s stance toward the infanticide as being “shocking” and affiliates with Chris (Stivers, 2008). Evidence for this is found in Chris’s response. Chris initially responds with an oh-prefaced (Heritage, 2002) negative assessment: “Oh:: just (. ) unbeli-” (line 11; Chris cuts off the word “unbelievable”). Here, Chris treats, and agrees with, Natalie’s account solicitation as a critical assessment of the mother’s homicidal behavior (Pomerantz, 1984); this indicates that Chris orients to the account solicitation as asserting that infanticide runs against a (commonly shared) normative expectation that a mother would not murder her children. Chris abandons this unit (symbolized in the transcript by the hyphen) and continues his response with an explanation of the mother’s possible motives (lines 11–17). By framing his explanation as “thee only reason” (lines 11–12), and by further inserting the modifier “lo:gi:cal” (line 12; i.e., “thee only reason ... you know lo:gi:cal reason”), Chris builds an extreme-case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) that treats Natalie’s account solicitation as a critique of the mother and her actions. Thus, Chris’s response shows, on one hand, his orientation to the relevance of an account and, on the other hand, his understanding that Natalie’s account solicitation indexed her challenging stance toward the reported events and its producer. By aligning with Natalie’s critical stance, Chris embraces it as a shared one (note his use of “we” at line 12, which
highlights the shared nature of the norms by reference to which her judgment is made).

In Excerpts 2–5, responses to why-interrogatives display recipients’ resistance to the challenging stance conveyed by the interrogatives. In Excerpt 2, the why-interrogative (line 15) is a vehicle for rejecting praise. As background, Carla is sheltering and providing for the children of another couple, who have been out of town for an extended period of time.

Excerpt 2 (CF 4919)

01 RIT: I feel bad for Ali an’ Debbie.
02 (.)
03 CAR: I feel terrible for them.
04 (0.8)
05 RIT: Well you’re helping them out a lot=I’m doin’ nothing.
06 (0.2)
07 CAR: <Wha:t am I> doing. I [didn’t (teh)–]
08 RIT: [↑You have ↓] their gi:rls by
09 [them].:
10 CAR: [.hh] Th]a:t’s true. But they think they’re paying me=I’m not gunna (.)
11 RIT: Tha’s not thuh point even if they pay you Carla it’s a tremendous he:lp.
12 (1.2)
13 --> CAR: Why is it a tremendous ↑he:↓[lp. ]
14 RIT: [It ↑i↓]s↓. bec↑au↓:se. you’re t(h)aking o:ver two ki:ds. fer [them.]
15 16 17 18 19 20
21 CAR: Mm ‘Eah.
22 (1.8)

At line 5, Rita praises Carla for assisting the out-of-town couple: “you’re helping them out a lot,” which Carla resists (at line 7 and lines 10–11). Ultimately, Rita reasserts and upgrades her praise: “it’s a tremendous he:lp” (lines 12–13). In response, Carla pauses for 1.2 seconds (line 14), which projects her continued disagreement, and then requests an account for Rita’s praise-based assessment: “Why is it a tremendous ↑he:↓[lp]” (line 15). We argue that Carla’s why-interrogative communicates her challenging stance toward Rita’s praise by treating it as not being self-evident (i.e., not according with common sense). Rita initially responds with “It ↑is↓” (line 16), which is stressed both through increased volume and pitch (symbolized by underlining and up/down arrows, respectively), and which arduously defends her praise by reasserting it (via a “modified repeat” of her prior claim, cf. Stivers, 2005). Rita’s response treats Carla’s account solicitation as actively challenging that her (i.e., Carla’s) child assistance constitutes “tremendous help.” Rita goes on to provide “bec↑au↓:se” (line 16) as a prosodically complete unit (symbolized in the transcript by the period). Here, Rita claims, for the moment, that her praise is commonsensical and self-evident and that an account is unnecessary,
which again treats Carla’s why-interrogative as being challenging. Ultimately, Rita does provide an account, “you’re t(h)aking o:ver two ki:ds. fer them” (lines 16–17), which treats Carla’s why-interrogative as soliciting an account. In summary, Rita’s multiunit response (at lines 16–17) treats Carla’s why-interrogative as not simply requesting an account but also as challenging the accountable event (i.e., Rita’s praise).

Excerpt 3 is drawn from a phone call between two housemates, Ron and Catherine (who is out of town). As context, in Catherine’s absence, Ron has had to deal with a flea infestation at their home. At lines 1–2, Ron announces bad news: Catherine’s clothes were intentionally left exposed to a “flea bomb” (a chemical spray).

Excerpt 3 (CH 4927)

01 RON: We did o:pen (.) thuh ba:g though with all thuh=hhhhhh- uh- 02 well with all your clo:thes. 03 (0.4)
04 CAT: [.hh]
05 RON: [.hh]hh[h ]
06 CAT: [Wh]at. nah- eh nah- you didn’t bo:mb (1.0) thuh 07 clo:thes=
08 RON: ="u- u- " We di:d. 09 --> CAT: Why::<.=
10 RON: =Because thuh r i:sk was too big that the:re <might be fleas> 11 in there. you know, an’ .hhhhhhhhhhhh- h- an’ after all 12 that-=I mean y-=you didn’t see it. (.) any of it. y’=know 13 an’ [just th]uh thought.
14 CAT: [Ye:ah. ]

