The emergent construction of feminist identity in interaction

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This case study is an analysis of college-aged womens' conversations about feminist identity and tracks a shifting attitude among college women with respect to feminist identification. Using conversation analysis, I argue that the interlocutors' feminist identity is an interactional achievement produced by collaboratively setting aside topics related to feminism. This practice (re)problematizes feminism and maintains hegemonic standards of 'feminist' as an identity that needs to be accounted for in conversation. Building on Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (2013) work on the phrase "I'm not a feminist, but…" I argue that feminist identification may be shifting, as the discourse in the present study fall more in line with "I *am* a feminist, but…," producing a *'sort of' feminist* identity. In the discursive process of relevantly setting aside qualities and practices associated with feminism, the interlocutors (re)establish normativity surrounding feminist identity and its enaction in everyday conversation.

Keywords: conversation analysis, feminism, identity, linguistic anthropology, ideology, hegemony, interaction, normativity

1. Introduction

"Are you a feminist?" is a question that many people are asked. The answer that follows has always been intimately tied to the sociocultural context of the era. Whether asked during the first wave, second wave, third wave, or even during an emerging fourth wave or (post)feminist era, the question has remained contentious, and often puts people in very specific identity positions, depending on how they answer. Naturally, many researchers have explored why "are you a feminist" is a contentious question, and why feminism at large is still such a contentious topic. Recently, discussions on (post)feminism have explored what feminism means in a variety of iterations. Lazar (2009) defines postfeminism as something that "speaks the language of feminism, but without investment in fem-

inist activism, collectivism, social justice and transformation of prevailing gender orders" (340). Gill (2016) suggests the need to distinguish different kinds of feminisms, arguing that "the corporate/neoliberal feminism (Catherine Rottenberg 2014) of Lean In (Sheryl Sandberg 2013) may have little in common with – and indeed may be antithetical to – the activist feminism of those protesting budget cuts to women's services or deportation of migrants" (612). These two kinds of feminisms may also be different, Gill (2016) argues, from "dominant media constructions of feminism as a youthful, stylish identity" (612). McRobbie (2015) distinguishes between an "older, welfarist and collectivism feminism of the past" and an "individualistic striving" feminism (4). Despite all these different iterations, at its core, feminism as an identity must be intersubjectively enacted between social actors, and feminism as a movement must be negotiated within conversation.

Therefore, drawing on Gill (2007), I take notions of postfeminism as a *sensibility*, whereby social actors must navigate all the varieties of feminism, including media constructions of feminism, 'activism' feminism, collectivist and welfarist feminism, corporate and neoliberal feminism, 'individual' feminism, and more, which often intersect and collide in social actors' everyday lives. Since feminist identity is fundamentally interactional, how do social actors navigate what it means to be a feminist, particularly in a postfeminist sensibility? How is the movement (re)constructed in conversation, and how is it shaped as something with which a person may or may not identify? The case study that follows explores meaning-making in a postfeminist sensibility; namely, how feminist identities are produced in conversation; how they are created, understood, and conceptualized; and how the discursive practices of this conceptualization not only creates localized feminist identities for speakers, but also (re)creates larger discourses surrounding feminism.

For some people, being a feminist might mean getting arrested at a protest against capitalism, while for others it might mean buying body wash with advertisements for "girl power." These kinds of contradictions create an on-the-ground predicament for people answering the canonical question "are you a feminist." Whether the answer is 'yes,' 'no', or 'sort of', the interactional negotiation of these answers is not only informative of one person's perspective on feminism, but it also informs our larger understanding of what it means- and what it does not mean- to identify as a feminist in the current sociopolitical climate.

2.   Feminist identification in practice

Though feminism (or at least certain versions of feminism) seem to have become more accepted and less-stigmatized in broader popular discourse, in patriarchal

society, feminist identity is by its very nature problematic, since feminism as a movement, in its most basic definition, seeks to create equity and equality for all genders by uprooting systematic oppression. However, the movement continues to undergo many changes and iterations since its expansion in the second wave feminism of the 1970s. Griffin (1989) notes that "there is not one feminism but many, the concept is under a continual process of negotiation, and for most women, the identification of oneself as a feminist is not a straightforward process" (174). Bucholtz (2014) highlights a similar point, that there are many varying definitions and expectations of what it means to be a feminist.

Previous research on feminist identity often focuses on young women, particularly college-aged women, and it often investigates why more young women do not self-identify as feminists (Breen and Karpinski 2007; Jacobson and Koch 1978; Houvouras and Carter 2008; Redfren and Aune 2010; Williams and Witting 1997; Rudman and Fairchild 2007). Such research shows that many young women tend to agree with feminist ideals but not with an overt feminist identity. Stapleton (2001) uses discursive psychology to explore how one woman works to maintain a feminist identity in two different conversations. In the study, Stapleton (2001) finds that "a 'feminist identity' is dependent on local practice for its meaning and constitution" (483). Quinn and Radtke (2006) find that speakers displayed patterns of "avoiding outright acceptance or rejection of a feminist identity" (194). These patterns include a "common-sense connection between feminism and extremism," but also "a common-sense connection between feminism and equality" (194). The authors attribute the dichotomy between extremism and equality as a challenge in either wholeheartedly identifying as a feminist or outright rejecting the label. Women in Crossley's (2010) study display similar negotiations between two extremes, in this case, between the "importance of individuality" that the women emphasized in their talk, and their "aversion to collective identity" (131).

