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Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Baumgarten, N., Du Bois, I. and Gill, V. (2019) Patterns of othering minority groups in telephone gatekeeping encounters in the Sheffield property market. Journal of Language and Discrimination, 3 (2). pp. 120-149. ISSN: 2397-2637

https://doi.org/10.1558/jld.39978

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Patterns of othering minority groups in telephone gatekeeping encounters in the Sheffield property market

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Abstract
Research into housing discrimination has pointed out the pivotal role of estate agents as gatekeepers to the housing market. Telephone mystery shopping experiments were carried out with British estate agents to investigate how different British majority and minority groups –indexed by accented speech and ethnic personal names– are treated in those housing gatekeeping encounters. While there was little evidence for overt discrimination, linguistic microanalyses of the data revealed differential treatment of ethnic majority and minority groups during the call procedure. The differential treatment was found in the estate agents' call handling behaviours and related to the degree of personalisation of the service encounter in the form of either giving or withholding opportunities for rapport building with the caller. The findings show that ethnolinguistic discrimination in estate agents' service provision affects the gatekeeping process independently of its outcome, with implications for the notion of equitable access to services and community participation in the UK.

Keywords: UK housing market, gatekeeping, accent and name discrimination, rapport management, service encounters

1 Introduction

In the UK, housing in general and homeownership in particular, are omnipresent in the media, in politics and in public discourse at large. The "national obsession with getting on the housing ladder", i.e. purchasing one's first property for owner-occupation, reflects an ideology of individual homeownership as the ideal and the aspirational norm of housing (Powell and Robinson, n.d.; Guerny 1999a,b). In the dominant discourse, homeownership provides financial security and social prestige, while renting is stigmatised, associated with high costs, low-quality housing, relative poverty and social vulnerability. Renting also tends to be seen as a transitional state while one is saving up enough money to qualify for a mortgage to be able to purchase one's first house. This first 'home' (Mallet 2004) is conceptualised as the 'first step on the property ladder' with further house selling and buying across the lifespan as a means of capital generation and securing assets for welfare in old age.

Migration and anxieties over migration, too, have been persistent topics of UK political and public discourse. The two discourses of homeownership and migration are fused in the current political and public narrative construction of the 'UK housing crisis', in which migration (often conflated with ethnic minorities) plays a central role in the explanation of a lack of affordable housing (for renting and buying), increasing property prices, depressed wages, and the increasing financial inaccessibility of homeownership for a growing portion of the British majority population (Aalbers 2016; Allen 2008; McKee 2012; Hoolachan, McKee, Moore and Soaita 2017).

The housing shortage also means that for people who have the funds, access to buying a house has become highly competitive, which puts estate agents as gatekeepers to the housing

market in the spotlight. The current English housing system and market, then, with their two materially and symbolically charged, distinct tenure types of owning and renting on the one hand, and its discursively constructed associations with ethnic majority and minority group dynamics on the other, is a context in which people not only seek accommodation, but in doing do also are implicated in the symbolic construction of social prestige and stigma and the negotiation of larger discourses on intergroup relations. The study reported on in this article investigated how -in the context of these overlapping discourses of housing, migration and ethnicity- ethnic majority and minority groups were able to access estate agent services in relation to homeownership. The study focuses on the 'first-time buying experience', i.e., the 'first step on the property ladder', to find out how estate agents construct the gatekeeping encounter with customers from different socio-ethnic groups.

Research on gatekeeping in the housing market has pointed out the pivotal role of estate agents in ethnically-patterned residential steering and resultant ethnic residential segregation (e.g. Barresi 1968; Pearce 1979; Palm 1985; Smith 2002; Bonnet et al. 2016). However, while ethnic bias in selection practices in the private rental market has received considerable academic and public attention in the UK and Western Europe (e.g. Van der Bracht, Coenen and Van de Putte, 2015; Bonnet, Lalé, Safi and Wasmer, 2016; The Guardian 3/12/2018; Horr, Hunkler and Kroneberg, 2018), less is known about how different socio-ethnic groups are able to navigate gatekeeping encounters with estate agents when the goal is to purchase a property for owner-occupation.

This article presents results from a field study involving telephone mystery shopping experiments with estate agencies in the city of Sheffield in northern England. While being ostensibly mundane service encounters, we consider these calls to estate agents as the first of a series of institutional gatekeeping encounters which regulate access to the property market and homeownership. We will show that accessing estate agent services on the telephone is a multi-tiered phenomenon, in which outcome and process need to be differentiated. While there is little evidence for systematic preferential treatment of particular socio-ethnic groups in terms of the gatekeeping outcomes, there are language-based patterns of differential treatment during the gatekeeping process. Some groups benefit from a personalisation of the service encounter and interpersonal validation, which is withheld or even rejected for others. The latter constitute microinvalidations (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin, 2007; Piller 2016) that exclude the people affected by this behaviour from equitable community participation. It is these everyday relational encounters between stakeholders that seem to characterise different normalities for White British and ethnic minority participants in the housing market. They can only be revealed through qualitative linguistic microanalysis and have not received sufficient attention in housing studies on ethnic selection bias or in research on service encounters.