Intentionally exposing somebody’s clothes to toxic chemicals is potentially accountable. Catherine shows her inability to ascribe typical motives to Ron’s behavior in the way that she deals with his announcement at lines 1–2. In lieu of responding to his announcement as bad news, per se (e.g., with an assessment), Catherine registers her disbelief by requesting (dis)confirmation of Ron’s actions: “you didn’t bo:mb (1.0) thuh clo:thes” (lines 6–7). This is formulated as a negative assertion and thus designed as a possible criticism of Ron’s actions (Schegloff, 1988). In the wake of Ron’s confirmation, “We did” (line 8), Catherine directly solicits an account for Ron’s actions with an emphatic “Why:” (line 9). Although Ron treats Catherine’s why-interrogative as soliciting an account, he orients to it as communicating Catherine’s stance toward his behavior as being inappropriate or unwarranted. After providing a “good reason” for his decision, “thuh r i:sk was too big that there <might be fleas> in there” (lines 10–11), Ron continues to defend his behavior by asserting that Catherine lacks sufficient access to competently judge the severity of the situation: “you didn’t see it. (.) any of it” (line 12; note especially that Ron upgrades his defense by repairing “it” to “any of it”). Catherine’s account solicitation leaves open the possibility that there could be a legitimate reason for Ron’s actions (given
his greater epistemic access to the situation), and it is this possibility that Ron exploits in his response. Observe that Catherine ultimately agrees with Ron’s defense, “Ye:ah” (line 14) and thus backs off of her challenge. (Note that Ron doggedly pursues Catherine’s agreement, with “you know” [line 11], “you didn’t see it” [line 12], the self-repair “any of it” [line 12], and “y’=know” [line 12].)

In the next example, an account solicitation is used to criticize a past action that is now being recollected. Excerpt 4 is drawn from a videotaped family dinner, including a mother, father, two adult sons (Tim and Jon), their grandmother, and Tim’s girlfriend. At lines 1–6, the dad (who is addressing Tim) is reminiscing about a time when the mom got pulled over for speeding and how it scared Tim and Jon, who were young children at the time.

Excerpt 4 (Easter Dinner)

01 DAD: And this Smokey thuh Bear guy sticks ‘is head
02 in thuh window ‘n says we’re lucky that we have
03 extradition otherwise he would’ve taken ‘er (t’/duh)
04 ja:il (0.2/ hh) and you two who were >little at thuh
05 time< started baw:1(in’), crying, ‘cause they were
06 gunna jail your mother,
07 (0.5)
08 TIM: Oh what thuh he:ck.
09 MOM: An’ I was going <sixty two: mi:les an’ hou:r.>
10 (.)
11 --» TIM: Why?: ((gazing at MOM))
12 (1.1)
13 DAD: W[e were keeping=up] with tra:ffic as (h)a m(h)atter=a=
14 MOM: [Wh:?:] ]
15 DAD: =fact. th they j’st (0.2) (d)–
16 JON: (Oh you: the{only) ( ]}
17 DAD: [They took us to a jus)tice=a=thuh peace hou:se...

When the mom announces “An’ I was going <sixty two: mi:les an’ hou:r.>” (line 9), she defends herself by precisely indicating (i.e., “sixty two:”) that she exceeded the legal speed limit (of 55 mph) by only 7 mph, which is an infraction that is typically considered acceptable both culturally and in terms of legal enforcement. At line 11, Tim gazes at his mom and requests an account for her driving at 62 mph: “Why?:” We argue that Tim’s account solicitation communicates his challenging stance toward the appropriateness of his mother’s speed. Tim treats a typically nonaccountable behavior as being accountable. In this case, it is a practice for being belligerent. The dad ultimately answers for the mom with a defensive justification of the mom’s speed as being “typical” or normal: “We were keeping=up with tra:ffic” (line 13). Dad explicitly marks the account as a piece of supportive evidence by appending “as (h)a m(h)atter=a fact” (lines 13/15). In doing so, the dad treats Tim’s why-interrogative as not only soliciting an account but also as challenging the justifiability of the accountable event (i.e., mom’s speed). Simultaneous with the dad’s account, the
mom initiates repair on Tim’s account solicitation with a final-rising-intoned repeat: “Why::?” (line 14). This type of repair initiator can be a practice for soliciting self-correction (Jefferson, 1987; Robinson & Kevoe-Feldman, 2010). The mom’s repair initiation treats Tim’s account solicitation as being inapposite because her speed (i.e., 62 mph) is typically nonaccountable.

To summarize, the excerpts above support the argument that why-formatted interrogatives that directly solicit accounts (in the general sense of “account”) are primarily understood as soliciting “accounts” in the sense of Scott and Lyman (1968). These why-interrogatives communicate a stance that the event to be explained is accountably inappropriate or unwarranted and hold accountable the agent responsible for its production. Our analysis of responses to account solicitations provides evidence that account givers orient to account solicitations as conveying a challenging stance. Specifically, account givers invoked common sense norms as grounds for defending themselves (or others) against the challenge (as in Excerpts 2 and 4) or as grounds for aligning with it (as in Excerpt 1). However, why-interrogatives are Janus-faced: As questions, they allow for the possibility that a “reasonable” explanation might be provided (Heritage, 2007). Thus, as in Excerpt 3, account givers may contest the solicitor’s rights to (negatively) judge the situation by claiming primary epistemic access to it and thereby defend themselves against the challenging implications of the account solicitation.

**Account solicitors’ orientations as evidence**

In the previous section, we examined how recipients understood why-interrogatives by examining how recipients responded. However, the challenging stance of why-interrogatives is an intersubjective phenomenon. In the following section, we examine how account solicitors understand why-interrogatives by examining: (a) how they “take up” recipients’ responses and (b) how they design their why-interrogative turns.

