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| **‘I sort of did stuff to him’: A case study of tellability and taboo in young people’s talk about sex** |
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**Abstract**

This article presents a conversation analytic examination of a telephone call in which a teenage girl updates her friend about developments in a relationship. The telling is in three phases, from initial reluctance, through first kiss to first sexual contact. Drawing on the notion of lower and upper bounded tellability, I analyse the talk for what is constructed as tellable and as taboo. Eminently tellable, the kiss is a directly named activity, details are sought, and it is assessed in a delighted way. In contrast, the sexual activity is not named and instead is referred to as 'stuff'. The details of 'stuff' are not pursued, and the activity is assessed with (playful) disapproval. The telling speaks to normative gendered sexual expectations for teenage girls in the UK. In talking about personal experience of sexual conduct but without talking in any detail, these speakers position themselves as morally respectable.

**Keywords**Conversation analysis, teenage sexuality, storytelling, tellability

1. **Introduction**

Teenagers inhabit and reproduce in their talk a social world that is full of tensions between propriety and impropriety, passivity and empowerment, and reason and emotion. Public, political and academic discourse is typically replete with anxieties about the moral, affective and physical risks of teenage sexual conduct (Angelides, 2012; Egan, 2013; Egan & Hawkes, 2012; Elliott, 2010; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Schalet, 2011). Young people are variously positioned within these discourses as prematurely driven by biological or cultural factors towards sexual risk-taking, disease, pregnancy and gendered double-standards, leading to passionately argued (protectionist) debates and heartfelt anxieties about how they should (not) be instructed in sexual matters (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Hirst, 2013).

A major approach to understanding young people’s sexual knowledge, practices and subjectivities has been through use of qualitative talking methodologies (Tolman, Hirschman, & Impett, 2005); inviting young people – often girls – to discuss relevant topics in interviews and focus groups (Allen, 2003; Gilmore, Delamater, & Wagstaff, 1996; Hirst, 2004, 2013; Jackson, 1982; Lees, 1986; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Tolman, 1994, 2002; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen‐Reynoso, & Porche, 2003). These studies are important for informing a critical understanding of diverse populations of young people’s perspectives on negotiating and managing their sexual lives (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Tolman et al., 2005). They also provide much needed space for the voices of girls and young women in social research (Gilligan, 1982) and, increasingly, those of boys and young men (Morrison et al., 2015).

However, from a conversation analytic perspective, gathering data by directly interviewing participants risks researchers (inadvertently) producing findings through their active engagement in the process (Potter & Hepburn, 2005, 2007. See also DeFina, 2009; Mishler, 1986). Research interviews and focus groups are a form of social practice in their own right in which there are normative and contextualised roles (interviewer and interviewee), and associated obligatory frameworks (which has particular relevance when adult interviewers talk to young people).[[1]](#footnote-1) There seems a pressing case to research how people actually talk to each other about their sexual conduct (Kitzinger, 2006). There is an apparent lack of research on everyday talk about sex, and as a result, we lack understanding of the mundane language of (talk about) sex even for adults.

There is a small but significant conversation analytically informed literature on the ways that sexuality is indexed in talk (Kitzinger, 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Land & Kitzinger, 2005; Rendle-Short, 2005; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2003). Much of this research focuses on the ways in which heterosexuality is taken-for-granted in social life. Speakers regularly (and unintendedly) produce their sexuality in talk by using recogniseably gendered names and pro-terms when referring to their partners. [[2]](#footnote-2) When opposite-sex partners are referred to, the progressivity of ongoing action is unaffected. In contrast, when lesbian or gay identities are indexed in the same way, recipients regularly orient to sexuality, making it relevant even when the overall action is in no way contingent on it. In talk, then, heterosexuality is normative and homosexuality is marked.

In focusing on the unintended consequences of person reference, these studies have ‘gone beyond’ the data to demonstrate the normative backdrop to interaction. This fits with the feminist conversation analytic method most notably described by Kitzinger (2000). The feminist application of CA is variously contended (Schegloff, 2009; Whelan, 2012; Wowk, 2007) but has generated a body of findings that take seriously the mundane ways in which gender and sexuality are (re)produced in social life (Speer & Stokoe, 2011; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2014).

