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# Continuers in research interviews

## A closer look at the construction of rapport in talk about interfaith dialogue

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Richards (2011) discussed the importance of understanding the role that continuers (Schegloff 1982) play in research interviews, proposing that understanding how talk is organized has been overlooked in researcher training. This paper draws from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to explore the researcher's use of "mm hm" as a response token in a set of three interviews conducted with one participant during a qualitative case study. Specifically, it focuses on how the use of "mm hm" as a continuer, an acknowledgement token used as a way to give attention to participant accounting, and the use of silence might contribute to the interactional accomplishment of establishing rapport. Finally, the researcher reflects on the usefulness of examining response tokens in research interviews ethnomethodologically, the implications for developing interviewing expertise, and offers suggestions for future research.

**Keywords:** research interviews, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, interfaith dialogue, mundane talk, continuers, silence, rapport

## Introduction

In learning to conduct a "successful" qualitative interview, students are confronted with the concept of developing rapport. Sources describing what rapport is and its importance abound. For example, in Seidman's (2013) text on interviewing, he wrote that the interviewer must develop a balanced relationship with the interviewee, that "too much or too little rapport can lead to distortion of what the participant reconstructs in the interview" (99). Abbe and Brandon (2014: 213) argued, "Rapport develops when attention, positivity, and coordination occur and are reciprocated in an interaction." Rapley (2006) described how interviewers should work to establish a relaxed atmosphere built around relationships of trust

and encouragement, without which an interviewee may find it difficult to talk with an interviewer. According to deMarrais (2004: 65), the relationship between interviewers and interviewees is determined by a variety of factors including the type of study, the length of time spent together, the intensity of subject matter, and the level of rapport.

Rapport created during, and possibly even begun before interviews is indicative of a specific type of affiliation between two people, one different from a long-term relationship created out of mutual inclination and desire for connection. As Miller (2017: 82) explained, research interviews require an interviewer to listen to and encourage an interviewee in a way that specifically asks them to "share/'disclose' their experiences." Making them feel comfortable helps achieve this. The research interview is then a particular form of social interaction, one created with an exact and expressed intent in building a specific sort of connection with another individual. Thus, the type of relationship created in interviews is one built on a specific purpose with anticipated behaviors and when this purpose is met, the relationship – however comfortable – typically ends.

With regard to subject matter, establishing rapport between researcher and participant(s) becomes especially important in studies examining vulnerable populations or sensitive topics (Liamputtong 2007). One such sensitive topic of research is religion. My dissertation, a qualitative case study, examined adult learning through interfaith dialogue. Working with an interfaith dialogue group of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, I intentionally focused on building rapport with my participants when designing the study, spending a significant period of time to create relationships with participants before beginning research interviews. I initially attended an interfaith dialogue meeting in November of 2015, during which time I did not collect data, but focused on meeting people, expressing my interest in their practice, and answering their questions. In March of 2016, I reached out to the organization requesting their participation in my study. After my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved my application, I met with the steering committee of the group in July of 2016 to discuss the study, my plans, my timeline, and again answer their questions. In August of 2016 I began observing the monthly interfaith dialogue meetings. After observing a second interfaith dialogue session in September of 2016 and two steering committee meetings (one in August and one in September), I began contacting individual, long-time members to participate in interviews.

I conducted interviews for this study following Seidman's (2013) "three-interview series" method. I followed an ethnographic interview style (Spradley 2016) with the intent that these interviews seem more like a conversation than a formal interview. Keeping with Roulston's (2010b: 19) explanation, the ethnographic interview in this study was focused on "generating participants' descriptions of

key aspects related to the cultural world of which he or she is part – that is space, time, events, people, activities, and objects." By conducting three interviews with each participant using an ethnographic style, these interviews allowed for "both the interviewer and participant to explore the participant's experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning" (Seidman 2013: 20) over an extended period of time. This extended contact and time with each participant during the interview series helped encourage the creation of rapport and closer relationships, something helpful in discussing a sensitive topic such as religion (deMarrais 2004).

There are several components identified in the literature necessary for building rapport between researchers and participants. First, the establishment of rapport takes time and effort (Abbe and Brandon 2014; deMarrais 2004). DeMarrais (2004: 5) wrote that studies using a series of interviews encourage "the researcher and participant to form closer relationships and more permanent friendships." In examining rapport development in investigative interviews, Abbe and Brandon (2014) noted that establishing rapport between individuals requires effort on the part of both parties involved in the interview. Miller (2017) emphasized that creating rapport starts well before the interview even begins and extends beyond it in since technology has become commonplace in both everyday social interaction and research.