**Account solicitors’ uptake of provided accounts**

In the wake of recipients’ responsive accounts to why-interrogatives (e.g., explanations and justifications), account solicitors sometimes overtly challenge/criticize the account or the accountable event and sometimes overtly retract the challenging/critical stance originally communicated by the why-interrogative. In each case, the account solicitor displays (post hoc) an orientation to the why-interrogative as having originally communicated a challenging/critical stance.

*Rejecting accounts by challenging them.* Excerpt 5 is drawn from a call between two religiously observant Jewish women, Ziva and Leah. Leah just had a baby, to whom she gave the Hebrew name Rahel Hannah. At line 1, Ziva inquires into the name that Leah plans to use on a day-to-day basis, to which Leah answers with the English pronunciation of “Rachel” (line 4). After Ziva’s positive assessments of this name (i.e., That’s cute at lines 6 and 8), Leah expresses doubt/pessimism that it will continue to be used: “I hope it sticks” (line 9).
Leah’s assertion of her pessimistic opinion about the viability of her baby’s English name (“I hope it sticks,” line 9) makes agreement (or disagreement) conditionally relevant (Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2007). Instead of agreeing or disagreeing with Leah’s assertion, Ziva uses “Why:” (line 10) to solicit an account for Leah’s pessimistic opinion. Due (in part) to the preference for contiguity, account solicitations placed after sequence-initiating actions, such as this one, are hearable as projecting disalignment or disagreement (Schegloff, 2007). In other words, the sequential placement of Ziva’s why-interrogative contributes to its understanding as indexing a challenge. In response to Ziva’s why-interrogative, Leah accounts for her pessimistic statement by noting that Rachel is an English (vs. Hebrew) name and thus may not be adopted by their religious Jewish community: “I don’t know ‘cause it’s an English na(h)me” (line 13). Note that Leah’s “I don’t know” weakens her account by minimizing her epistemic rights to provide it and is some evidence that Leah orients to Ziva’s why-interrogative as communicating a challenging stance toward her (i.e., Leah’s) pessimistic opinion.

Our primary focus in this excerpt is the observation that, after Leah’s account, Ziva challenges its adequacy. Initially, Ziva solicits a defense of Leah’s account with stand-alone “So:” (line 14; Raymond, 2004), which characterizes Leah’s account as being insufficient. Interrupting Leah’s response (begun at line 15), Ziva then challenges the adequacy of Leah’s account with: “You’re thuh mother” (line 16). Ziva emphasizes “You’re” (symbolized in the transcript by the underlining), and uses the categorical descriptor “thuh mother,” to highlight Leah’s independent authority and ability to enforce the adoption of the English name, thereby invoking the presumably shared norm that mothers decide on their children’s names. (Leah subsequently agrees with and concedes to Ziva’s point: “Yeah that’s true” at line 17.)
Also note that Ziva’s challenge is accomplished via an appeal to what-is-presented-to-be a common sense norm. In summary, Ziva overtly challenges Leah’s account, which treats it as being insufficient and displays Ziva’s orientation to her why-interrogative as having communicated a challenging stance toward Leah’s pessimistic opinion.

In the next segment (Excerpt 6), a why-interrogative challenges the addressee’s immediately preceding assessment. Prior to this excerpt, Rob (who plays college basketball) asked Caitlin to find something in the local newspaper (which he has not read and does not currently have access to). As Caitlin retrieves the paper, she announces: “There was a uh:m (.). mtch a:rticle in thuh paper about you toda:y” (lines 1–2).

Excerpt 6 (CH 6100)

01 CAI: Hold on. lemme get my paper, >.h< There was a
02 uh:m (.). mtch a:rticle in thuh paper about you toda:y,
03 ROB: .mtch=.hhhhh _hhhh That’s not good,
04 --> CAI: Why::,
05 (1.0)
06 ROB: ’Cau:se.
07 (0.2)
08 CAI: #'Cause what.
09 ROB: .hhhh I’s not.=h
10 (2.2)
11 CAI: You don’ even know what it ↑sa:id↓.
12 ROB: We:ll, (0.3) .hhhh(.) I’m not there to def:end myself so hh hh
13 CAI: It was a ↑good↓ article,
14 ROB: Eh:=h
15 CAI: I’ll tell you in a second once I fi:nd what=you’re lookin’
16 for here.

At line 3, Rob negatively assesses the presence of the newspaper article and indirectly the article itself and its news about him. Rob’s negative assessment makes relevant a responding second assessment from Caitlin, especially given her claim to have seen (and presumably read) the article (lines 1–2; Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2007). Rather than doing so, Caitlin solicits an account for Rob’s negative assessment (“Why::” at line 4), which projects her disagreement with it. Rob twice avoids giving an account. First, Rob’s ‘’Cau:se’’ (line 6) merely asserts the presence of a self-evident account and thereby claims that no account is necessary. Second, Rob’s “I’s not” (Line 9) simply reasserts his original negative assessment from line 3.

Our primary focus in this excerpt is on how Caitlin takes up Rob’s “I’s not” (line 9). At line 11, Caitlin accuses Rob of not having grounds for negatively assessing the article, “You don’ even know what it ↑sa:id↓” (line 11), which is evidence that her why-interrogative communicated a challenging stance toward the warrantability of his original negative assessment. Additionally, following Rob’s justification of his negative assessment (at line 12), Caitlin overtly disagrees with it: “It was a
↑good↓ article” (line 13). By positively assessing the article as “good,” Caitlin claims first-hand knowledge of it and thus primary rights to assess it.