This paper uses conversation analysis (CA) to analyse a single call in which fifteen year old Mary, in conversation with her friend Katie, describes the circumstances of a first sexual experience with her new boyfriend. In keeping with a feminist application of CA, I analyse the story for both its fine-grained form and content; taking seriously both the way the telling unfolds interactionally *and* what the story is *about* (for a related approach see De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). At the heart of this analysis is a naturalistic narrative of the temporal development of a teenage relationship from reported initial resistance through the first kiss to first sexual contact. The story arises in a naturally occurring context – a telephone call between friends - and, unusually for research on young people’s sexuality, the topic is not researcher-led. Instead, the story is elicited interactionally in the form of a request for ‘the craic’ by Mary’s co-conversationalist, in part, as an enactment of friendship; demonstrating both knowledge of Mary’s life and the assumptive rights to enquire (which are accepted).[[3]](#footnote-3) The story that follows details a number of events that eventually culminate in the cautiously delivered punchline that Mary has done ‘stuff’ to her new boyfriend. She does not specify what ‘stuff’ she did, and her recipient does not pursue the specifics. This contrasts with the way in which a first kiss is spoken of and responded to; in celebratory ways that attest to the appropriateness of talk about kissing. For these participants, kissing is a reportable and pursuable topic, sex is not. In other words, kissing is tellable and sex is taboo.

The conversation analytic notion of tellability comes from Sacks (1992), in which he notices that would-be storytellers make clear their credentials for telling *this* story to *this* recipient *now* in order to resolve the various contingencies they face (e.g. gaining and retaining the floor across several turns). That is, tellability is not an abstract property of a story, such that any story can be told to anyone at any point. Instead, tellability is actively and locally managed in situated interaction *between* people (Mandelbaum, 2013; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006), and a bid for tellability on any given occasion might be rejected/heckled (Goodwin, 1986; Sacks, 1974). As Norrick (2005) puts it, the story might interactionally fail to reach a lower threshold bounding of tellability (p.337). This can happen for various reasons, but can be due to a lack of (local) interest or newsworthiness; the ‘so what’ factor (Labov & Fanshel, 1977).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Norrick (2000, 2005) extends the notion of tellability to include an upper threshold of appropriateness or propriety (see also Ochs and Capps, 2001). Stories can transgress the locally constituted bounds of acceptability (e.g. are too gory or intimate) and their telling risks loss of face (Goffman, 1967) for both teller and recipient(s). The teller risks sanction for neglecting contextual decency and the recipient could be embarrassed by the implication they might be a willing recipient of such a story (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987). Prospective story tellers, then, should negotiate both lower and upper boundaries of tellability and select what to tell, to whom, how to tell it and in what amount of detail (see also Bamberg, 1997).

As noted, the grounds for both thresholds of tellability are locally contextual. So what is both noteworthy and within the bounds of propriety is not a property of the story itself but rather is contingent on the relationships between present company, the privacy of the setting and constituted standards of acceptability (Norrick, 2005). Thus, what is in both senses tellable is grounded in the immediate conversational context and yet constitutes something of the broader normative context that interlocutors inhabit (De Fina, 2008; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Karatsu, 2012; Woods and Wooffitt, 2014). The intricacy of interrelationships between self, social and cultural factors are evident in all talk-in-interaction, but storytelling, together with the notions of upper and lower bounded tellability, provide particularly a rich source of identities and culture in action (McAdams, 2006). The cultural relevancies of storytelling brings us to the focal data for the current paper; a story of teenage sexuality.

As illustration of the applicability of CA to illuminating social and political contexts constructed through talk, I analyse what is in effect a storytelling about one young woman’s account of her relationship with a new partner from its beginnings through to first sexual contact. I focus particularly on the notion of tellability for what it suggests about the contextualised orientations to propriety and impropriety.