Scharff (2012) conducted interviews with German women and found that "when young women negotiate feminism, they also negotiate the associations of feminism with man-hatred, lesbianism, and unfeminine women" (2). As such, Scharff found that the women largely rejected labelling themselves as feminists. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) observe that the phrase 'I'm not a feminist, but...' is common among college women, and they argue that resistance to the term feminism is twofold. First, feminism is associated with "organized political action" (193–194), which is echoed in other work (Houvouras and Carter 2008; Zucker 2004). Second, feminism often evokes negative stereotypes ranging from "feminazis" to "whining victims" (995; see also Breen and Karpinski 2007; Jacobson and Koch 1978; Houvouras and Carter 2008; Redfren and Aune 2010; Williams and Witting 1997). However, there are a variety of other reasons why

someone might not identify as a feminist. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) remind us that some women of color do not identify as feminists because feminism as a movement has not always been viewed as appropriately intersectional (195; see also Crenshaw 1991 and Collins 1990 on this aspect of early second wave feminism). Indeed, there is an extended critique regarding feminism's neglect of voices and perspectives that are not upper-middle class, white, cisgender women (McCall 2005; Choo and Marx Ferree 2010; Collins and Bilge 2016).

As shown, a variety of studies demonstrate that feminist identification is a challenging subject position for women, one that gets negotiated and qualified through discourse. In the present study, I also see how a feminist identity emerges in practice for its meaning and is negotiated within conversation. I extend on this type of analysis by asking *how* the identity specifically gets negotiated. Researchers have explored why women reject the label, particularly through the phrase "I'm not a feminist, but…" I extend this body of literature by exploring how feminist identity gets negotiated in discourse among participants themselves, and how the identity is constructed as problematic. At least in this conversation, it seems that the phrase "I'm not a feminist, but…" has shifted towards "I *am* a feminist, but…", producing a *'sort of' feminist* identity.

3.   Methods

Much of the research on feminist identification has been conducted through surveys where participants are asked if they are or are not feminists, and if they do or do not associate certain stereotypes with feminism (e.g. Williams and Witting 1997). For such a complex, multifaceted identity and political movement, it seems difficult if not impossible to discover the multiple meanings of a term through static sampling. Rather than assume people can easily check a box if they are or are not a feminist, or even that the answer is always a clear 'yes' or 'no', this paper analyzes college-aged women's conversations on feminism and feminist identity under a sociocultural framework (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 2008), as it emerges through the discourse.

A variety of studies have used discourse analysis and critical discursive psychology to analyze either interviews about people's feminist (dis)identification or discussions about feminism during which the study authors were also present. For example, Quinn and Radtke (2006) facilitated group discussions where "participants were asked to take a position on feminism during the research conversation" (190). The first author provided participants with a sheet of paper that included the question "do you consider yourself to be a feminist" along with a list of "controversial and provocative quotations." The first author also ensured that partici-

pants "did not stray from the conversation topic" (190). In this study, I investigate not just *what* is topicalized, by also *how* this is done, and where the topics are located in sequence in the conversation.

Barnard (2009) analyzed interviews conducted with groups of undergraduates at Texas A&M University, noting that the interviewees seemed hesitant at best to identify as feminists themselves. However, Barnard (2009) also reflexively analyzed her role in the interview process and acknowledged that she potentially influenced the course of the discussion. Riley and Scharff (2013) facilitated cooperative inquiry groups, where "participants explore together their experiences of an issue through cycles of reflection and experimentation with understanding and behavior" (211). While this method can reveal insights into understanding behavior, it also presents a different perspective than how a group comes to their own, unmediated understanding of feminism. In this paper, I suggest that it is more productive to understand feminist identity by working from the bottom up, using the methodological principles of conversation analysis (CA) to better understand how participants construct for themselves their own, emergent understanding of feminism.

First and foremost, I ground the analysis within ethnomethodology by focusing on the member's methods for making sense of one another (Garfinkel 1967). Specifically, CA allows analysts to uncover the "local, moment-by-moment determination of meaning in social contexts" (Heritage 1984, 2) by analyzing both the position and composition of participants' turns. Using CA and Jefferson's (2004) transcription system, I analyze not just what participants make relevant in a conversation about feminism, but also how they do so, and what effects those processes have on local identity construction and broader hegemonic systems.

The broader university-approved study on which this paper is based involved 26 semi-open sociolinguistic interviews and 3 video-recorded group discussions with undergraduate students, graduate students, and staff at a large public university in the western United States. The excerpts analyzed for this case study are taken from a group discussion involving five undergraduate women previously unknown to each other before consenting to having their conversation video-recorded: Claire, Liz, Nadia, Grace, and Aly (all pseudonyms). I did not interview these specific participants, and I was not present for the conversation that followed. All the participants self-identified as female, were between their second and fourth years of university, and were between nineteen and twenty-two years old. Aly was an international student who self-identified as Chinese, Claire was from the United States and self-identified as Japanese American and German, and