2 Gatekeeping in the housing market

2.1 Estate agents as gatekeepers to the housing market

The sale or letting of a property to a particular person is related both to estate agents' short-term profits from a particular housing transaction and to building a client base that will return maximum profits through the value of the properties that are brought on to the market. Three types of estate agent discrimination have been identified by Zhao, Ondrich and Yinger (2006): discrimination based on the agent's personal prejudice; customer prejudice in which the agent satisfies the prejudice of the existing client base; and statistical discrimination in which the agent uses the customer's social group membership to assess the likelihood of successful purchase. Zhao et al. (2006) further describe a set of discrete service choices that allow estate agents to discriminate between customer groups with regard to the number of services they

offer. For example, beyond granting or refusing a house viewing request, estate agents can offer similar properties for viewings, offer financing assistance, or make efforts to speed up the sale, e.g. through follow-up contact.

The prevalent methodology in housing discrimination research are field studies in which estate agents' services are tested (Pager 2007). Matched pairs of personas are created that are identical except for one social characteristic, signalled through physical appearance, accent and name. The personas are enacted by auditors in 'in-person' experiments or by the researchers themselves in e-mail 'correspondence' experiments. The experiment involves initiating a gatekeeping encounter by visiting branch offices, calling on the telephone or sending e-mails to request property viewings in order to create an opportunity for the estate agent to discriminate. In this way it is possible to observe discrete service provision choices made by estate agents in response to customers who are members of different social groups.

Although this research method involves communication between people, researchers are interested predominantly in the outcome of the interaction, i.e. whether participants were able to access the estate agent's services, but less *how* access works as a process. In in-person and telephone studies, the number of topics addressed, the perceived politeness and other behavioural traits of the gatekeeping agent tend to be part of the post-test reporting. Similarly, some correspondence studies take in to consideration the content of the response e-mails sent by the estate agent. However, the purpose and nature of the data collected and the analysis of the gatekeeping encounter are outcome-oriented, not process-oriented. Therefore, it remains relatively unknown how gatekeeping is communicatively constructed and interactionally accomplished.

2.2 The project: Linguistic Profiling on the Urban Property Market[1]

The framework for investigating estate agents' gatekeeping practices in the present study takes as its point of departure Baugh's concept of 'linguistic profiling', i.e. discrimination based on language usage (Baugh 2000) to explore majority and minority group experiences. In its original formulation, linguistic profiling had a narrow focus on phonetic speech features, i.e.

> auditory cues that may be used to identify an individual or individuals as belonging to a linguistic subgroup within a given speech community, including a racial subgroup. Hearers frequently practice linguistic profiling, including drawing racial inferences from small amounts of speech (Baugh 2000: 363)

In our approach, we move beyond phonetic features to include ethnic personal names and culture-specific communication styles in a broadened conceptualisation of linguistic profiling as a linguistic-interactional phenomenon. This allowed us stimulate service providers' drawing of socio-ethnic inferences on multiple communicative levels and to extend the analysis of gatekeeping behaviour to interactional features.

Linguistic profiling studies have shown that telephone service providers are susceptible to markers of language variation which can be used to draw ethnic-related inferences about the speaker. This is especially the case when service provision contains an element of gatekeeping (Erickson 1976), which gives the service provider the authority to allow or deny the customer the service or goods (e.g. Massey and Lundy 2001; Baugh 2007; Bavan 2009, for housing). These studies have typically mostly used quantitative methods to investigate discrimination by perception reflected in callers' success rates for accessing services. Usually they do not include qualitative analyses of the interaction between the service provider and customer and their language use during the call (Du Bois, this issue). It is thus not clear whether and how majority and minority group service encounter experiences are similar or different, as a successful service outcome does not necessarily equal a pleasant service experience and vice versa.

Features at all linguistic levels, from phonetics to pragmatics, can be the source of ethnic-based inferencing by the hearer, however, accent features have been shown to trigger almost instantaneous social categorisation (Flege, 1984). The inferencing process is accompanied by personality judgements of the speaker, which derive from positive or negative emotions evoked by what is heard, as language features are attributed to different social groups and the internalized cognitive and affective attitudes of the hearer towards those groups (Giles and Billings, 2004; Fuertes, Gottdiener, Martin, Gilbert and Giles, 2012; Hansen, Rakić and Steffens, 2014, Sharma, Levon, Watt, Ye and Cardoso, this issue). When there is a pattern to hearer judgements of speech accents, this points to a symbolic ecology of languages (Haugen, 1972; Steffensen and Fill, 2014) in the environment. Symbolic language ecologies describe the pattern of how multiple languages or –as in the present case- varieties of one language co-exist in the geographical area and their relationships with societal structures, including the 'place' and 'currency' of a variety in institutions and economic processes as well as ascriptions of standardness, non-standardness and social prestige. They tend to reflect larger-scale intergroup relations and stereotypes (Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1981; Adler, this issue).

Hearers' responses to non-native speech markers, i.e. those that can be attributed to the speaker being foreign-born, include further dimensions in addition to personality trait ascription. Non-native pronunciation, prosodic patterns and communicative styles tend to be associated with reduced intelligibility and comprehensibility and assumptions of communication difficulties (Munro and Derwig, 1995; Egbert 2004; Gluszek and Dovidio 2010; Subtirelu 2015; Hansen and Dovidio 2016). Non-native speech has also been shown to affect native speaker listeners' conversational collaboration and cooperativeness in task completion (Lindemann 2002; Egbert 2005).

Auditory stimuli tend to override visual stimuli in ethnic categorization and personality trait and group attribution (Rakić, Steffens and Mummendey, 2011). This underscores the perceptual salience of accents and the psychological entrenchment of accent categorization in relation to social group membership (Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus and Spelke, 2009; Pietraszewski and Schwartz 2014). However, similar social categorization processes have been observed for ethnic minority names, both when they are presented in spoken and written form (Bursell 2012; Blommaert, Coenders, Van Tubergen, 2013). Speech style and name are thus the first diagnostic for identifying geographical or social outsiders and insiders (Lippi-Green 1994), which can potentially influence the course of social interactions (Raymond, 2018).