* 1. ***Focal Data***

The data examined here is taken from the author’s UK-based corpus of 70+ naturally-occurring telephone calls made or received by pre-teen and teenaged girls. Recording devices were provided and girls consented to record calls they made or received in the course of their usual activities.[[5]](#footnote-5) Hence, they were not asked to produce any particular kind of conversation for the purposes of research but rather to simply record (with permission) the telephone conversations in which they happened to participate. All interlocutors in the corpus were aware of being recorded and that the recordings would be analysed for research purposes. This might raise concern, based on the ‘observer’s paradox’ (Labov, 1972), that knowingly recorded talk is less than ‘natural’ (e.g. Griffin, 2007; Hammersley, 2003). One assumption underlying this concern is that speakers might censor themselves in ways that analysts cannot conceivably access. Whilst this is a challenging possibility, the matter is often open to empirical investigation through, for example, analysing participants’ demonstrable orientations to being recorded (Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff, 2010; Speer and Hutchby, 2003). These orientations are occasionally present in the corpus, but do not appear in the particular call under analysis in this paper. The activities, content and direction of conversations in the corpus were unsolicited, (Lynch, 2002; Sacks, 1984) and pass the conceptual ‘dead scientist test’ proposed by Potter (2002) to distinguish between researcher-generated data and ‘data’ that would have occurred whether or not a researcher was present. To this extent, the data are naturally-occurring.

The particular call analysed here occurs between two fifteen-year-old girls, anonymised as Katie and Mary, during a school summer vacation, after a period of not seeing each other for a while (due to their respective family holidays). They are good friends and the call essentially serves as a catch up on recent events in their lives. Both girls have relatively new boyfriends. Katie is with Davie, and things are going well. Mary has recently come out of a relationship with Adam but is now with John. Katie knew that John was interested in Mary but has not heard about the latest developments between them. Much of the conversation consists of discussion of these relationships. The extracts presented below are taken from a longer fragment that, at 199 lines (some three minutes of talk), is too long to analyse fully here. Consequently, I focus my analysis around four extracts that illustrate the construction of what is tellable for these teenage speakers.

1. **Findings**

The ‘news’ that Mary’s relationship with John has become sexual is not treated as straightforwardly tellable; it is not blurted out in one announcement. Rather it is carefully constructed over a series of turns that, through the specific temporal ordering of events (Labov and Waletzky, 1967), positions sexual contact as both reasonable and respectable. However, the fact there is something to tell is taken for granted at the beginning of the call, when Katie asks Mary for the ‘craic’ immediately following the greetings.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Extract 1: [CTS33] Telling Alibi**

01 Mar: Hello?

02 Kat: .hh Hiya Mary

03 Mar: Hi:::

04 Kat: .hh Hello:. Can you tell me the craic now.

05 (.)

06 Mat: Uhm Yeah I can. But uh got a really really cheeky

07 favour to ask you.

08 Kat: Oh: go on. Go on.

09 Mar: Uhm (0.3) I’m going to a ◦party◦ tonight right

10 Kat: Yea::h?

11 Mar: ◦John’s invited me but◦

12 (1.2 )

13 Mar: ◦But uhm (0.9) sorry

14 (0.3)

15 Kat: Huh huh huh huh .hhhh

16 Mar: H(h)m

17 (2.9)

18 Mar: But uhm: (0.6)like my mum wouldn’t let me go if

19 I just said I was going with John, so I s- I said

20 that I’m sleeping at yours.=Is that alright.

21 (.)

22 Kat: Yeah. It’s fine.

Mary agrees to the telling (line 6) but delays the actual granting of this request with a request of her own, which she characterises as a ‘really really cheeky favour’ (lines 6-7). It turns out that Mary is going to a party that evening, against her mother’s wishes, and has (already) told her mother, untruthfully, that she is staying at Katie’s house (lines 18-20). Mary is subsequently checking that Katie is willing to go along with this alibi. There is much that might be said about this extract in terms of what it conveys about negotiating and managing familial and friendship obligations, but maintaining a focus on tellability, it is interesting to note that Mary’s request for an alibi already contains within it an implicit telling of the ‘craic’ that Katie earlier wanted to know. Mary embeds the news that her relationship with John is now (potentially) sexual when she asks her friend for an alibi that will permit her to spend the night with him (lines 11 and 18-20). So, although not yet delivered *as* news, Katie is now ‘in-the-know’ about how far things have potentially progressed between Mary and John. Yet, Katie does not respond to the ‘news’ aspect of Mary’s request.