Grace, Liz, and Nadia, all from the United States, self-identified as white.[1] At the start of the session, I asked the women to introduce themselves to each other, including their names, year in school, and major. I then requested that the group talk about anything they felt was relevant to feminism, whether in their lives, with their friends, in their communities, or in the media. I explained that I was purposely leaving the subject open, and that they could talk about anything they felt was relevant to the topic. I then turned on the video recorder and left for 45 minutes. What followed was a rich conversation on feminist identity, rape culture, sexism and misogyny, career hopes and struggles, and more, but this paper will focus on the first two minutes of conversation in which group members chose to begin their interaction by discussing whether or not they identify as feminists. I argue that the interlocutors' feminist identity is an interactional achievement produced through a variety of discursive practices. In the conversation, the participants first establish feminism as a problematic identity. From this, the participants collaboratively bring up- and then dismiss- the qualities and activities they associate with the feminist movement in general, but not with their own *sort of* feminist identity. Overall, the analysis illustrates how this discursive practice – i.e., relevantly setting aside topics and displaying agreement with that action – (re)problematizes feminism and maintains hegemonic standards of feminism as an identity that needs to be accounted for in conversation.

4.   The other F word

At the start of the conversation, Nadia opens with "okay sssss hehe" and after a silence, Claire asks "hh umm: what do you want to start with" (line 3). In response to this, Nadia poses a topic suggestion as a question, "well, do you guys all identify as fem, feminis, as like a feminists::S?" (lines 5–6), shown in Excerpt 1 (for a complete transcript of the data, see the Appendix). Interestingly, Quinn and Radtke (2006) started their conversation by asking the participants "do you consider yourself a feminist?" (190). In this study, I was not present for the conversation and did not prompt the participants, but Nadia asked the same question, highlighting the cultural salience of this question, at least in North America.

(1)

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01  NAD:  Okay. sssss hehe
02        (1.2)
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1. Participants had the option of writing their race and/or ethnicity on their intake paperwork. Though all participants chose to do so, none of the participants invoked race or ethnicity in their discussion of identity.

```
03  CLA:   hh umm: what do you want to start with
04         (0.4)
05  NAD:   well, do you guys all identify as a fem, feminis, as like a
06         feminists::S? Maybe that could,=
07  CLA:   =umm?=
08  NAD:   =be a good, [jumping off point ]
09  CLA:              [not necess:a:rily,] I guess,
```

In lines 5–6, after two false starts, Nadia begins her pronunciation of the word *feminist* with falling intonation, then draws out the final /s/ through the use of heightened intensity and high rising intonation. Pomerantz (1984, 155) has found that "delicate" topics are often spoken about in glosses or euphemisms, and although "feminists::S" is not a euphemism, it is produced in such a way that avoids directly and succinctly saying what scholars have sometimes dubbed "the other f word" (Pritchard 2005; Hernandez-Truyol 2011; North 2009; Jaworska and Krishnamurthy 2012; Houvras and Carter 2008). Nadia's challenge in stating the entire word, demonstrated through multiple self-repairs and the "like a" construction, perhaps reflects a general trend in popular discourse to avoid saying this word at all. Researchers from a variety of fields have found an aversion to the term feminist in classrooms of college students (Houvouras and Carter 2008), journalism (North 2009), large media corpuses (Jaworska and Krishnamurthy 2012), legal studies (Hernandez-Truyol 2011), religious studies (Pritchard 2005), and interviews (Anastosopoulos and Desmarais 2015). As with taboo more generally, the "other f word" is invested with ideologies that makes its use in everyday conversation "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966, 34) and leads to its avoidance. In this sense, Nadia's verbal hesitation regarding the word feminism serves as a containment strategy (Fleming and Lempert 2011; Irvine 2011).

A second form of evidence for the group's discomfort with the term comes from the way each expand on the topic. After Nadia poses the question, no other speakers immediately respond, so she mitigates the lack of a response with "Maybe that could" (line 6). The first opportunity for response would have been after the question "Do you guys identify as feminists::S?" (lines 5–6). Nadia's drawn out [s] and rising intonation call for a response, but group members initially remain silent, until Claire starts a delayed response of "umm" in line 7.

In the responses that follow from other participants, we see how the group constructs an understanding of the term as it relates to their identities. Nadia formulates her topic suggestion as a polar question, shown by the use of "do," which places the participants in a slot to either answer yes or no in regard to their potential feminist identity. Rather than answer with a straightforward, type-conforming response, the responses the participants give negotiate the identity space in between "yes I'm a feminist" and "no I'm not a feminist." This positionality and question construction provide a motivation for the group to intersubjectively (re)define feminism in their responses, as they negotiate what kind of

feminist they are and are not. As such, the stances taken by the participants in this conversation are not in reference to a fixed, stable concept, but rather to an identity that must be continually (re)negotiated through its problematic perception in the world. Rather than discuss what it means to be a feminist abstractly, the interlocutors bring up qualities and activities they associate with being a feminist, and it is in this process that the group's understanding of feminist identity emerges. Since everything must be done for "another first time" (Garfinkel 1967) in social interaction, in this conversation the participants must collaboratively construct a shared understanding of feminism, upon which to base further discussion of the topic. It is also important to note that the question is fraught with potential social ramifications for either an affirmative or negative answer. In either type of response, participants are morally accountable to each other for their answers, and in this case, morally accountable to the movement as well.