Second, some scholars encourage researchers to be open and honest in their interactions with their participants (Abbe and Brandon 2014; Oakley 2016; Trull 1964). As Trull (1964: 90) wrote decades ago, "The general tone of the interview should be one of helpfulness and friendliness so as to minimize the immediate barriers to forthright communication." If a researcher is guarded in their interactions, participants may feel suspicion and have a closed, rather than open, engagement. The researcher should be friendly and trustworthy to inspire open and truthful communication on the part of the interviewee (Montgomery 2012). Such positioning includes the researcher's tone, body language, acknowledgment of participant discussions, and finding common ground between researcher and participant (Abbe and Brandon 2014; Houtkoop-Steenstra 1997; Stock 2010). This honesty and openness may also include researchers sharing their own experiences when relevant (Abbe and Brandon 2014; Montgomery 2012; Oakley 1981, 2016; Rapley 2006). For example, working from a feminist perspective Oakley (1981, 2016) identified reciprocity, i.e. personal expression and narrative on the part of the researcher, as particularly important for rapport development in research interviews. Yet, others caution researchers in self-disclosure, indicating that it may in fact highlight differences between interviewee and interviewer and lead to unintended topic shifts preventing opportunities for desired elaborate responses about the topic at hand (Abell et al. 2006; Forbat and Hubbard 2016).

Third, and particularly pertinent for this chapter, scholars have described the use of *response tokens*, as an important part of the format of any interview. While listening, allowing the interviewee space to talk, and asking appropriate follow up questions, Rapley (2006: 26) wrote, the researcher should be "going 'mm', 'yeah', 'yeah, yeah' alongside nodding, laughing, joking, smiling, frowning." With reference to naturally occurring talk, Gardner (2000) defined these utterances as those that provide feedback to the speaker on the listener's engagement with and understanding of the conversation. In analysis of mundane speech, response tokens have been analyzed as *backchannel* utterances (Drummond and Hopper 1993; Mott and Petrie 1995; Mulac et al. 1998; Yngve 1970), *continuers* (Gardner 2000; Sacks 1992a; Schegloff 1982), *acknowledgement tokens* (Jefferson 1984a; Zimmerman 1993), *minimal responses* (Dushku 2010; Gardner 1997; Norrick 2012; Zimmerman and West 1996), and *generic responses* (Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson 2000) among others, each with a different function in talk-in-interaction.

For instance, Jefferson (1984a: 199) specified acknowledgement tokens serve as "pre-shift objects," the use of which may indicate an upcoming change in topic on the part of the listener. For "mm hm" specifically Jefferson wrote, "its user is proposing that his co-participant is still in the midst of some course of talk, and shall go on talking" (200). Several other researchers align with Jefferson on this point, indicating that "mm hm" as a response by a listener acknowledges the speaker's turn in still ongoing (Gardner 2000; M. Goodwin 1980; C. Goodwin 1986; Schegloff 1982). Stivers (2008: 34) argued that during storytelling, such responses are a form of alignment used to indicate listener understanding and acknowledgement that the story is still in progress. Gardner (1997: 220) explained the impact of such response tokens on the conversation and how talk develops, writing that these tokens are common and invaluable in "providing speakers with feedback that tells them something about how they are being understood, and thus how they might proceed with the talk." McCarthy (2010: 40) proposed that since listeners do more than just provide the minimal necessary acknowledgement of a speaker's turn in response tokens, they are attending "to the interactional and relational aspects of the talk" as well as the content and continuing the conversation itself.

Thus, response tokens can indicate active (Abbe and Brandon 2014; C. D. Baker 2002) or continued listening (Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson 2000) and are suggestive of "good listenership" (McCarthy 2010: 36). They have power in the conversation, offering the speaker feedback on whether their talk is being received as intended (Gardner 1997: 18). Similar to their stated purposes in various analyses of mundane speech (Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson 2000; Gardner 1997, 1998, 2000; M. Goodwin 1980; C. Goodwin 1986; Jefferson 1984a; Schegloff 1982; Stivers, 2008), support given through response tokens in research interviews

encourages a speaker to continue his or her turn through the listener's indication of continued attention, appreciation, requests for elaboration, and/or acknowledgement of both the content of their speech and that the speaker's turn may not be complete. Indeed, these types of responses are integral to creating mutual understanding as they show the listener's interpretation, acceptance, or rejection of the speaker's talk (Bavelas, Gerwing, and Healing 2017). And the creation of such is important for the development of rapport. In the excerpts included in this chapter, the response tokens used are continuers and acknowledgement tokens. Gardner (2000: 2) defines continuers as utterances "which function to hand the floor back to the immediately prior speaker." Acknowledgement tokens "claim agreement or understanding of the prior turn" (2).

In what follows, I offer examples of three conversational resources used to develop rapport in research interviews. In looking across a corpus of 27 interviews with 9 different participants, the following three excerpts from telephone interviews with one participant serve as examples of the use of these specific resources. Predominantly, qualitative scholars note telephone interviews as not ideal for qualitative research because they lack a face-to-face element which can lead to cursory data collection, cause interactional difficulties, and hinder the development of rapport (Gillham 2005; Novick 2008; Shuy 2003). For example, Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury (2013: 102) argued it is more difficult to establish rapport through telephone interviews because they have a more formal and "businesslike atmosphere" than face-to-face interviews. Yet not all scholars agree with this assessment, some contending that the telephone interview has several advantages and can in fact be quite successful, particularly when researchers work to cultivate report by being responsive, engaged, and respectful of the interviewee (Drabble et al. 2016: 118). In this study, phone interviews did not impede rapport because of the extended time already spent with participants.