Doing the telling without doing it *as* a telling, and, therefore, without setting up a conditionally relevant response from a recipient, might appear to be rather odd. However, there are related interactional phenomena. For example, Kitzinger (2000) shows instances where speakers ‘come-out’ as being lesbian without provoking the oft-cited (e.g. see Broad, 2011 and Harris, 2013) expected negative or positive reaction from recipients. Kitzinger noticed in her data, speakers were coming out almost parenthetically, in the ‘protected’ space in the middle of a compound turn construction unit (i.e. multi-component units such as *if-then* statements – see (Lerner, 1996)) and in this way, were dampening the space for recipients to respond.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Although relying on a different set of interactional resources, there are resonances here between managing a coming-out without it being news, and what Mary does in embedding a telling in a request sequence. Mary reveals that her relationship with John has progressed to a (potentially) sexual stage, without making this the focal part of the action in which she is engaged. This ‘news’ is neither presented nor responded to as such because it is embedded within a sequence that sets up different contingencies for participants. Yet, the news that Katie seeks at the start of the call is clearly evident.

We might ask why Mary opts to delay a telling, only to do it under the auspices of another action. What are the interactional gains for Mary in doing this? One line of argument is that Mary is hypothetically testing the waters, trying to gauge her friend’s likely response before giving her a full account. In support of this argument, we can turn to Drew and Walker’s (2009) analysis of the introduction of complaints into conversations. They note that complaints (about third parties) tend only to be ‘put on record’ in interaction after cautious efforts to secure alignment from a recipient. One interactional payoff is that conversationalists negotiate and maintain affiliation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Drew and Walker’s analysis relates to the domain of complaints against third parties but it is a small step to see that the same kind of interactional work might be involved in other sorts of delicate social actions. In the focal data for this paper, in revealing a (potentially) sexual relationship with her new boyfriend, fifteen-year-old Mary might well have reason to secure alignment before putting her story on record. One interactional payoff, then, is that Mary is enabled to judge from Katie’s response, whether or not she is warranted to tell the story more explicitly. As it turns out, Katie simply grants Mary’s request, therefore providing some evidence for Mary that Katie is not demonstrating any resistance or moral judgement about what is happening, and that, therefore, Mary can indeed proceed with her story.

As the story develops, Mary tells of a first kiss. Again, she does not blurt this out; instead it is launched in a way that it is akin to instances of what Jefferson (1984) calls stepwise transition, using a current topic as a bridge into something new. Mary is talking about her concerns about a third-party – Jenny – whom, we assume relevantly features because of some prior romantic connection to John, and Mary speculates that Jenny is under the impression that nothing has actually happened between Mary and John (lines 144-146).[[9]](#footnote-9) The key news, however, is that, in contrast to whatever Jenny understands, something actually has happened (line 145).

**Extract 2: [CTS33] … except it has happened.**

142 (.)

143 Kat: Yea::h

144 Mar: (**Because the) ( ) said nothing’s actually**

145 **happened except that it has happened.** **<But**

146 **she probably didn’t know**. Huh

147 Kat: Ooh:: ↑↑Tell me,

There is a sense in which this ‘news’ is, as it were, cautiously dangled for Katie to take up or not. However, again, the news is not delivered *as* news.[[10]](#footnote-10) As it happens, this time, Katie does respond to the newsworthiness of Mary’s turn. Katie does not respond to the immediately prior talk about Jenny. Instead, she treats the embedded information (i.e. that something has happened between Mary and John) as newsworthy and invites Mary to tell more (line 147). Mary then sets the scene for what turns out to be the story of a first kiss. Mary was at John’s house the day before she went on a family holiday (lines 149-150) perhaps providing an acceptable platform to launch a kiss.

**Extract 3: [CTS33] And we kissed.**

147 Kat: Ooh:: ↑↑Tell me,

148 (.)

149 Mar: Well er:m (0.7) I was at his house

150 the day before I went to Wales

151 **˚and we kissed˚**

152 (1.0)

153 Kat: Aw was it good.

154 (.)

155 Mar: <Yea::h. It was lov:ley:>

156 (.)

157 Kat: Ah:::::[:::::::: ]

158 Mar: [It was all] like (0.8) Oh it

159 was all the kind of fireworks

160 tingly feeling one

161 (0.7)

162 Kat: ↑↑↑Aw mpt That’s so cute.

163 Mar: Oh: I was so happy.

164 (0.3)

The kiss is reported in slightly hushed tones as a joint activity; not something that he did to her, or that she did to him. They were both active in this kiss. Somewhat delayed (perhaps indicating an expectation of more to come), Katie produces a response token (line 153) that might be best characterised as denoting ‘cuteness’ and follows this with an interrogative – ‘was it good’ - which is built to prefer, and gets, a yes (Raymond, 2003). The fact that the question is formulated in this way displays Katie’s entitlement to ask about the nature of the kiss, which Mary accepts. In fact, Mary responds with ‘yea::h’ (line 155), delivered somewhat ‘dreamily’ (slow and stretched), and is culturally fitted to a romantic context.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The romantic context is continued when Mary categorises the kiss as a ‘fireworks tingly feeling one’ (line 160) that made her ‘so happy’ (line 163) thereby drawing heavily on cultural images of what perfect (romantic) kisses should feel like.[[12]](#footnote-12) In response, Katie produces an even more emphatic display of delightedness with a high-pitched ‘aw’ and a verbal assessment ‘so cute’ (line 162).