5.   A *Sort of* feminist identity

Throughout the conversation, the interlocutors negotiate the relevance of a variety of qualities and activities surrounding feminism, and it is through this negotiation that the group's emergent "sort of" feminist identity is produced. The qualities that are negotiated include being "active" (Excerpt 2) and having a "personal" feminism (Excerpt 3), as well as being "aggressive" (Excerpt 4), "radical" (Excerpt 5), and "obnoxious" (Excerpt 4). Participants also negotiate activities surrounding feminism, like protesting (Excerpt 6) and voting as feminists (Excerpts 4 and 7). In doing this, the interlocutors invoke the relevance of these qualities and activities to a feminist identity. At the same time, they also single out some of these qualities and activities as irrelevant to their own *personal* identity and use of the term. I argue that it is through this discursive practice of making a topic relevant to the discussion, but irrelevant to one's personal identity, that feminism becomes reified as a problematic identity, as this process both talks into being (Heritage 1984) and maintains hegemonic social organization. In what follows, I begin by discussing the qualities that the participants topicalize in the conversation, and then to the topicalized activities. Then, I look at the process of how particular qualities and activities are relevantly set aside in the conversation, and finally, how this process informs larger understandings of feminist identity in general and normative (re)constructions of (un)acceptable identities.

5.1   A *Sort of* feminist: Relevant qualities

Beginning with the qualities associated with feminism that arise in the conversation, Excerpt 2 shows Grace saying that she's not a very "active" feminist, with emphasis on the modifier.

(2)

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24  GRA:  yeah like I'm not, if someone said, I'm not going to say I'm not
25        a feminist, [because]
26  CLA:             [mhmm ]
27  GRA:  I'm definitely like- I guess technically would be I am a feminist
28        but like I'm not very active feminist I guess=
29  CLA:  =yeah=
30  GRA:  =*if that's a good way of [explai- ]=
31  CLA:   [like a: ]
32  GRA:  =*explaining it*
```

In lines 24–25, Grace says "I'm not going to say I'm not a feminist" emphasizing the word "not." From the start, this shows that Grace does not completely disavow a feminist identity, but she also does not fully embrace the term, since in line 27 she says she "technically would be" a feminist, which Claire acknowledges with "yeah" in line 29.

The use of "technically" indicates that there is some sort of category of feminist that Grace understands, and she must now explain how she fits into that category. In order to do so, she states that she is "not [a] very active feminist I guess" (line 28). This presupposes that the quality active is part of being a feminist, just not a part that Grace identifies with. In stating that she is not active, she makes relevant the idea of activism to feminism, and then sets it aside as irrelevant to her identity. Through this process, we can see parts of the social semantics of feminism in and through what the participants deem is relevant to set aside. The things that the group members make relevant presuppose that they are relevant to an understanding of feminism, and in the process of selecting irrelevant qualities of their feminist identity, like being active, the group arrives at a version of feminism unique to the interactional moment that they constructed in conversation. However, the group does demonstrate some difficulty in naming this particular version of feminism, shown in Excerpt 3.

(3)

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33  CLA:  pers- like a personal femin?-  like I don't know howda-
34        like  there's no word to like- [like *describe*]
35  GRA:                                 [I share all've ] the *views*.
```

This excerpt shows the problems participants have in identifying with the word feminist. Although in line 35 Grace says that she shares "all the views" of feminism, no one has outwardly stated that they are feminists, and in fact in line 33 Claire nearly attempts to coin a new term for a "personal feminist," because appar-

ently there is no word for someone who shares the views of feminism and yet does not fully identify as a feminist. Depperman's (2005) concept of pragmatic opposition shows how in categorization, "the first item contextualizes a frame of associated expectations which are violated by the contrasted second item" (309). If the original frame is Nadia's earlier "feminists::S," then items need to be brought up to contrast with the assumed meaning of the word, as a way for participants to construct their own relevant meanings and identities. So far, the group has contrasted "active" with feminist, thereby creating the need for a new term for women who are feminists, yet not active feminists.

Along with being active, Nadia brings up being aggressive as a quality of feminism that she does not agree with, shown in Excerpt 4.

(4)

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52  NAD:  yeah, I agree. same kinda thing, like.
53        (0.6)
54        I'm like really
55        (0.3)
56        >k(h)inda ob<noxious around my friends, £about it£? and like
57        definitely like vote n stuff like
58        (0.7)
59        with *that in mind but not as like*
60        (1.3)
61        aggressive, as
62  LIZ:  yeah
63  NAD:  other (.) feministS are:
64        (.)
65  LIZ:  as like media *makes feminists out to be*
66  NAD:  ye[ah ]=
67  CLA:    [yeah]
68  GRA:    [yeah]
```

In lines 59–63, Nadia says she is "not as like aggressive as other feminists are," with emphasis on the qualifier aggressive as well as the final /s/ in feminists. In this excerpt, we see that the quality "aggressive" is made relevant to feminism in principle, topicalized by Nadia, but it is made irrelevant to her personal identity. This shows that Nadia has an understanding that at least some feminists are aggressive, so when discussing feminism, she needs to bring the quality of aggression up only to set it aside as irrelevant to her personal version of feminism. However, rather than agree that all feminists are aggressive, Liz responds in line 65 with an embedded correction (Jefferson 1987) that it is the media that makes feminists out to be aggressive, with the increment "as like media *makes feminists out to be*". In doing so, Liz shifts the assessment of "aggressive" from feminists themselves to the media's portrayal. However, regardless of whether or not an omnipotent media says that feminists are aggressive, the very fact of bringing up the quality and then setting it aside not only shows the speakers' association of the quality aggressive to the identity feminist, it reifies that association in the conversation.

Radical is another quality brought up and then set aside in the conversation, shown in Excerpt 5.

(5)

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69  NAD:  =exactly. like like a radical [kind of  ]
70  LIZ:                                 [.hhh yeah]
71  ALY:  mhm
72  LIZ:  which I definitely think is just a depiction I don't think
73         it's very *true about everyone*=
74  CLA:  =°not fair°=
75  LIZ:  =yeah
```