**Accepting accounts/explanations and withdrawing the challenge.** We have argued that why-interrogatives are Janus-faced: While they communicate a challenging stance toward the accountable event, they also recognize the possibility that a “satisfactory” explanation can be provided, especially when account solicitors have relatively weak epistemic rights to know about the accountable event. Thus, following a “sensible” explanation, the person who issued the why-interrogative can accept it as being “satisfactory” and withdraw their challenging stance. We can see this in Excerpt 7, which is drawn from a dinner interaction between four friends. Shane is recounting a conversation he had had with his boss about making personal phone calls at work. As part of the telling, Shane conveys his boss’s position with regard to personal calls: Shane should “watch” them even though she (i.e., the boss) does not care (lines 4–5 and 9–10). It is this assertion that Michael (the primary recipient of the telling) problematizes by soliciting an account of it (line 14).

Excerpt 7 (Chicken Dinner)

01 SHA: I been (0.6) I- ruh- r'member I calledju up the other
02 night (. ) Toosday n-uh la- uh: ↑las'↓night. (0.2) I
called you up. From work? en I wz on the'phone f'r a
03 long ti-me? (0.5) Muh boss says ju know (1.2) watch
04 thosse: ‘(. ) pers'nal phone cal{ls
05 06 VIV: [uhh!
07 08 (0.7)
09 SHA: u-Sh_e- one a'the- one a'my bosses cuz she sid thet (0.4)
she said she didn' ca:re.
11 SH/MI: (“yi know.”)/ (“yeah.”)
12 SHA: But see the mo:ni tor they have a-a: machine in there thet
ev'r[y time you call up ]
13 -->MIC: [W'll='f she din' care w]hy did she say.
14 (0.3)
15 SHA: Becuss the b'o:sses care, an' they're mo:ni tor ed.
17 (0.2)
18 MIC: Oh:: O[b:::
19 [Ya-a(h I ( )
20 SHA: [They know evry d- evry t- (. ) ca[ll thet's]=
21 MIC: [ O h : ]=
22 MIC: ={y e a h } y e a h } y e[a h
23 SHA: ={made out]where it's fro)m 'n[where it's c]all[ed.ed.
24 NAN: [Y e a h .] [Yeah.

There are at least two pieces of evidence that Michael’s why-interrogative (line 14) communicates a challenging stance toward the warrantability of the boss’s warning to “watch thosse: (. ) pers’nal phone calls” (lines 4–5), given that she, reportedly, “didn’t care” that he made such calls (lines 10 and 14). First, Michael formulates the
boss’s warning as, in the very least, puzzling by using an “if-then” format in which the
two clauses present the situation as a contradiction (“W’ll=’f she din’ care why did
she say’”; line 14). Second, Michael prefaces his account solicitation with “well,” thus
casting it as a disaligning action (i.e., a disagreement with Shane’s tacit acceptance
of the boss’s position; Heritage, 1984b). In response, Shane explains the situation
by contrasting his boss’s personal position with that of multiple other “bosses” and
then restates that the calls are monitored (line 16).

Our focus is on Michael’s uptake of Shane’s explanation. In Excerpts 5–6, account
solicitors went on to challenge either the account or the accountable event (which
involved claims of epistemic authority over them). In contrast, in Excerpt 7, Michael
claims that the offered information is news to him through the emphatic and repeated
production of the change-of-state token Oh (Heritage, 1984a): “Oh:: Oh::.” (line 18).
Here, Michael indirectly withdraws the challenging stance communicated by his why-
interrogative by implying that its production was premised on inaccurate assumptions
(or epistemic grounds). After Shane provides further explanation (line 20), Michael
agrees with Shane’s position (lines 21–22). Note that Michael uses multiple sayings
of Yeah, “yeah yeah yeah” (line 22), which claims that further work in this course of
action (i.e., accounting) is unnecessary (Stivers, 2004). In summary, by withdrawing
his challenging stance once a “satisfactory” account is provided, Michael orients to
his why-interrogative as having communicated such a stance.

In this section, we examined account solicitors’ orientations to the action of
soliciting an account by analyzing their uptake of the responses (i.e., accounts or
explanations) to their why-interrogatives. This uptake included either rejecting the
account by claiming some measure of epistemic authority regarding the event in
question (see Excerpts 5–6) or withdrawing the challenging stance indexed by the
why-interrogative by accepting the provided explanation (see Excerpt 7). Doing so
was evidence that producers of why-interrogatives orient to them as challenging the
accountable event while soliciting an account for it.

**Account solicitors’ design of why-interrogative turns**

We have been arguing that, as direct account solicitations, why-interrogatives com-
municate a stance that the accountable event does not accord with common sense and
thus is possibly inappropriate or unwarranted. For a different type of evidence, in this
section, we examine features of the design of why-interrogative turns. Excerpts 8–12
demonstrate that account solicitors design their why-interrogative turns so as to either
downgrade or upgrade the challenging stance indexed by the account solicitation,
thereby orienting to such a stance.

**Downgrading the challenging stance toward accountable items.** Account solicitors
sometimes extend their why-interrogative turns beyond their initial turn-
constructional unit (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Although an account
(a second pair part) is conditionally relevant on completion of the account solicita-
tion (a first pair part), the account solicitor may continue the turn beyond the possible
completion point (Sacks et al., 1974) to manipulate the action that the account
solicitation is used to accomplish. Continuing beyond the first turn constructional unit of the question is commonly a practice for narrowing or specifying the original action (Lerner, 2002). Such modifications provide evidence for the nature of the action that speakers designed their original unit to accomplish. In Extracts 8–10, account solicitors extend their why-interrogative turn to downgrade the account solicitation’s challenging stance.