Kisses are treated here as an appropriately tellable activity. That is, although there is some marked delicacy in the sotto voce delivery of the news that Mary and John kissed, there is no disapproval in the sequence. Indeed, Katie’s responses are repeatedly positive and strongly aligning. Nor is there any resistance on Mary’s part to Katie’s repetitive ‘cute’ responses/assessments. Clearly, there is a physicality to her description – that it was tingly and like fireworks – but the potential sexual nature of the kiss is somewhat submerged under romantic imagery. It is notable that the kiss reportedly makes Mary ‘happy’ as opposed to ‘turned-on’ or aroused. The ‘appropriateness’ of the kiss, as revealed in its tell-ability and comment-ability, contrasts with the next stage of the story, which is a description of progression of the relationship to some form of sexual contact.

Extract 4: [CTS33] Did stuff

165 Mar: And then (1.0) And then I went away and

166 I was texting him loads. And then I

167 came back. .hhh And we’d sort of

168 talked about it.

169 (0.5)

170 Kar: Yeah[::

171 Mar: [( ) like. And then (0.9) I was

172 a little naughty hhhhhhhhh

173 Kar: Wh(h)at d(h)id you do::.

174 (.)

175 Mar: Erm well I tol- I don’t know why

176 but I told him I was on my period.

177 (0.5)

178 Mar: I think that was like kind of

179 like a barrier thing wasn’t it.

180 Kar: Oh right. [Yeah.

181 Mar: [Because you don’t

182 want to rush into anything. So

183 I told him I was on my period but

184 like I sort of ˚ did stuff to

185 him.˚

186 (0.9)

187 Kar: Tch tch tch [Mary.

188 Mar: [Hum hm

189 (0.7)

190 Mar: But I don’t know it didn’t feel

191 like wrong or anything.

192 (0.9)

193 Kar: It’s good I think.

194 (.)

195 Kar: I think you make a good couple.

196 Mar: Yeah. That’s what everyone says.

197 <I mean we went on a really nice

198 walk last night right.

199 Kar: ((Sniffs))

It is possible that Mary first alludes to sexual activity through a non-serious assessment of her own conduct; ‘I was a little naughty’ (line 171-172). The non-serious nature of the negative self-assessment is achieved in two ways: first, through the selection of the modifier ‘a little’, which downplays the significance of the act; second, through use of ‘naughty’ as a description. Naughty has childish connotations and might suggest mischief or minor transgression rather than serious wrongdoing. Of course, in this environment, ‘naughty’ might also have sexual connotations because of its common use in sexual contexts (Aral & Manhart, 2009). In this sense, ‘I was a little naughty’ could allude to (limited) sexual activity without bragging about it. There is an alternative analysis of ‘naughty’, however, because what happens next is the report of a lie that Mary told John. It is possible, therefore, that ‘a little naughty’ could refer to her having been deceitful.

If, as analysts, we find it difficult to distinguish the action that Mary accomplishes with ‘a little naughty’ it might well be that her recipient is in the same predicament. What we do know (from the design of the next turn) is that Karen treats ‘little naughty’ as something that Mary did rather than something she said. Karen’s laughter also nicely aligns with the non-serious nature of whatever it is that Mary is heading for. We also know that, by now, the understanding that Mary and John have progressed to a sexual stage in their relationship is hanging in the air.

If ‘little naughty’ is a mild sexual reference, we should note that the report of sexual activity is alluded to rather than done directly. We can compare this with the more direct report of the kiss, where the activity is named. Note that, again, in contrast to the kiss (where ‘we’ is used), the reference to self - ‘I’ - makes of this activity something that Mary did to John; it is not ‘we were a little naughty’. This continues the sense of limited sexual contact – they did not have full sexual-intercourse.