In this case, Nadia brings up radical as a quality associated with feminists (line 69), which Liz says is "just a depiction" (line 72) and is not "true about everyone," (line 73), a statement that Claire supports with the assessment "not fair" (lines 74). In this case, Nadia has not stated that she is not radical, as was done with the qualities active and aggressive. Nevertheless, the group has reified the quality's connection with feminism by saying that the depiction is not true about everyone. If being radical is not true about everyone, then it presupposes that it is true about someone, just not one of them. Additionally, although Claire adds that the depiction is not fair, it is still topicalized as a depiction that must be dealt with in a conversation about feminism.

Radical and aggressive are both pervasive and stereotypical traits of feminists. One of the arguments in scholarship as to why more young women do not identify as feminists is that they supposedly do not want to be associated with negative stereotypes that often surround feminists, such as being obnoxious, radical, or aggressive. Williams and Witting (1997) have argued that stereotypes hinder self-labeling and make women resistant to self-identifying as feminists (890). However, the following example shows that it is not the mere existence of a stereotype that might hinder self-identifying as a feminist, but rather how that idea is dealt with by participants. Recall Excerpt 4, in which the quality of obnoxious is recast as a positive quality of being a feminist. In that case, a negative stereotype about feminists is actually resignified as positive. In line 56, Nadia says that she is "kinda obnoxious around my friends about it." Nadia says this with a laughing outbreath and a smiley voice – a voice that sounds as if it has been delivered through a mouth forming a smile. Both laughing outbreath and smiley voice have been shown to be used to mitigate problematic terms (Jefferson 1984), demonstrating Nadia's orientation to "obnoxious" as a potential problem. However, she still brings obnoxious up as a quality that is relevant to her feminist identity, and she reframes it as a positive quality by claiming it as something she herself does with her friends. Furthermore, no other participants disagree. In this example, not only has Nadia made being obnoxious relevant to being a "sort of" feminist, but she has also recast it into a positive association. It is only through this process of inter-

action that "obnoxious" is unproblematic for the group and is recast as a positive part of being a feminist.

Overall, the qualities of active, personal, aggressive, radical, and obnoxious are all brought up as relevant qualities surrounding a conceptualization of feminism. Importantly, active is the first quality invoked, which sequentially occasions aggressive and radical, all of which are set aside as irrelevant to the interlocutors' personal identities. As such, personal is invoked in opposition to active, which occasions the addition of obnoxious. Though a quality like obnoxious is often stereotyped as a negative quality of feminists, these data show that such associations can be recast in conversation. In the following section, we see a similar discursive process play out with activities of feminists.

5.2   A *sort of* feminist: Relevant activities

In addition to dealing with all the qualities of feminism, the interlocutors also negotiate activities of feminists, and like with the qualities, some of the activities are set aside as irrelevant to the group's understanding of feminism. The routine activities that persons engage in have long been situated in language and gender research as foundational to identity. In this conversation, the participants discuss certain activities, such as protesting or marching, in which they may or may not participate in as "sort of" feminists. We can revisit the beginning of the conversation in Excerpt 6. Claire responds that although she leans towards feminist sides on issues, she does not protest.

(6)

```
08  NAD:  =be a good, [jumping off point ]
09  CLA:             [not necess:a:rily,] I guess,
10  CLA:  but like
11        (0.4)
12        I definitely like lean towards
13        (1.2)
14        that side on like *issues* I guess.
14        (0.5)
16        >But I don't like<
17        (0.9)
18        protest.
19        (0.3)
20        I don't kno(h)w hh
21  NAD:  hh [ye(h)ah]
22  GRA:     [yeah   ]
23        (0.4)
24  GRA:  yeah like I'm not, if someone said, I'm not going to say I'm not
25        a feminist, [because]
26  CLA:             [mhmm  ]
27  GRA:  I'm definitely like- I guess technically would be I am a feminist
28        but like I'm not very active feminist I guess=
29  CLA:  =yeah=
30  GRA:  =*if that's a good way of [explai- ]=
31  CLA:                           [like a: ]
32  GRA:  =*explaining it*
```

Starting in line 9, Claire says that she does "not necessarily" identify as a feminist, and yet, as she expresses in lines 12–14, she "definitely like lean[s] towards that side on like issues." However, she quickly amends that statement in lines 16–18 with "But I don't like protest." In this case, Claire has made the activity of protesting relevant to a conceptualization of feminism, but irrelevant to her personal identity, which establishes protesting as something negative and problematic. Sacks' (1992) notion of modifier illustrates a similar pattern to this analysis where statements such as "I'm 48 but I look and feel younger" or "she's on the girl's tumbling team but…" function as "attempts to provide that what it is that may be said about any member is not to be said about the member at hand" (44).