The present study combined the perspectives of discrimination by perception, residential steering, and symbolic language ecologies in order to identify the effects of accented speech and personal names on gatekeepers who regulate access to the property market in Sheffield. Specifically we addressed

i) how personal names and accented speech which are associable with established ethnic minorities, immigrant groups, and White British[2] regional origin affect speakers' chances of receiving an appointment to view a residential property for sale in different Sheffield city areas ('discrimination by perception');
ii) whether language-sensitive discriminatory gatekeeping practices exist that segregate prospective buyers in separate parts of the city ('residential steering'); and
iii) whether socially prestigious and non-prestigious accent-name combinations exist in the environment that result in differential treatment of ethnic majority and minority groups in the housing industry ('symbolic language ecologies').

3 Data and methodology

The data set for the analysis comprises mystery shopper telephone calls to estate agencies in response to 'for-sale' property listings in four different areas of Sheffield.[3] The telephone interactions were elicited through a variation of the 'verbal guise technique' (Garret et al. 2003), in which the same communicative task -requesting a property viewing- was carried out according to a script by different speakers, who were recruited on the basis of their foreign language or regional dialect accent in English. The call data was analysed quantitatively for the outcomes of the calls ('viewing offered and confirmed') and qualitatively for interactional variation. For the latter we employed linguistic discourse analysis (Gumperz 1982) informed by intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes 2013), conversation analysis (Schegloff 2007), and discourse approaches to intercultural communication (Scollon and Scollon 2001).

The speech accents under investigation were selected to index prominent majority and minority groups in the Sheffield area, according to census data (ONS 2011). They represent established ethnic minorities (Asian (Hindi/Urdu), Middle Eastern (Arabic/Farsi)), recent EU migrant groups (Polish, Spanish, Romanian) and the local White British majority community (Northern/Yorkshire English). For both majority and minority groups[4] one overtly prestigious accent was included: Southern-Standard English and European French (Coupland and Bishop 2007; Jaworska and Themistocleous 2018). For each participant, the accent was combined with a matching generic personal name (e.g. 'Eva Martinez' with a Spanish accent) in order to signal minority or majority group membership both acoustically and lexically. This provided two separate perceptual stimuli for the social categorisation of the speaker by the hearer, with the accent being the first available socially meaningful information reinforced by the name.[5]

One female persona was designed for the experiment. The persona was a 'first-time buyer', fitted with socio-economically desirable characteristics in the context of homeownership in the UK. As such, she would be a sought-after customer for an estate agency, but would not be expected to have any in depth knowledge of the property market or the typical processes and procedures involved in accessing estate agent services. This persona was enacted over the telephone by 29 female participants. All participants were between 25 and 42 years old and had been in the UK for more than six months; the majority were British citizens or long-term residents in the UK. All participants had completed at least one academic degree in the UK or were in the process of completing one. The sampling of participants involved in higher education was purposeful because it helped to reduce social speech variation within the participant group. The participants were provided with a script that contained information about the persona (including address, contact, financial and banking details) and the wording of the call opening move. In the task briefing, they were instructed to make the viewing request and then continue to conduct the call in a conventionally polite way until it was completed. 'Conventionally polite' was not specified further so as to allow participants autonomy and the use of their own socio-pragmatic and pragmalinguistic strategies in conducting the call. Immediately after the call, the callers rated the estate agents' 'friendliness' and 'responsiveness' on a five-point semantic differential scale.

Each participant completed between nine and fourteen calls in response to property for-sale listings in four different socio-economic areas of the city. The areas were distinguished with respect to income levels and ethnic diversity according to census data. For each participant, a set of fresh listings were selected, which had come to the market immediately before the experiment and were affordable for a first-time buyer.[6] This approach ensured that all calls were made in a competitive market environment, in which interested buyers compete for early access to house viewings. 336 calls were made over a period of nine months between 2017 and 2018. In total, the participants spoke to more than 25 different estate agencies. In each experiment session, individual agency branch offices were only contacted once. The calls were recorded and manually transcribed according to GAT2 conventions (Selting, Auer, Barth-

Weingarten, Bergmann, Bergmann, Birkner and Couper-Kuhlen, 2009). All identifying information was changed.[7] The call data allowed us to investigate both the outcome and the process of a central gatekeeping event that channels access to the property market. The social acceptability ratings provided an insight into which call handling behaviours were judged as friendly and responsive service.

4 Findings

4.1 Call outcomes

With the exception of the Romanian group, all groups are similarly successful in securing confirmed viewings (Table 1). Pair-wise comparison of the Romanian group with the other groups shows, however, a significant intergroup difference with the French group. There are no significant differences in the call outcomes for the four city areas tested.

Table 1 Confirmed viewings obtained in all city areas. P-value for pair-wise comparison with the Romanian group (Fisher's Exact, two-tailed).