In Excerpt 8, the account solicitor (Art) extends the turn of the why-interrogative to claim his limited epistemic access to information about the accountable event. As context, Moe currently resides, and teaches English, in Japan, and his friend Art currently lives in the United States but is about to move to Japan for a similar job. Moe has been instructing Art about how to prepare for the trip. For purposes of securing a travel visa, Moe advises Art to “buy a plane ticket” (line 1) to document that he will return to the United States.

Excerpt 8 (CH 4829)

01 MOE: .hh An’ you should buy a pla:ne ticket,
02 MOE: .hh[hh ] Uh:[ ]
03 --> ART: [.hh] [W- [Wh]y do I have tuh leave. that’s what I don’t
04 --> understa:nd.
05 MOE: ‘m=bee- ‘m- m-=0 because they’ve never met you. they have
06 tuh meet you: .hhh a:n’ duh[ : ]
07 ART: [Ah]:. {{a version of Oh}}
08 (0.3)
09 MOE: But >(enyouknow) < (they=ess gunna) see you on video so they
10 might be able tuh pro:cess it before you co:me b[ut ]
11 ART: [ R]ight.
12 MOE: .hhhhh >I don’ know< they’re a little:: they- them jus’
13 kinda like wait ‘till thuh last minute type a pe:ople.

At line 3, Art’s why-interrogative, “Why do I have tuh leave” communicates a challenging stance toward—and thus projects possible rejection of—Moe’s advice to buy a round-trip ticket prior to finalizing the job-application process. Through the action of soliciting an account, Art claims that he is at least somewhat knowledgeable of the accountable item (i.e., the relevant employment rules). Our focus is on the fact that Art extends his turn with: “that’s what I don’t understa:nd” (lines 3–4). Here, Art works to soften the challenging stance associated with his account solicitation precisely by disclaiming his knowledge about the employment rules. Thus, Art shifts from a position (embodied in his why-interrogative) of “the action does not typically make sense” to one of “the action does not make sense to me.” In response, Moe defends his advice (lines 5–6) by providing an explanation of the company’s rationale for Art “having to leave.” Art tacitly accepts Moe’s explanation by producing an exaggerated (i.e., vocally stretched) “Ah:::” (line 7; a version of Oh), which claims a change in his state from “uninformed” to “informed” (Heritage, 1984a). Similar to Excerpt 7, Art’s Ah indirectly withdraws the challenging stance communicated by his why-interrogative by implying that its production was premised on alternative/inaccurate
assumptions. Note that, by subsequently characterizing the company as “wait ‘till thuh last minute type a pe:ople” (line 13), Moe orients to, and aligns with, Art’s critical position toward the employment process indexed by his why-interrogative. Thus, although Moe’s initial response (lines 5–6) is a relatively neutral explanation, he nonetheless orients to Art’s why-interrogative as a valuative account solicitation.

In Excerpt 9, the account solicitor (Stan) extends the turn of the why-interrogative to acknowledge the possibility that his recipient has greater epistemic access to information about the accountable event. Prior to this extract, Stan asked his sister (Joyce) for advice about where to buy a “good” hat, which she gives at line 1 (Bullocks is a department store, as are May Company and Broadway at lines 17–18).

Excerpt 9 (Joyce & Stan)

01 JOY: Why don’t you: go into <Westwo:d,> (0.3) an: do go=to Bullocks. (0.6)
02 STA: Bullocks. yuh mean that one right tuh:m (0.8) .m:ch (0.2)
03 right by thee uhp- (0.2) wha’=zit thuh pla:za theatre:[:]
04 JOY: [U]h huh,
05 (0.3)
06 STA: (mem) .hh[h]
07 JOY: [Y]eah.
08 STA: (mem) [Y]eah.
09 --> STA: <Why that Bullocks.> Is there something about it?
10 JOY: They have some pretty nice things. an’ you could prob’ly
11 find one you li:ke there:, (1.1)
12 13 STA: Well I mean:=uh do they have a good selection of ha:ts?
14 JOY: ↑I=’on’ kno:w↓ I n(h)ev(h)er looked for h[ats. you’re]
15 STA: [Oh:. ]
16 a:ski[ng me ’an’ (I) ( )]?
17 STA: [(Well) I’d just as soon go to May Company er
18 Bro:adway

After verifying the identity/location of the recommended Bullocks (lines 3–8), Stan solicits an account for Joyce’s recommendation: “<Why that Bullocks.>” (line 9). Stan’s account solicitation communicates a challenging stance toward—and thus projects a possible rejection of—Joyce’s recommendation. (This argument is further supported by Stan’s subsequent expression of his preference for other department stores besides Bullocks: “I’d just as soon go to May Company er Bro:adway” at lines 17–18.) Our focus is on the fact that Stan extends his turn with “Is there something about it?” (line 9). This yes/no-interrogative inquires into a possible exception that would make Bullocks an appropriate recommendation (the exception being having “a good selection of hats,” as revealed at line 13). This question positions Stan as having relatively less epistemic rights to know about Bullocks (Heritage, 2007) and thus mitigates the challenging nature of his account solicitation. Furthermore, the appended question allows for the possibility that Joyce’s recommendation may be a good one and thus acknowledges the possible appropriateness of the accountable action.
In Excerpt 10, the account solicitor (Ziva) extends the turn of the why-interrogative to acknowledge that the accountable event is possibly reasonable. At lines 7–8, Leah, who has just given birth, tells Ziva that she (i.e., Leah) was given an epidural (a catheter-based injection of pain-blocking medication) unusually early in the labor, when her cervix was dilated only 1.5 cm.