We should also note the different sequential positions in which reports of the kiss and the possible allusion to sex occur. The report of the kiss is a (possible) upshot of a telling, whereas ‘I was a little naughty’ is hearable as a story-preface making Katie’s ‘what did you do’ the go-ahead to do the telling; so together these turns act as a mini presequence within an ongoing telling (Schegloff, 2007).

Mary begins this (final) part of the story (line 175) with a well-prefaced response to Katie’s ‘what did you do’. As Schegloff and Lerner (2009) report, well-prefaced responses to *wh*-questions indicate that answers will not be straightforward (see also Heritage, 2013). Indeed, Mary’s response does not simply describe the sexual activity to which she has previously alluded. Instead, she begins by starting to report something she had told John but then halts this to insert ‘I don’t know why’ before restarting the turn. Analyses of ‘I don’t know’ (IDK) have generally considered their use sequentially as part of responsive turns (Drew, 1992; Hutchby, 2002; Tsui, 1991), where they are found to accomplish a range of actions including and beyond claims to insufficient knowledge. Mary’s IDK appears not to be responsive because, as noted above, Katie’s ‘question’ – ‘what did you do’ - is a go-ahead in a presequence. In this sense, Mary’s IDK is closer to those analysed by Weatherall (2011) which was a collection of IDKs appearing as the initial tcu in a multi-unit turn at talk. Weatherall showed that these IDKs are forward-looking (or preliminary) and act to downgrade the speakers’ epistemic commitment (Heritage, 2012) to the next tcu in the turn. Mary’s use of IDK is sufficiently important for her to halt the progressivity of the turn-so-far in order to insert it. Accepting that this IDK is preliminary rather than responsive, and drawing on Weatherall’s analyses, it marks whatever comes next - whatever she told John – as something to which she was not fully committed. In the context of this story, the lack of ‘commitment’ seems additionally to suggest that whatever Mary said to John, it had not been premeditated. What John was told turns out to be an inability account (line 183); Mary was on her period.

Menstruation is a culturally acceptable way to turn down unwanted sexual penetration/intercourse (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). It appears then that the insertion of ‘I don’t know why’ renders the period ‘untrue’. That is, Mary ‘knows’ why she told John she was on a period (indeed, she explicates her reasons more fully in the turns that follow) but the downgraded commitment to what she told him suggest her action was to spontaneously limit sexual activity in the moment rather than because she actually was menstruating.

So the (fabricated) period acts as a barrier to intercourse and next Mary deals with why she needed a barrier – because she didn’t want to rush into anything (line 181/182). However, this is not done as something personal to Mary but rather as a generic norm – the ‘you’ in this turn is a generic you, perhaps referring to all teenage girls, or all respectable teenage girls? The reference to ‘anything’ – as in ‘don’t want to rush into ‘anything’ is presumably another allusion to sex – this time, full sexual intercourse because it is this that is being prevented by the period. Not wanting to rush, might be fitted for either stage of relationship or for stage of life. That is, either not wanting to pursue a sexual connection too early in a particular relationship or too early in life.

So, using a menstruating body as an account, Mary draws on a culturally available reasoning for preventing unwanted intercourse. However, this does not stop her in engaging in any sexual activity because, as she puts it, she ‘sort of did stuff’ to John (line 184). Here, then is another allusion to sexual activity. The verb ‘stuff’ could refer to almost any conduct, but is hearable, from the topical context, as performance of some form of act on his genitals. The news that Mary ‘did stuff’ is delivered with a notable drop in volume, which conveys a sense of the telling being delicate, and is mitigated with ‘sort of’.

So, here is the punch line to the story that Katie elicited from Mary at the start of the call. The ‘craic’ is that Mary’s relationship has progressed from an initial expression of interest through to a romantic first kiss to a stage where she is willing to engage in some form of sexual conduct for his pleasure but is (or, at least, was) not yet ready to have full intercourse with him.

As the recipient of this story, a response is now due from Katie. What follows, however, is a relatively long gap possibly signalling some trouble ahead. It might be that this silence helps to construct a sense of (faux) disapproval, which Katie produces next (line 187) in the form of a repeated non-lexical sound – recognisable as ‘tuts’ - and the use of the address term ‘Mary’. The second of these things (i.e. the address term) is the more straightforwardly analysable: A post-positioned address term in a two-party interaction (i.e. where speaker selection is not an issue - see Lerner, 2003) tends to strengthen whatever stance is conveyed in the turn-so-far (Clayman, 2010). In the present case, Katie’s display of (faux) disapproval is underlined by her use of Mary’s name at the end of the turn.