We can compare Claire's formulation with Grace's that follows. Both Claire and Grace have structured their turns in similar ways. Though Claire hedges a "no" formulation (line 9) and Grace twice hedges a "yes" formulation (lines 24–27), both speakers ultimately select qualities and activities that they associate with other kinds of feminism, but not their own. Claire highlights protesting as an activity of some feminists, but not herself, while Grace highlights being active as a quality of a general feminist, but not her version of feminism.

Compositionally, both speakers include ambiguity at the beginning of their turns, with "not necessarily" uttered by Claire in line 9, and "technically" by Grace in line 27. Both speakers then account for this ambiguity by stating that they share some of the same views, but they either do not protest or they are not active (lines 18 and 28, respectively). Finally, both qualify their statements with uncertainly, as in "I don't know" uttered by Claire in line 20, and "if that's a good way of explaining it" in lines 30–32 by Grace. In structuring her response in this way, Grace has responded to the topic and affiliated with Claire. Both women's structurally similar responses solidify their joint affiliation against this kind of active and protesting feminism.

In contrast, the activity of voting as a feminist is brought up as a relevant activity to this brand of "personal" feminism, demonstrated by Liz in Excerpt 7.

(7)

```
38  LIZ:  I mean, by definition I'm a feminist just because of the
39        definition [of   ]=
40  GRA:             [yeah,]
41  LIZ:  =feminism is like what I stand for, but I mean haven't ever- I
42        mean I've protested something once but like that was-
43        (0.4)
44        *that was about abortion rights in Texas so*- hh *but like that
45        was with my mom. but I haven't ever like done like marches [or  ]
46  GRA:                                                            [yeah]
47  LIZ:  like I'm not like part of any like groups but like, like when I
48        vote and that stuff like I look at like the political's like side
49        on feminism view that like really dictates who I vote for.
50        so in that sense yeah I'm a femin°iss°
```

In lines 57–59 of Excerpt 4, Nadia says she "like definitely like vote[s] n stuff like with that [feminism] in mind." Here, in Excerpt 7, Liz also brings up the action of voting as a feminist, shown in lines 47–49, with the statement "like when I vote and that stuff like I look at like the political's like side on feminism view that like really dictates who I vote for." In addition to the action of voting, Excerpt 7 shows three important things: first, the orientation to a fixed definition of feminism, (lines 38–41); second, the negotiation of the action of protesting or marching (42–45); and third, the lack of strong agreement with a feminist identity (lines 38–41 and 50).

First, Liz starts her turn with "I mean, by definition I'm a feminist just because of the definition of feminism is like what I stand for" (lines 38–41). None of the participants necessarily know Liz's definition of feminism, because it is continually being constructed in the conversation. Nevertheless, Grace follows with a quick "yeah" (line 40), acknowledging this assumed definition of feminism. Additionally, Liz does not say "I am a feminist;" rather, her turn echoes Grace's statement that Grace "technically" would be a feminist (Excerpt 2, line 27), since it is only "by definition" that Liz is a feminist. There is thus a pervasive orientation to a concrete definition of feminism, one that the women either do or do not fit, but in different ways.

Second, this excerpt also shows protesting and marching as additional activities that must be negotiated to the group's and to the individuals' identity. At this point in the conversation, the group has agreed that they do not protest, and Liz now needs to remedy her past activities (when she protested about abortion rights in Texas with her mother). At the start of the turn, Liz starts to say "I haven't ever protested" – an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) – but immediately repairs herself to say "I mean I've protested something once" (lines 41–42). According to Pomerantz, speakers can use extreme case formulations to defend themselves in conversation, and in this example Liz has started to defend herself by starting to say that she has not ever protested. However, she immediately concedes that she has protested something once (line 42), and then continues to qualify the context of this event: the protest was only once, with her mom, and she also has not done marches and is not part of any groups. This formulation of an overstatement, a concession, and a revised description follows Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson's analysis of concessive repair (2005). Here, Liz uses "I mean" twice, which Maynard (2013) argues is a pseudo repair, casting the first version (i.e., never protesting) as basically correct. Liz thereby attempts to fit the group's emergent understanding of feminism. Nonetheless, she also must contend with her past actions that may risk categorizing her as a protesting type of feminist, which has already been negatively assessed and set aside by the group. Recall that in Excerpt 6, Claire established that she does not protest (line 18). As such, as Liz's

utterance comes sequentially after Claire's formulation, Liz must now reformulate her experience, if she does not want to be placed in the category of active, protesting feminists. Liz's banal, inconsequential presentation of the activity works to achieve an ordinariness: Liz has lived her life as a usual, "sort of" feminist who fits in with the group.

Third and finally, the lack of a strong feminist identity is brought up again when Liz says that feminist views "like really dictates who I vote for," and so "in that sense" (but therefore not in other senses) "yeah I'm a femin°iss°" (lines 49–50). Here, "voting" is collaboratively constructed as an acceptable activity of being a feminist, because no one disagrees that they do not let feminism "dictate who they vote for" (line 49).

In these micromoments of identity construction, interlocutors negotiate a variety of qualities and activities they deem relevant to a discussion on feminism in the abstract and to their own personal identities. In this negotiation, the group creates an emergent, intersubjective, collaboratively constructed *sort of* feminist identity localized to the specific time, place, and location of their conversation. However, just because this is one conversation does not mean there are not demonstrable effects to larger social understandings of identity and identification processes. Conversations, although localizable to particular microinteractional moments, also constitute macro conceptualizations through their moment-by-moment (re)creation of socially (un)acceptable identities.