Group (n)	% of confirmed viewings	p-value
Northern (35)	88.89	0.063
Southern-Standard (48)	89.19	0.081
French (46)	91.11	0.038*
Hindi (38)	81.58	0.412
Middle Eastern (45)	86.67	0.159
Polish (32)	90.32	0.072
Romanian (35)	72.22	-
Spanish (57)	89.58	0.096

The division between the Romanian and French groups in our data is paralleled by overall positive language attitudes towards French and bilingualism with those languages that are associated with Modern Foreign Languages study and elite multilingualism, and less favourable attitudes towards bilingualism with so-called 'migrant' languages, which are also not part of the school curriculum (Jaworska and Themistocleous 2018). In addition, media representations of Romanians in the UK and in particular in Sheffield have been overwhelmingly negative, related to large-scale immigration and the social impact of their patterns of settlement in the UK. Romanians are the most recent large EU migrant group in the UK. The group is also often conflated with 'Gypsies' and 'Roma', which are equally portrayed as 'problematic other' (The Migration Observatory 2014; The Casey Review 2016).

4.2 Social acceptability

There is little intergroup variation in the social acceptability ratings, although the Middle Eastern and the Romanian groups' rating patterns reflect comparatively diverse call experiences for those groups (Figures 1 and 2). The two British majority groups gave the highest ratings, in particular with regard to estate agents' responsiveness. This indicates that the estate agents (EA) conducted the calls in a manner that coincided with the White British callers' expectations of interpersonally engaged service provision. Especially among the Northern group, EA responsiveness ratings are uniformly high. However, there is no relationship between the social acceptability ratings and the outcome of the calls.

Figure 1 Friendliness (1-friendly 5-unfriendly)

[[Figure 1 should be inserted here]]

Figure 2 Responsiveness (1-responsive 5-unresponsive)

[[Figure 2 should be inserted here]]

The rating variation is noteworthy, however, because telephone service provision typically is linguistically and interactionally highly standardised through call scripts and institutionally monitored through recording for performance assessment and quality control. Call centres, in particular, have been described as 'hyper-rationalised' (Hultgren 2017) service environments, geared and shaped towards maximising efficiency, predictability, control, and sameness of service, including sameness of customer experience (Jagodziński and Archer 2018). The communicative work that a call centre agent is required to carry out is linguistically regulated through scripts and guidelines that pre-determine not only what agents have to produce (e.g. a standard greeting) but also how to do it (e.g. 'with a smile') (Cameron 2000; Hultgren 2017). Crucially, the linguistic regulation encompasses two dimensions: the transactional aspects of service provision and the communicative construction of an interpersonal relationship between caller and agent. For example, agents are required to engage in particular forms of relational work (e.g. using the caller's name; giving listener signals) in order to build rapport with the caller. The standardisation and routinisation of agent performance that is the desired outcome of the linguistic regulation is reinforced through performance monitoring.
The standardisation of the call procedure is also evident in the present data. Figure 3 shows the typical call sequence.

Figure 3 Typical call sequence. Minimum set of communicative tasks in bold; [] optional place in the sequence

[[Figure 3 should be inserted here]]

However, in our data standardisation does not fully extend to the communicative construction of an interpersonal relationship between caller and EA.

4.3 Variation in call handling behaviour

Variation in EAs' call-handling behaviour occurs in the context of core call activities (Table 2, column A) and in relation to the central communicative tasks and presuppositions in information-based service encounters, i.e. the giving and receiving of information on the basis of mutual assumptions about already existing topic knowledge (column B). The variation is realised by a differential use of a particular set of linguistic and interactional choices (column C).

Table 2 Triggers for call handling variation (A and B) and resources for variation (C)

A **Core call stages**	B **Communicative tasks and presuppositions**	C **Linguistic and interactional choice**
Response to viewing request	Assumption of shared knowledge – Call procedure – Sequencing of house buying transaction – Housing terminology	Pausing and silence
Registration procedure		Information intake and uptake signals
Caller's status as 'first-time buyer'		Information assessment
Financial background check	Information giving (incl. spelling of names, numbers)	Non-speech sounds (breathing, sighing, laughter, singing, humming)
	Clarification requests	Prosody and pitch variation
	Interactional trouble based on the above	Relational talk – Addressing and naming the caller – Phatic sequences; small talk episodes

The communicative tasks and presuppositions (B) are associated with conversational grounding (Clark and Brennan 1991; Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986), i.e. procedures that ensure that mutual understanding has been achieved and common ground is being constructed to serve as the shared knowledge base for the interaction. Importantly, common ground encompasses not only referential information that is exchanged as part of the service transaction, but also information that has a relational orientation, i.e. that contributes to establishing and maintaining an interpersonal relationship between caller and EA.

In what follows, parallel instances from the EAs' handling of core stages and communicative tasks will be discussed in order to exemplify differential treatment of callers through the linguistic and interactional choices made by EAs. The examples are taken from two calls from the Southern-Standard and the Romanian group. Instead of discussing a variety of examples from a greater range of calls across the data set, the focus is on comparing four contrastive instances from an *intra*group and an *inter*group call (Gumperz 1982). This will illustrate, on the one hand, that differential treatment manifests itself in individually observable instances of EAs' call-handling choices (Heritage 2005). On the other hand, the examples show that differential treatment recurs and can characterise longer stretches of the interaction or even an entire call experience. The two calls were chosen as they both contain highly collaborative caller behaviour and episodes of interactional trouble caused by the callers. Differential treatment is associated with EAs' engagement in rapport management (Spencer-Oatey 2000) -specifically, EAs' linguistic and communicative choices regarding reciprocating relational work, information uptake and assessment (Schegloff 2007, Lindström, Norrby, Wide and Nilsson 2019), and the use of (de-)problematizing strategies (Lindemann 2002). The instances discussed concern resolving an issue with an interruption in the telephone line; information giving and uptake in the context of the client registration procedure; and the EAs' probing into the financial background of the callers. Our analysis focuses on several subtle linguistic-interactional phenomena in EAs' call handling that coincide with the participants' high or low rating of the interaction and characterise intra- and intragroup calls in our data more generally.