The repeated tongue-clicks (in effect, ‘tut, tut, tut’) are less straightforward. In comparison to many other languages, English is not generally regarded as having a linguistic ‘click’ component (Wright, 2011). However, it is not difficult to find examples of clicks in English interaction, particularly the more commonly denoted ‘tut’ (Ogden, 2013); a non-lexical object often associated with marking a negative stance (Reber, 2012). Ogden (2013) shows empirical evidence for this negative stance (amongst other things) but notes that this meaning is not inherent in the clicks themselves but can be inferred from the longer stretch of talk in which they are embedded. In our extract, we can note that the repeated tongue-clicks occur in a place where a response to a story is due from a recipient, and certainly seems to function as an assessment of sorts. If we remember that the story-preface in this case was ‘I was a little naughty’ the disapproving stance possibly implied with the tuts appears fitted to and aligned with ‘naughtiness’ (see Stivers, 2008). There is possible evidence that the disapproval is good-humoured rather than serious. My sense of this arises from the three-part repetition. We might speculate that whereas one tut appears to convey a negative stance, three tuts is more gentle, playful or even teasing by virtue of its staged and crafted nature. This is speculative though, and requires more empirical work grounded in other similar instances. Treating the three tuts as akin to a tease, we might note that Mary’s post-expansion response - that what she did, ‘didn’t feel wrong’ can be characterised as ‘po-faced’ (Drew, 1987). In response, Katie affiliates with Mary by upgrading ‘not wrong’ to ‘good’, hence recasting the ‘tuts’ as non-serious.

After this, the talk about relationships continues in ways that shore up Mary and John’s newly accepted status as a ‘couple’ who engage in other couple-like activities like going for ‘really nice’ walks (line 197-8) and hence moves out of talk about sexual conduct.

1. Discussion: Achieving respectability by talking without naming

A pragmatic competency of social interaction is the contingent partitioning of topics into ones that are ‘safe’ and ones that are ‘unspeakable’. As we have seen, for Mary and Katie, one unspeakable is the embodied detail of sexual conduct. Yet, ‘unspeakable’ is too strong, because these things do get spoken about, but in ways that display their special, taboo status (Jefferson *et al.,* 1987; Norrick, 2005). One resource for producing a thing as unspeakable whilst actually speaking about it is to withhold naming it overtly. We see for example, that Mary refers obliquely to her own genitals when she talks of her period being ‘a barrier’; a barrier to what not being overtly expressed. Importantly, we can also notice that, although the upshot of Mary’s story is reported sexual activity, it too is never overtly named. Rather, the sexual activity is alluded to through phrases such as ‘I was a little naughty’ and ‘I did stuff to him’. Whilst, arguably, there is a hint of sexuality in the selection of ‘naughty’ and the description of *doing* stuff to a hearably male partner, out of context, these phrases might refer to almost any activity.

This allusive treatment of sexual conduct contrasts with the description of John and Mary’s first kiss. The kiss is referred to overtly, albeit in slightly hushed tones. It appears that, between these speakers, the act of kissing is at least openly mentionable, if not entirely without delicacy. Once mentioned, there is a fairly full and unabashed pursuit and description of how the kiss felt for Mary. The recipient’s responses to news about the kiss and sexual activity are also contrastive. Katie treats the kiss as something to be celebrated, interrogated and assessed. We can see this in the high-pitched ‘aw’s, the direct question of whether it was good, and the positive assessment of the whole thing as ‘cute’. In contrast, in immediate response to news that Mary had sexual contact with John, Katie produces the repeated tongue-clicks (plus address term). Although there is a sense of playfulness, there is not an equivalent sense of celebration, and no questioning of how it had felt. If we can treat the tongue-clicks as an assessment of some kind, then, although (arguably) playful, it lacks the positivity of ‘cute’.

So, kissing and sex are co-constructed in this extract in different ways. For these speakers, kissing is a mentionable, pursuable topic, but sex is not. The two activities in are positioned in different categories: the former is ‘allowable’ (even celebratory), the latter is ‘taboo’ (and occasions playful disapproval, fitted with a sense of naughtiness in the local story-preface).