6.   Discussion

We see the negotiation of both group dynamics as well as broader social dynamics with the creation of a certain kind of feminist in opposition to the group's construction of an acceptable feminist. As Bucholtz and Hall (2004) argue, "the perception of shared identity often requires as its foil a sense of alterity, of an Other who can be positioned against those socially constituted as the same" (371). In this case, the women construct an Other feminist, a negative one who protests and goes to marches, in opposition to their own version of feminism, and we can see that opposition play out in how participants discursively set aside the qualities and activities they associate with feminism in general but not with their own, personal, *sort of* feminism. The (re)creation of normatively acceptable identities is made possible by the process of making a topic relevant to the conversation but irrelevant to a person's identity. The group's list of qualities and activities is by no means exhaustive, but it shows what is relevant for the women to bring up in their conversation on feminism, as well as what is relevant to set aside as irrelevant to

their identity. This speaks to the situated temporality of the identity: it is unique to the interactional moment and made possible only through interaction.

The discursive work these women are doing in situated social action shows how identities can be (re)formulated to meet the new circumstance. Throughout the conversation, the interlocutors work to agree with each other, both overtly through responses like "same," and less overtly through their construction of a shared conceptualization of feminism. Liz is the only woman who outs herself as having protested something (see also Potter 1996 on stake confession). However, as was shown, Liz also works to situate that protest within the group's constructed identity category of s*ort of* feminists. Liz (re)formulates her identity from a protesting/negative feminist to a *sort of* feminism who does fit in with the constructed circumstances of this particular social interaction.

Raymond (2017) shows how interlocutors create a "set of common sense inferences" in conversation by actively updating in-the-moment understanding. Similarly, the women in this conversation create a set of common inferences by actively selecting qualities and activities that they decide are relevant to the conversation in general, such as voting with feminism in mind. However, because feminism is oriented to as a problematic identity, the women must also be clear that they do not ascribe to many of the stereotypes associated with feminism, like marching or protesting.

Although in principle there are individual identities and notions of feminism, and although each woman might have their own definition of what it means to be a feminist, what becomes central to the group's understanding of feminism is what is brought up as relevant in the interactional moment. Then, those aspects are intersubjectively and sequentially negotiated among the group, and more importantly, they become the things that are established as members of the broader feminist category. We can view these relevant qualities and activities as variables. The variables that participants draw on that they *do* do, like vote with feminism in mind, construct the group identity of what doing being a feminist means to them, but the deliberate setting aside of the variables they *don't* do, like protest, constructs the view of feminism as problematic.

These variables are also indexical of larger ideologies and worldviews. In her work on stylistic variation, Eckert (2008) conceptualizes the link between ideology and the situated use of a given variable through the idea of an indexical field. In her view, speakers engage a "constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable" (454). I suggest that a similar constellation lies behind these women's activation of topics relevant to feminism. Eckert argues that linkages between macrosociological categories and individual stylistic choices "produce and reproduce" social meaning (465). In the data I have examined, we see these linkages in the way group members

invoke macro qualities and activities ideologically associated with feminism and then collaboratively set some of those qualities and activities aside to construct a personal feminist identity. The variables in Eckert's indexical field involve socio-phonetic choices instead of topicalization choices, but as Eckert herself states, "it is not just the meaning of phonological variants that change in discourse – lexical change does as well. A word's denotation can absorb connotations through association with aspects of the context in which it is used…" (464). Qualities and activities, as components of social identity, also form an indexical field; the situated use of these components in conversation are linked to larger macrosociological categories of identity. If the indexical field is the ideological work that happens on-the-ground, then the speakers in this study metadiscursively construct a feminist identity through the topicalization of qualities and activities occasioned by each turn. They collaborate on the indexing of a sort of person, or in this case, a sort of feminist.

It is notable that many of the variables the group relevantly sets aside have to do with taking action as a feminist, whether by marching, protesting, or joining groups. Scholars such as Kitzinger (2000) have shown how speakers work to present themselves in a way that disallows activist interpretations. This concern with activism also seems to be embedded in presuppositional understanding of feminism, since the interlocutors frequently clarified that although they in some ways identify as feminists, they do not participate in activities normatively associated with feminism. In this process of bringing certain activities up and then setting them aside, of making topics in principle relevant and then making them personally irrelevant, we can begin to see how normativity arises surrounding feminism.

7.   Conclusion

Heritage (1988) argues that exceptions, along with explanations, do not disprove a broader rule or norm, but rather become the "exceptions that prove the rule" (140). For instance, when participants explain that they personally are not aggressive feminists, they simultaneously (re)establish that feminists are aggressive. This organization of accounts creates a "self-motivating, self-sustaining and self-reproducing normative organization of action" (Heritage 1988, 140). Relevantly setting aside topics (re)creates normativity and normatively acceptable identities, of which "feminist" is still not fully agreed upon as socially acceptable, as this conversation shows.