Excerpt 10 (CH 4899)

01 LEA: They gave me tons of epidural. >I mean it< wasn’t
02 ZIV: You as(k)ed for epidural.
03 LEA: Of course.
04 (.)
05 ZIV: You [said n]: o wa:y are you gunna ( ) without it.=
06 LEA: [It=w’s-]
07 LEA: She ga(v)’me an’ epidu:ral (.) when I was one an’ a half
08 centime(h)t(ers)=hh
09 ZIV: Are y(h)ou se(h)rio(h)us, hh
10 LEA: I am seri[ous.]
11 --> ZIV: [ Why. ] you had never had such agonizing pain?
12 LEA: N[. ] >it didn’ even hurt.<
13 ZIV: [Or-]
14 (.)
15 LEA: Hh at that ti:me, [(hu-)]
16 ZIV: [ So w]hy’d she >give it you. < she just
17 wanted to.
18 LEA: ‘Cause I wan- ↑ I figured what thuh hell. ↓
19 ZIV: Why [should it hurt=at-]
20 LEA: Why [should it hurt]t
21 ZIV: [ You might as well]l get it [{.} bef[ore you start=e-]
22 [.hh [ Why should it hur]t
23 ZIV: [ Exact]ctly:. Exactly.

At line 9, Ziva enacts her shock at the announcement of the early administration of the epidural with “Are y(h)ou se(h)rio(h)us,” a newsmark that claims disbelief (Heritage, 1984a). After Leah’s confirmation (line 10), Ziva pursues the announcement by requesting an account for getting the epidural: “Why” (line 11). Ziva’s account solicitation indexes a challenging stance toward getting an epidural this early in the labor and thus has overtones of an accusation of Leah for requesting it. Our focus is on the fact that Ziva immediately appends, “you had never had such agonizing pain?” (line 11). Here, Ziva formulates—and requests confirmation of—a candidate exceptional circumstance in which an epidural would have been appropriately administered. In doing so, Ziva reduces the challenging/accusatory nature of her account solicitation. Note as well that, when Leah rejects this candidate account (lines 12/15), Ziva further pursues this course of action with another why-interrogative (“So why’d she >give it you. <” at line 16), followed again by a candidate response (“she just wanted to,” lines 16–17), both of which now attribute the problematic decision to administer the epidural to the medical professional (“she”),
thereby further mitigating the challenging/accusatory nature of the initial account solicitation.

In each of the above cases (Excerpts 8–10), because the recipient of the why-interrogative is personally responsible for the accountable event (i.e., advice, recommendation, and a medical decision), the action of soliciting an account disaffiliates with the recipient because it communicates a stance that the accountable event was potentially inappropriate or unwarranted. In each case, the turn of the why-interrogative is extended with an action that downgrades its challenging stance, which works to mitigate its disaffiliatory potential.

**Upgrading the challenging stance.** Just as speakers can design their account-solicitation turns so as to downgrade the challenging stance embodied in why-interrogatives (as in Excerpts 8–10), they can also design their turns so as to upgrade it. In Excerpt 11, the account solicitor revokes the why-interrogative altogether (and thus, the associated claim that a satisfactory account might exist) and replaces it with an overt criticism. At the beginning of this phone call, Debbie reveals to her friend Sarah that her boyfriend Paul initiated their relational breakup, “he broke up with me” (line 2), a topic that Sarah returns to 14 min later (at line 3).

**Excerpt 11 (CF 6239)**

01 SAR: Aren’t you guys on an’ off?
02 DEB: No: we’re broken up. he broke up with me...

((14 minutes deleted))

03 SAR: So- wait- you=an’ Paul =are: still talking.
04 (0.4)
05 DEB: Ye::ah. we talk like every da:y. =an’ =we’ve spe:nt like a=hh >I mean:< I’(ve)stayed over at ‘is ho:use prob’ly like five 06 times, since we broke u:p [an’': (s)-] 07 SAR: [>h< Oh: sh]i::t.=
08 DEB: =.hhh So it’s not cle:an.
09 10 (.)
11 DEB: It’s very me:ssy. >but I mean< we’re still in love with each other. you kno:w, like (.). I didn’t wanna to break up with hi:m, a:nd .hhhhh
12 --> SAR: W[hy did he- ooOh:] God he’s so bizarre.oo What’s his deal.
13 DEB: [Uh:m=hhhh ]
14 15 DEB: .mtch=.hh We:ll (.). he re:ally needs tuh like get his shit 16 together an’ figure o:ut like..

((Several lines deleted))

17 DEB: I’m like <if you: love me I don’t understa:nd> .hhh (0.3) 18 you kno:w (.). why (0.2) you wouldn’t want to be = with me.

At line 14, Sarah begins to respond to Deb’s telling of her “messy” breakup in a way that shows Sarah’s affiliation with the teller’s troubling situation. There is evidence that Sarah’s account solicitation, “Why did he-” (line 14), was on its way to
Why did he break up with you? First, it is positioned immediately after Debbie says “I didn’t wanna to break up with him” (lines 12–13), which not only makes relevant agency regarding the breakup but also projects the relevance of Paul’s agency through the use of contrastive stress on the “I” (symbolized in the transcript by underlining). Second, Debbie appears to understand Sarah as having asked about Paul’s agency when she responds with I’m like if you love me . . . why wouldn’t you want to be with me (lines 18–19).