4.2.1 Reciprocating relational work

In example (1), the line briefly cuts out (line 10) and the EA's (Age) question towards the Southern-Standard caller (Luc) gets interrupted. Luc requests Age to repeat the question.

Transcription conventions

Overlap	[ ]
Pausing/silence	(.) micropause; (-) 0.2-0.5s; measured (0.73)
In-/outbreaths	°h/h°
Reduced loudness	<<p>>
Lengthened sound	:
Latched utterances	=
Unintelligible speech	( )
Emphasis	____

(1) Southern-Standard caller Lucy Edwards (Luc); estate agent, female (Age); 1-friendliness, 1-responsiveness; call length 07:03min.

1	Age	what 'bout your mortgage
((7 lines of talk omitted))		
8	Age	c'you off remember off the top of your head you
9		what kind of
10		(0.73; line cut off)
11	Age	( ) you
12		((click))
13	Luc	oh sorry it just (.) cut out for a second
14		could you just repeat <<smile voice>
15		[that please]>
16	Age	[yeah yeah]
17		he <<smile voice> oh sorry>
18		i was just gonna say what kind of rates are they
19		offering you

Luc and Age acknowledge and resolve the interruption through collaborative overlap (lines 14-15), reciprocal smile voice (lines 14, 16), and reciprocal apologising (lines 13, 16). Age's affirmative 'yeah yeah' move acknowledges and minimises the repetition request. Age further grounds the episode in the interactional moment through the meta comment 'I was just gonna say' (line 17) and in this way steers the interaction away from the disruption and back to the transactional topic. The conversation continues in a smooth way without any pauses or hesitations. Notably, both speakers have been involved in trouble resolution (Egbert 2004). In the following example (2) the EA reacts differently towards a minority group caller when a similar technical problem occurs.

(2) Romanian caller Sofia Albescu (Sof); estate agent, female (Age); 3-friendliness, 3-responsiveness; call length 08:35min

1	Age	°h good morning AGENCY

2 [NAME speaking]
3 Sof [<<p> hllo>]
4 (0.70)
5 Sof hello eh my name is sofia albescu
6 (0.32)
7 Sof i'm looking at the three bedroom property (-) in
8 benson [<<p>road>]
9 Age [i'm sorry | i can't] hear you=
10 =can you speak up please h°
11 (0.17)
12 Sof hello | ah can you hear me now
13 (0.76)
14 Age no °h
((17 lines of talk ommitted))
32 ((Sof hangs up to dial again))
33 (43.42)
34 Age good morning AGENCY=
35 =NAME speaking
36 Sof hello
37 °h oh ah i'm (0.32) i'm calling again
38 (0.27)
39 Sof can you hear me [now]
40 Age [it's] (.) yes it's slightly
41 better n[ow]
42 Sof [<<laughing> hh°>]
43 Age °h not (.) not really loud bu' e:hm it's
44 better than it was e'
45 (0.64)
46 Sof sorry about that
47 °h ehm so my name is sofia albescu
48 (.) ehm i am looking at the property a three
49 bedroom (.) a-property (.) in eh benson road
50 (1.12)
51 Sof ah i would like to book a v:iewing (0.15) if
52 it's possible
53 (0.27)
54 Age °h on what road was it °h
55 Sof oh benson
56 (0.86)

```
57  Age   how are you spelling that plea:se h°=
```

The Romanian (Sof) participant's call starts with connection issues (line 9); Sof offers to call again. At the beginning of the second call, there is no uptake from Age but rather a focus on content and problem (House 2010) and not on the person. Sof's attempt at relating the present interaction to what happened before ('I'm calling again', lines 37-38) receives no uptake or greeting (line 38). When Sof asks whether Age can hear her (line 39), Age responds with a negative evaluation of the current call quality (lines 40-44), emphasising 'slightly' and 'not really loud' rather than 'better', which would have displayed an effort to sustain the joint communication (Stefanovic 2013; Goffman, 1964). Sof offers rapport-enhancement (Spencer-Oatey 2000) opportunities through slight laughter (line 42), displaying her intent to soften the problematic situation (Potter and Hepburn, 2010). Sof's apology 'sorry about that' (line 46) displays her trouble responsibility (Robinson 2006) but again there is no response from Age. Numerous longer Age-driven pauses (lines 45, 49, 51) indicate that initiating and sustaining the interaction is performed by Sof alone. Age does not offer her service or otherwise takes responsibility for the steering of the transaction -neither in the opening move, nor after the interactional trouble is dealt with, nor after Sof identifies the property she is calling about (line 50). Moreover, unlike in example (1) the interactional trouble is not marked as resolved by Age. The pause in line 45 indicates that Sof is waiting for Age to go on, but it is Sof who achieves the transition to the purpose of her call and accomplishes orientation to the transaction in line 47 ('so my name is'). Age's audible in- and outbreaths and withholding of uptake and acknowledgement tokens signal non-participation (Goffman 1964; Heritage 2005; Stefanovic 2013). The spelling request -formulated as an other-oriented request ('how are you spelling that', line 57)- is realised with marked falling intonation on 'please', a lengthening of [i] and followed by an audible outbreath. It underscores that Age has a problem with Sof's linguistic encoding of information.