The interactional strategy of highlighting what participants *do* do, versus what they *don't* do, normalizes certain qualities and activities as belonging to a feminist identity. Relevantly setting aside these qualities and activities reproduces femi-

nism as a problematic and contested identity. Previous scholarship has demonstrated the problematic nature of the identity. However, much of the previous scholarship posits this problematic nature to stereotypes or the negative valence of the term itself. I argue that it is not the absolute existence of stereotypes or negative connotations, but rather what speakers *do* with the stereotypes and negative connotations that solidifies the problem. We can return to Nadia's "obnoxious" demeanor around her friends. Although this may be viewed as a negative label about feminists, it is not a problem for Nadia and the group. Though there is a level of pre-existing negativity surrounding the quality obnoxious, what is more important is how the group negotiates this negativity in conversation, and in that negotiation, make it not a problem for their identity. However, that pre-existing negativity is also what creates a problem: no matter how much speakers can do things with negative associations, the very act of setting them aside (Raymond 2019) reifies the commonsense association between feminism and the qualities and activities discussed in this paper. The fact that stereotypes abstractly exist does not necessarily make them a problem; what can make them a problem is the ways in which they are negotiated. It is in this negotiation that the problems are reified as definitional components of identity.

This gets at the very nature of hegemony. Talbot (2003) writes that "the representational practice of stereotyping plays a central role in [hegemony], by endlessly reiterating what amounts to caricatures of subordinate groups" (471). We might hope that conversations about feminism would dismantle issues, but in many cases, such conversations end up (re)creating social norms by relevantly explaining away deviations. However, if social products and actions are the basis for hegemonic social organization, then they are also agents of change (West and Zimmerman 2009, 114 for this process in gender attributes). What was once a taboo subject, like birth control, may later be dealt with by the group as standard, normal, and expected (see also Clayman 2016). When topics are not set aside, they can be negotiated and acknowledged as relevant aspects of feminism – both feminism as a micro category and something to identify with, as well as feminism as a macrosociological category and movement.

It is also important to remember that this conversation took place in early fall of 2016, well into the political climate of a contentious election year, but before Donald Trump was elected president. Shortly after that period, the world witnessed the Women's March on D.C. and sister marches across the country, the largest single-day protest in United States history at that time, and a development that certainly brought the role of protesting to a new level and purpose in mainstream US society. The popularity of the Women's March has likely influenced people's views of protesting and their associations with this activity, so it remains

to be seen how post-Women's March conversations may also shape understandings of (un)acceptable identities.

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Appendix. Transcript of conversation

```
01  NAD:   Okay. sssss hehe
02         (1.2)
03  CLA:   hh umm: what do you want to start with
04         (0.4)
05  NAD:   well, do you guys all identify as a fem, feminis, as like a
06         feminists::S? Maybe that could,=
07  CLA:   =umm?=
08  NAD:   =be a good, [jumping off point ]
09  CLA:              [not necess:a:rily,] I guess,
10  CLA:   but like
11         (0.4)
12         I definitely like lean towards
13         (1.2)
14         that side on like *issues* I guess.
15         (0.5)
16         >But I don't like<
17         (0.9)
18         protest.
19         (0.3)
20         I don't kno(h)w hh
21  NAD:   hh [ye(h)ah]
22  GRA:      [yeah  ]
23         (0.4)
24  GRA:   yeah like I'm not, if someone said, I'm not going to say I'm not
25         a feminist, [because]
26  CLA:               [mhmm  ]
27  GRA:   I'm definitely like- I guess technically would be I am a feminist
28         but like I'm not very active feminist I guess=
29  CLA:   =yeah=
30  GRA:   =*if that's a good way of [explai- ]=
31  CLA:                             [like a: ]
32  GRA:   =*explaining it*
33  CLA:   pers- like a personal femin?- like I don't know howda-
34         like there's no word to like- [like *describe*]
35  GRA:                                 [I share all've ] the *views*.
```

```
36  CLA:  yeah. same.
37        (2.3)
38  LIZ:  I mean, by definition I'm a feminist just because of the
39        definition [of    ]=
40  GRA:             [yeah,]
41  LIZ:  =feminism is like what I stand for, but I mean haven't ever- I
42        mean I've protested something once but like that was-
43        (0.4)
44        *that was about abortion rights in Texas so*- hh *but like that
45        was with my mom. but I haven't ever like done like marches [or  ]
46  GRA:                                                             [yeah]
47  LIZ:  like I'm not like part of any like groups but like, like when I
48        vote and that stuff like I look at like the political's like side
49        on feminism view that like really dictates who I vote for.
50        so in that sense yeah I'm a femin°iss°
51        (1.4)
52  NAD:  yeah, I agree. same kinda thing, like.
53        (0.6)
54        I'm like really
55        (0.3)
56        >k(h)inda ob<noxious around my friends, £about it£? and like
57        definitely like vote n stuff like
58        (0.7)
59        with *that in mind but not as like*
60        (1.3)
61        aggressive, as
62  LIZ:  yeah
63  NAD:  other (.) feministS are:
64        (.)
65  LIZ:  as like media *makes feminists out to be*
66  NAD:  ye[ah  ]=
67  CLA:    [yeah]
68  GRA:    [yeah]
69  NAD:  =exactly. like like a radical [kind of  ]
70  LIZ:                                [.hhh yeah]
71  ALY:  mhm
72  LIZ:  which I definitely think is just a depiction I don't think
73        it's very *true about everyone*=
74  CLA:  =°not fair°=
75  LIZ:  =yeah
```

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