We have argued that why-interrogatives simultaneously index a position that a “satisfactory/sensible” account is possibly available and a challenging stance toward the appropriateness or warrantability of the accountable event. If this is correct, Sara’s why-interrogative (at line 14) not only communicates a challenging stance toward Paul’s actions but simultaneously indirectly claims that a satisfactory account for his behavior is possibly available (i.e., that there might be a good reason for Paul’s breaking up with Debbie). However, the latter position potentially disaffiliates with Debbie and her immediately prior statement that she and Paul are still in love and she didn’t want to break up with him (lines 11–13). Sarah circumvents this disaffiliative implication by cutting off her why-interrogative (“Why did he-”; the hyphen symbolizes a cut-off sound) in favor of simply criticizing Paul’s motives for breaking up: “Oh: God he’s so bizarre” (line 14). Sarah then proceeds to solicit an account for Paul’s actions with “What’s his deal” (line 14), which, in contrast to a standard why-format, builds in an assumption that the “problem” lies with Paul (i.e., his deal). In summary, Sarah redesigns her account-solicitation turn to upgrade her affiliative stance toward Debbie by upgrading her criticism of Paul, which was not adequately indexed by Sarah’s why-formatted account solicitation. Note that both in this case and in Excerpt 10, account solicitors highlight their affiliation with the addressee by (eventually) placing the blame for the accountable event on a third party.

In Excerpts 8–11, account solicitors variously manipulate the design of turns in which they produce a why-interrogative, either by extending it with an additional action (Excerpts 9–10) or by abandoning it altogether (Excerpt 11). However, it is possible to format why-interrogatives themselves so as to maximize their challenging stance toward the accountable event. One recurrent practice for doing so is to dramatize the event by upgrading its pejorative nature relative to its initial formulation. In such cases, why-interrogatives are designed and treated as complaints or criticisms. For one example, see Excerpt 12, which is drawn from a phone call between two Jewish women, Rae and Cindy. At line 4, Rae announces that a third party, Matsi, is in a fight with his mother.

Excerpt 12 (CH 4926)

01 RAE: She sh[ould send <pictures> anyway.
02 CIN: She wh[t? She sh[ould send? ]
03 RAE: [>I don’ know-<] (.I am not so sure maybe
04 but- Matsi’s like in a fight with Sher.$ hh [heh]
In response to Rae’s announcement (at line 4), Cindy produces a Yiddish term of exasperation, “Oy ve’y” (line 5) and then solicits an account for Matsi being in a fight with his mother: “Why?” (line 5). Rather than responding with an account, Rae repeats, “Oy ve’y. Why:;” (line 7), which can be a practice for confirming (Schegloff, 1996), and thus aligning with, Cindy’s exasperated stance (and affiliating with Cindy). Rae proceeds to normalize the accountable event with “it’s okay” (line 7). At line 8, rather than aligning with Rae’s stance (that “it’s okay”), Cindy complains about the fighting by producing a dramatized why-interrogative: “Why does ev’ryone have tuh fight.” Here, the original accountable event (i.e., Matsi fighting with his mother) is reformulated and upgraded in terms of its pejorative nature, including everyone fighting (vs. just Matsi) and everyone having to fight (vs. just being in a fight). In contrast to all previous examples of why-interrogatives so far discussed (Excerpts 1–11), this one is produced and understood not as accomplishing the action of soliciting an account but as complaining. Rae treats the dramatized why-interrogative as a complaint in two ways. First, she responds with, “I KNOW” (line 11), which treats Cindy’s interrogative as a position to be agreed with rather than a question to be answered. Second, Rae aligns with Cindy’s complaint by performing a complaint of her own, which is similarly implemented through a dramatized why-interrogative: “Why does Matsi have=tuh fight with thuh whole world” (line 13). Similar to Rae’s “I KNOW” (line 11), Cindy’s response “Right” (line 14) treats Rae’s dramatized interrogative as an assertion to be agreed (or disagreed) with. In this case, both Cindy’s and Rae’s dramatized why-interrogatives are versions of what Koshik (2005) called reverse-polarity questions, which, as actions, primarily accomplish complaining/criticizing, not soliciting an account.

In summary, speakers can use a variety of turn-constructional resources to either downgrade or upgrade the challenging stance communicated by why-interrogatives toward the appropriateness or warrantability of accountable events. Speakers can extend account-solicitation turns with additional actions beyond why-interrogatives, revoke why-interrogatives in lieu of criticisms, and formulate why-interrogatives in (dramatized) ways that suggest that no adequate account can possibly be offered. All these turn-based operations reveal account solicitors’ orientations to why-interrogatives as indexing a challenging stance toward accountable events.
Discussion

The majority of prior research on accounts has examined accounts themselves, as opposed to actions that solicit accounts (Buttny, 1993). It is for this reason that, in a review of the accounts literature, Orbuch (1997) commented: “One of the most challenging issues for future work on accounts . . . is a detailed focus on the context in which individuals make and present accounts” (p. 469). Arguably the most local interactional context are actions that directly solicit accounts because they constrain how speakers “make and present accounts.” Of the work on actions that solicit accounts, most has focused on “reproaches,” such as, Why haven’t you been filling these out with the truth? (McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983) and Why were you so late? (Weiner, 1992). However, both prior research (Koshik, 2005) and the present analysis (see Extract 12) suggest that, although these “reproaches” are syntactically formatted as why-interrogatives, they do not perform the action of soliciting an account, per se; rather, at least by virtue of the remainder of their turn design (which, e.g., reformulates the accountable event as a pejorative one), they are produced and understood as accusations, challenges, or criticisms.