4.2.2 Information giving and uptake

In example (3), Luc gives her current address as part of the customer registration procedure required by the estate agency.

(3)

```
1   Age    can you give me your postcode lucy
2          (0.17)
3   Luc    yep ehm ess for sugar nine (.) five ess for
4          sugar (-) aitch
5          (1.82)
6   Age    just confirm the first line of your address
7          [for me] [please]
8   Luc    [ yeah ]
9                  [apartme]nt three oh four
10         (0.71)
11  Age    three oh four
12         (1.9)
13  Age    wonderful=
14         =what's the best contact telephone number
```

The EA's request (line 1) represents a routinized task orientation which Luc completes successfully. Luc uses a spelling alphabet to disambiguate letters during spelling (line 3). She signals individual information chunks through micro pauses, making the requested information available in increments. Likewise, Luc breaks down triple-digit numbers into single ones (line 9). This reflects her knowledge of culture- and language specific spelling and information-giving conventions on the telephone (Clarke and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986). Age signals information uptake with verbatim repetition (line 11). This information giving activity requires "the participants to accomplish and to make explicit their substantive understanding on a turn-by-turn basis" (Firth, 1996: 250). It is completed with the sequence closing third 'wonderful' (Schegloff, 2007), which represents a positive assessment (Pomerantz, 1984). 'Wonderful' signals high-grade assessment of successful task completion and quality of information, hearable as "the definitive closure of a task section" in a service encounter (Lindström et al., 2019: 92) -as opposed to low-grade assessment items such as 'okay' or 'good'.

The same transaction stage in Sof's call (example 4) triggers a misunderstanding caused by diverging spelling conventions.

(4)

1	Age	and your address at the moment
2	Sof	eh my address at the moment i:s a-one hundred
3		three ay (0.18) linklater road
4		(0.64)
5	Sof	oh ess ten
6		(0.15)
7	Sof	six ee (0.19) <<p> aer>
8		(1.03)
9	Age	six e:h h°
10		(0.79)
11	Sof	ae<<p> r>
12		(1.07)
13	Age	ef (0.17) for foxtrot
14		(0.28)
15	Sof	ae<<p> r>
16		(1.02)
17	Age	ess for sugar
18	Sof	no no no aer
19		(1.45)
20	Age	ef
21		(0.66)
22	Sof	aer
23		(1.27)
24	Sof	a:hm:

```
25          (1.48)
26  Sof     from race
27          (3.23)
28  Age     °h what's your best contact number sofia
```

For a successful registration of the caller in the estate agency's customer database, both participants need to make explicit problematic items to accomplish the correct spelling of the current address (Firth 1996). In this sequence, the task is not successfully completed, partly due Sof's non-standard spelling conventions, but also due to the lack of collaboration, i.e. acknowledgement tokens, by Age. In addition, Age does not explicate her non-understanding; instead, she offers verbalisations of what she heard, each of which comes after longer silences (lines 13, 17, 20). Sof's attempt at clarification by imitating Age's spelling conventions (line 26) -albeit with an unidiomatic letter-reference word combination- is not taken up. Following a three second pause and prefaced by audible breathing, Age makes an abrupt topic shift without having completed the task (lines 27-28).

4.2.3 Evaluation of information

Example (5) illustrates how the conversational rapport with the Southern-Standard caller is highly enhanced by ordinary talk and rapport building elements, such as acknowledging responses, collaborative overlap and phatic talk (Heritage 2005).

(5)

```
1   Age     are you a first time [buyer then lucy or]
2   Luc                          [     °h i am      ]
3           yeah
4           so this is all a bit new to me ((laughs))
5   Age     well done
6           [((laughs))]
7   Luc     [((laughs))]
8           °h still getting used
9           [to all the <<laughing> terminology>]
10  Age     [       i know it's not easy is it  ]
11          ((laughs))
12          °h it's a bit nerve racking but [NAME'll guide you]
13          through it don't wor[ry  ]
14  Luc                                     [     it is       ]
15                              [yeah] ((laughs))
16          (0.16)
17  Age     °hh it is though because everything's like
18          figures thrown at you you think
19          [ah goodness]
20  Luc     [yeah:      ]
21  Age     what next
```

```
22  Luc    (.) <<laughing< i know>
23         (0.54)
24  Age    right
25         let's see
```

Age's request for information on Luc's status as a 'first-time buyer' is assessed with a high-grade assessment 'well done' (line 5). Her admission of being new to the house buying experience (lines 4) triggers a cascade of rapport-enhancing behaviours by Age, indexing a shared understanding of the processes and feelings involved. Age offers positive evaluation of Luc through a compliment that praises 'first-time buyer' status as an achievement (line 5), reciprocates Luc's solidarity-seeking laughter (lines 4-11), and shows cognitive and affective engagement in the interactional moment through collaborative overlap (lines 9-10), including commiseration (Boxer 1993) through emphatic moves ('I know it's') and assurance of support ('guide you through it don't worry', lines 10-13). When the phatic sequence around the first-time buyer status is closed in principle in line 15, Age adds a voluntary extension of the phatic talk, in which she once more anticipates and empathises with Luc's affective responses to the house hunting experience (lines 17-21).

By contrast, Sof's status as 'first-time buyer' is dealt with rather task-oriented; Age displays no relationship building high-grade positive assessments.