These contrastive constructions connect to the stage-of-life of these speakers (as well as the different sequential environments in which talk about them occurs). As two-fifteen year old girls, it is likely (though presumptuous) that their respective sexual lives (with partners) are only just beginning. As teenage girls, they variously and complexly inhabit disputed social spaces vis-à-vis their sexuality. Through their locally co-produced identities as friends, who are beginning to negotiate and manage heterosexual relations, they organise their talk about sex in ways that attend to their (contested) moral accountability. The cautiously built telling and the particular ordering of events from initial resistance and reasoned acceptance of the relationship, through first kiss to (limited) sexual contact reproduce cultural understandings of young women as properly concerned with their reputations. However, a normative concern with moral respectability and the special or unspeakable status of a topic do not necessarily precede the interactional environment in which they emerge. It is more that these emerge in and are locally constructed in the progressive moment-by-moment unfolding of interaction between participants. It is not that something *is* unspeakable, but rather that it is *produced as* unspeakable. Perhaps ironically, the unmentionable is an accomplishment and is achieved in how it is (not) spoken of.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This paper has shown the application of conversation analysis to a single extract, in which gender and sexuality are interactionally relevant. The paper contributes to the literature on gender and language by focussing on talk about sex that occurs in a naturalistic context. The conversation is conducted by and for the participants (albeit with a recording device). The originality of the work lies, in part, in its contrast to much previous work that has relied on accounts of sex solicited by researchers in surveys, interviews and focus groups. This paper develops a conversation analytic argument for analysing naturalistic data, not as a replacement for more conventional researcher-led studies but as part of a broader project (Speer, 2012) to understand young people’s sexual lives. CA illuminates how young people organise their own talk about sex for each other, and can offer insights into what this reveals about their social and political positioning.

One of the advantages of naturalistic data is that it permits us to analyse how sex as a topic is introduced and managed in (this) interaction. The ‘special’ status of sex is also reproduced in this data extract. Sex is not discussed straightforwardly. Instead, it is constructed as taboo in the ways that it is introduced and referred to only in vague, unelaborated terms. We have seen that this contrasts markedly with the description of the first kiss, which is eminently an ‘appropriate’ topic. The taboo nature of talk about sex is connected to its moral status - in not being descriptive, Mary (and Katie) tacitly manage being ‘good’.

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1. Not that this is a new argument for feminist researchers, who have long struggled with dilemmas of this kind; how to minimise power relations and avoid speaking for participants (Scharff, 2010). The point here is that interviews and focus groups are inevitably interactional and bear analysing in these terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note that CA is not concerned with the internal and private desires of speakers, recipients and referents. Instead, the focus is on the publicly displayed sexual identities produced in talk. As Kitzinger (2005b) observes, publicly displayed identities are ‘insistently heterosexual’ (p.222). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Craic’ is a Gaelic word with no direct translation in English but is generally used to mean something along the lines of ‘news’ in a positive or entertaining sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Norrick (2005) provides evidence that not all stories get told on basis of their newsworthiness. For example, speakers might tell a known-in-common story in order to reminisce. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For girls under the age of 16, additional consent was sought from a parent. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As Katie is the caller, it seems that asking for the craic is the reason for call. Note that the call opening diverges from the canonical pattern (Schegloff, 1968) and gets to business straight away. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A turn construction unit (or tcu) is the conversation analytic term for the segments of talk that comprise a speaker’s turn in interaction (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. However, as Drew and Walker (2009) show, the goals of affiliation and alignment are not always achieved. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Unfortunately, inaudible data at this point makes it difficult to hear whether Jenny’s understanding about the status of John and Mary’s relationship results from deception or withholding information. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Indeed a short ‘yes’ would be wrong here because it could convey pithiness, denoting Mary’s stance on Katie’s rights to ask. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fireworks are a common Hollywood movie representation of the excitement and high emotion of a first kiss between lovers. For example, in the 1998 film Meet Joe Black, in the scene where actors Brad Pitt and Claire Forlani first kiss, the sky is filled with a spectacular firework display. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A similar argument is developed by (Billig (2006)) in which he argues that talk is repressive as well as expressive, and urges analysts to examine what is not said as well as what is said. Billig develops his argument as a method for exploring the interactional realisation of the psychoanalytic concept of repression. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)