In contrast, this study examined why-interrogatives that accomplish the action of directly soliciting an account. Using conversation analysis, we argued that why-interrogatives are Janus-faced. On one hand, as types of questions, they index an epistemic gap between questioners and answerers and thus the possibility that answerers are able to provide explanations that questioners did not previously know about. On the other hand, why-interrogatives index a measure of epistemic access to the accountable event and communicate a stance that it does not accord with common sense and thus is possibly inappropriate or unwarranted. Accordingly, why-interrogatives communicate a challenging stance toward agent(s) responsible for the accountable event and are frequently coimplicated in additional, negatively valenced actions, such as complaining, criticizing, and blaming. As Schegloff (2005) noted, stance is important because it is “one way in which values are embodied in interaction; understanding how stance comes to be deployed is, then, one place to look if we are to understand the moment-to-moment development of problematic situations” (p. 450).

This article contributes to our understanding of the (dis)aligning and (dis)affiliatory nature of initiating actions in general and account solicitations in particular. There is a widespread, vernacular perception of why-questions as massively disaffiliative. For example, popular literature (e.g., the Working Mother magazine; Hales, 1993) and undergraduate communication textbooks (Stewart, Zediker, & Witteborn, 2005; Weaver, 1990) advocate healthier interpersonal relationships through the avoidance of why-questions, which are said to “automatically indicat[e] disapproval” (Weaver, 1990, p. 152), “promote defensiveness, [and] put the questioned person on the spot” (Stewart et al., 2005, p. 169). This article demonstrated that although these claims can be correct, the picture is more complex. Why-interrogatives (as direct account solicitations) do not target the person to whom
they are directed but rather the accountable event. In other words, they communicate a challenging stance toward the appropriateness or warrantability of that event, which may or may not be disaffiliative toward the addressed person. When the addressee can be seen to be responsible for the accountable event, why-interrogatives can communicate their speakers’ disaffiliation with that person. For example, in Excerpt 3, Catherine’s “why” at line 9 communicates a stance that Ron was “wrong” in bombing her clothes. However, when the addressee is not responsible for the accountable event, why-interrogatives can be used to show affiliation with that person. For example, in Excerpt 1, Natalie’s why-interrogative in Line 10 communicates a stance that Chris was “right” in criticizing the mother’s homicidal actions.

Finally, this article extends our understanding of the problem of action formation (Schegloff, 2007)—that is, the problem of how social actions are designed in and through conversation so as to be understood—by suggesting that action formation involves the epistemics of social relationships or “members’ methods for managing rights to identity-bound knowledge in self-other relations” (Raymond & Heritage, 2006, p. 678; see also Heritage, 2002; Stivers, 2005). Our analysis indicates that one factor contributing to the challenging stance communicated by why-interrogatives is the degree to which the account solicitor has (and is recognized as having) epistemic grounds from which to assess the event as being accountable. It may be that the strength of the challenging stance is related to the strength of such epistemic grounds. Of course, members’ epistemic authority over accountable events is largely claimed and negotiated in and through interaction (rather than being an “objective” matter). We demonstrated that why-interrogative turns can be designed so as to minimize (Excerpts 8–10) or maximize (Excerpt 12) account solicitors’ epistemic authority over accountable events. And we demonstrated that account providers negotiate social epistemics in and through their accounts: For example, they may support their accounts by minimizing the account solicitor’s epistemic rights (e.g., You didn’t see it in Extract 3) or weaken their accounts by claiming to not have good epistemic access to the accountable (e.g., I don’t know in Extract 5). This study, however, examined only mundane interactions among adult friends and family members, as opposed to a range of other contexts in which participants are likely to have (highly) divergent access to, and rights to know about, accountable events (e.g., interactions between students and their teachers or young children and their parents). Further research needs to compare our results to account solicitations by people who can be relevantly categorized as novices (having no access/rights to knowledge about accountable events) to people who can relevantly be categorized as experts.

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Notes

1 This means that why-interrogatives issued by small children and other individuals relevantly characterized as “novices” might not be treated as challenging, though further research along these lines is needed (see Discussion).

2 We systematically collected why- and how come-interrogatives, which formed our core collection; other formats (e.g., what . . . for) were collected opportunistically. Of 329 core cases, 311 (95%) were why-formatted and 18 (05%) were how come-formatted.

3 There may be an association between why as a go-ahead to a presequence and the nature of the action projected by the presequence. For example, at least in our data, why is used as a go-ahead to pretelling sequences when they characterize the “tellable” as being atypical, unexpected, or a breach of social/moral orders.

4 Also note that after a micropause following the account solicitation, Ziva requests a (dis)confirmation of a candidate account (“You decided before?” at line 12) as a way to mitigate the criticism embodied in the account solicitation (see the following section for further instances of this practice). This candidate account formulates, in its speaker’s view, reasonable circumstances under which a name might not “stick”: when the decision is made prior to having interacted with the child (see also line 3 for Ziva’s position that what a child will be called, as opposed to named officially, will be decided after the child’s birth). Observe that Ziva’s candidate account emphasizes family decision making, whereas Lea’s (at line 13) focuses on community expectations. It is this divergence in what constitutes an adequate account that gets addressed with “You’re thuh mother” (at line 16).

References

Account Solicitations