(6)

```
1   Age    jiah
2          and are you a first time buyer (0.20) [sofia]
3   Sof                                          [ yes ]
4          (0.47)
5   Sof    [yes ]
5   Age    [yeah]
6          (0.48)
7   Age    °h so you're just rentin' at the moment
8   Sof    yes <<p> i'm just [renting]>
9   Age                      [ yeah  ]
```

Sof's positive compliance with Age's request for information here is received with minimal uptake through a delayed low-grade assessment ('yeah', line 5). The information is then used to conclude that Sof is 'just rentin' at the moment' (line 7), which topicalises Sof's current status as a tenant and characterises that as deficient ('just'). The use of 'so' in line 7 explicates an assumed relationship between renting and first-time buyer status. This is in contrast to example (5) where Age chooses to foreground a different relationship around 'first-time buyer' status, namely that of achievement. In (6), the EA devalues Sof's current housing status whereas the EA in (5) focuses on Luc's future status as homeowner.

4.2.4 (De-)Problematisation

In the final set of examples, the EAs go through the financial background check questions.

(7)

1	Age	i was just gonna say what kind of rates are
2		they offering you
3		(0.46)
4	Luc	°h ehm::
5		(0.21)
6	Luc	twenny li' twenny five (.) thirty year
7		(0.8)
8	Luc	is that what you mean
9		(0.13)
10	Age	m-kay
11		(0.32)
12	Age	yeah i'm thinking interest rates
13		what they're gonna charge you
14	Luc	°h (.) eh:m:
15		(0.57)
16	Luc	<<p> oh god> i don't know if
17		<<laughing> i can remember>
18		((laughs))
19	Age	<<laughing>it doesn't matter) dear>
20		[((laughs))]
21	Luc	[((laughs))]
22	Age	the only reason i'm asking is we have
23		(.) inhouse mortgage consultant

Luc's knowledge gap (lines 8) indicates a trouble source, which Age responds to with a trouble resolution (Egbert 2004). Age utilizes a low-grade assessment acknowledgment response ('m-kay') and then paraphrases the request for information with reference to her thought processes behind the question ('I'm thinking interest rates', lines 10-12). In this way, Age frames Luc's knowledge gap as the result of a misunderstanding and acknowledges responsibility for the misunderstanding by implicating that she was too implicit in formulating the question. When Luc has to admit to another knowledge gap (lines 16-17), Age resolves that moment of trouble through momentarily leaving the transactional space by joining in Luc's apologetic laughter, minimising the problem ('it doesn't matter'), and creating a close interpersonal relationship through the use of an endearment (lines 19-21). Age then returns to the transaction through a meta-comment ('the only reason I'm asking', line 22) that gives a justification for asking the question and further minimises its relevance.

At the same stage of her call, the Romanian caller Sof is able to provide the requested information.

(8)

1	Age	°hh and have you set yourself a: sort of
2		budget that you want t' spend on a propertey
3	Sof	ah yes eh somewhere between one hundred ninety
4		and two hundred ten
5		(0.39) <<p>(eh) [thou]sand pounds>
6	Age	[yeah]
7		(0.47)
8	Age	o-kay
9	Age	°hh a:nd how have you arrived at that figure
10		sofia
11		(0.6)
12	Sof	°hh ahm (0.11) well i: ehm inherited some money
13		(0.12) and i also made an agreement with my bank
14		(0.75)
15	Age	yeah
16	Sof	and we considered this (0.41) to be a (0.21) good
17		budget
18		(1.01)
19	Age	okay=
20		=who do you bank with sofia
21		(0.24)
22	Sof	ah aitch ess bee cee
23		(0.59)
24	Age	yeah
25		(0.91)
26	Age	m-kay
27		°hh so what areas of sheffield have you been
28		looking at so far

Age's acknowledging responses 'yeah', 'okay' and the reduced 'm-kay' (lines 6, 8, 15, 19, 24-26) indicate that she focuses on information content rather than on rapport building (Antaki 2000). These response tokens represent low-grade assessments or neutral assessments (Antaki 2000; Lindström et al. 2019) which withhold positive evaluation and are vague as to whether the information provided is satisfactory. In this example, the interaction remains task-oriented and is marked by institutional distance (Heritage 2005), while in (7) above, the EA engages in rapport enhancement (Spencer-Oatey 2000) as in ordinary friendship talk (Boxer 1993). In (8), Age probes further into Sof's financial details with direct questions, using contrastive stress and a vocative, her name, (lines 9, 20) to summon and focus Sof's attention. The topic is closed by an abrupt topic shift at increased volume.

5 Discussion

There are clear differences in the way the EAs handle the calls at comparable transactional stages. Whenever the Southern-Standard caller engages in relational work, this is taken up, paralleled and reinforced by the EA. In purely transactional contexts, the EA finds ways of injecting caller face-enhancing comments and high-grade positive assessments, which emphasise the high quality of the information given by the caller. Interactional trouble and moments of face-threat are explicitly de-problematised and minimised to reduce their severity and their impact on the interaction. The EA takes responsibility for misunderstandings caused by the caller. In contrast, relational work offered by the Romanian caller is not reciprocated. Acknowledgement of information is delayed, only given through low-grade assessments, or entirely omitted, leaving it open whether the information provided met the EA's criteria. Non-understanding and miscommunication are not overtly attended to and tasks are abandoned without explanation. Ordinary talk elements displaying a positive relationship with the caller are completely withheld. Overall, the difficulty of the task for the EA is emphasised for the caller. This makes EAs' behaviour open to evaluations of impoliteness on the part of the caller.

This pattern of differentiation shows that outcome and process of gatekeeping encounters need to be differentiated and examined separately in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of how community participation, in this case the housing market, works for different groups. The quantitative perspective on the outcomes of the house viewing requests seems unrelated to the difference in the way EAs interact with callers from different majority and ethnic minority groups on the telephone. Crucially, these differences do not lie in open conflict or in unwelcome caller behaviour that necessitate deviations from the transactional sequence, which have been described in previous research on telephone service provision (Cameron, 2008; Orthaber and Marquez-Reiter, 2011; Archer and Jagodziński, 2015). Across the 300+ calls there is uniformity in the way in which EAs processed viewing requests, regardless of whether the viewing was offered and ultimately confirmed in post-call communication. Likewise, the calls do not include interpersonally sensitive activities, such as e.g. complaints. Rather, the differentiation occurs at comparatively mundane stages of the call at which EAs decide to build rapport or not, without formal consequences for the transaction.

Rapport management behaviours differ, first, in the way in which EAs respond to the callers' solidarity-seeking behaviours, second, in the way in which uptake of information given by the caller is signalled or avoided, and third, in the manner in which caller contributions are framed as problems or not. Finally, EAs draw upon the culture-specific discourse on home-ownership in different ways –using it to praise and validate or invisibilise and invalidate the caller's current position. These communicative and interactional choices define the degree to which the service transaction is constructed by the EA as a joint endeavour, in which the callers' affective and cognitive states are anticipated, mirrored and attended to in order to achieve interpersonal coordination in the mediated service environment. Withholding rapport and positioning the caller the source of difficulties is a means of othering the caller.

These choices also affect how visible or hidden the institutional nature of the call is for the caller. The standardized call procedure, in which the EA controls the sequence of the call and elicits, steers and controls caller collaboration, contributes to an asymmetrical role relationship between caller and EA that already exists by virtue of the fact that the EA can refuse the service requested. In addition to the power imbalance inherent in the service seeker and service provider roles, the EA holds more institutional knowledge of both the pattern of the transaction on the telephone and the housing market in general. The rapport management choices that EAs make result in an emphasis of either an interpersonal or an institutional frame for the encounter.

6 Conclusion

Discrimination in the housing market can occur at various stages of the property-buying process. Access to property viewings is, however, the first stage of the selection process. With the exception of a negative bias against the Romanian group, there is no quantitative evidence for discrimination against particular ethnic minority and White British groups in gatekeeping encounters in the Sheffield property market. With respect to 'discrimination by perception' and resultant 'residential steering', the results show that personal names and accented speech associated with minority or majority group membership do not generally affect the chance to receive an appointment to view a property for sale in different areas of the city. However, there are indications that a 'symbolic language ecology' exists in the environment that provides advantages during the process of service provision for callers whose name and speech style index White British group membership and localeness. This raises questions for the conceptualisation, implementation, and monitoring of 'equitable access' to services and research into the construction of customer experience in mediated service environments, both of which have not addressed the 'normality' of intercultural service encounters and how they can be different from intragroup ones. As our results show, equal opportunities and outcomes do not necessarily mean equal treatment.

This was a small-scale field study, in which the size of the data set was constrained by the logistics of covert data collection in a relatively small-size research site over a short period of time and a methodological approach that aimed to complement quantitative results with qualitative analysis. The results are, therefore, limited in that they reflect only one particular moment in time in one section of the Sheffield housing market. In addition, they only reflect the experience of female callers –the gender group in the UK that is less likely to be able to afford homeownership and possibly also less likely to contact estate agents in relation to that service (Women's Housing Forum 2019). Therefore, positive or negative expectancy violation (Rakić this volume) might have influenced estate agents' call handling behaviours and decision making. Further, the need to elicit near-'authentic' interaction on the telephone required us to accept a greater degree of variability in the presentation of the stimuli through the verbal guises. Finally, estate agents might have responded to interpretations of the callers' personalities from their voice quality rather than from the ethnolinguistic markers provided. With these caveats in mind, the results show that in the absence of opportunities to discriminate openly against callers in a monitored and regulated environment, differential treatment of caller groups can be expressed in subtle ways: through less engagement in rapport building and a transactional focus in ethnic minority group calls, and through the construction of interpersonal common ground, which offsets the transactional nature of the service encounter in White British majority group calls. These constitute essentially two qualitatively different modes of participatory access to estate agents' services: one that is characterised by an emphasis on shared understandings and values and one that is characterised by its absence. These symbolic inclusion and exclusion processes are hidden in the service provision procedure and only accessible through a micro-analytic approach to the human-human interaction at the core of housing encounters. Further studies are needed in order to determine the extent of this type of differential community participation for majority and minority groups in the UK.

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[1] Funded by the British Academy *Tackling the UK's International Challenges 2017*.

[2] According to UK census classification (ONS 2011).

[3] The data was collected in a covert research design reviewed and approved by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from participants acting as mystery shoppers; the estate agencies were informed of the data collection and research purposes after the completion of the data collection. This approach was necessary due to the small size of the research site, the comparatively large volume of data collected over a short period of time, and the sensitivity of the topic of fair housing and access to home-ownership in the current UK context.

[4] For the present purposes, ethnic minority groups and immigrant groups are subsumed under the category label 'ethnic minority'.

[5] Additional lexico-grammatical, pragmalinguistic and interactional markers of socio-ethnic group membership were not controlled for.

[6] The listings only included flats and houses in overall good condition, fitted to a good standard. Property prices ranged from GBP 110,000 to 200,000. The financial information provided in the call script ensured that all callers, if asked, could give evidence of sufficient funds for the purchase.