In using an ethnomethodological approach (C. D. Baker 2002; Richards 2011) to analyze research interviews (Rapley 2001; Roulston 2016), I follow Prior's (2017: 4) proposition that "rapport can be investigated as emergent and observable conduct that unfolds in real time." Thus, within the context of representing an interactional record of developing rapport, the focus of this chapter is fourfold. I first examine the researcher's use of the continuer "mm hm" to request elaboration and encourage continued talk by the interviewee. Second, I inspect the researcher's "mm hm" as an acknowledgement token in response to participant accounting, i.e. how the researcher orients to the participant's explanations or justifications. Third, I review participant response to the absence of response tokens by the interviewer, i.e. silence. Finally, I discuss the implications of a researcher's reflexive examination of these conversational resources in interviews and further discuss their connections to the establishment of rapport between researcher and participant.

**The response token "mm hm" as a continuer**

Excerpt 1 below appears 30 minutes into my first interview with Khadija,[1] a Muslim woman. All three interviews with Khadija were conducted by telephone. The following excerpt is an example of the response token "mm hm" used specifically as a continuer. This analysis shows how such responses "have the power to influence the development of subsequent talk and they are a classic illustration of the way in which such talk is constructed by the participants involved" (Richards 2011: 98). In fact, Norrick (2012: 574) argued that without such continuers, the social requirements of a listener during conversation– namely showing attention and interest – could be seen to be lacking and will lead to a speaker ending their turn.

   Additionally, prosody in speech achieves specific actions (Sicoli, Stivers, Enfield, and Levinson 2015), one of which is as a way conversationalists can identify their turn to speak and avoid gaps and overlaps (Stivers et al. 2009). Gardner (1997: 19) specified that "mm hm" uttered with a "(fall-)rising intonation contour" is most often used when a "speaker passes up the opportunity to take a turn at talk." In each of the excerpts below, we see a less common prosodic use of "mm hm" where I use a falling contour, marked in the transcription with a period. When used in this way, "mm hm" takes on the tone of an acknowledgement token, used to mark the "end of a sequence in talk" but not for the listener to claim the conversational floor (Gardner 2000: 117). Khadija's response to "mm hm" uttered with this contour is to maintain the conversational floor indicating it is taken up as a continuer and acknowledgement token.

Excerpt 1. Interview 1 (29: 18–30: 54)

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1    E:   so (.) it sounds like you know you're (.) you're active
2         in your community, >you've mentioned that you< <have
3         never missed a day of ↑prayer>, you you know think about
4         the responsibility of of raising your children
5         correctly.
6    K:   [↓mm
7         [uh <I was wondering if> if you could tell me just a
8         little bit (.)↓about  (.)↓you know how to you ↑see (.)
9         or >what ↓role do:es< (.)↓religion play in your ↓life?
10   K:   well it's (.) the way I live my life (heh)
11   E:   mm hm.
12   K:   <I mean it's> it's I always think about (.) what's the
13        right thing to ↓do (.) to please God as I'm (0.2) >doing
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**1.** All participants in the larger study during which this data was conducted were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality in reporting.

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14        anything else<.
15        (2.0)
16   E:   °mm (h) ↓hm.°
17        (2.0)
18   K:   so it is <it is definitely> a major role (.) for me.
19        (1.0)
20   E:   yeah [so it sounds like it]
21   K:        [or just a part of my life.
22   E:   uh huh it's like it >↓provi:des structure<?
23   K:   [yes
24   E:   [°in a way?°
25   K:   mm ↑hm
26   E:   mm ↓hm.
27   K:   <well it's like ↑I don't know if you were> ↓at the um
28        (.) <at the session we had at the trialogue> where I
29        said (.) "God gives you all of th::e (0.5) His
30        expectations and He gives you (.) the ↑guides to follow.
31        (2.0)
32   K:   <and so your job is to try and follow it?>" you know?
33   E:   °mm hm.°
34   K:   so that's what I try to do.
35        (1.0)
36   K:   now (.) I'm not perfect a:nd (0.2) there are some things
37        I (.) I do that I (.) you know ↑minor things like (.) uh
38        I'll be lazy and (.) watch TV <a little bit longer than
39        I should> when I should (.)↓you know (0.1) read more
40        Qur'an or ↓whatever. but on a day to day basis I
41        definitely (.) do all the prayers on ↑time and (.) I
42        definitely read Qur'an every day and (.) I try to
43        instill that you know i:n (2.0) a- as a <role model for
44        my family?>.
45        (0.5)
46   E:   °mm hm.°
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The excerpt above begins with my acknowledgement of what Khadija has said previously in the interview through a summarization of her previous talk. This is considered good interview practice (Roulston 2010b) and represents the listener's continued attention of the speaker's talk, a conversational attempt at building rapport (Abbe and Brandon 2014). This summary also frames the interview question in lines 7, 8, and 9 that begins with "I was wondering if," a formulation attempting to mitigate interactional problems in interviews by phrasing the question in a

more indirect manner (cf. Roulston 2014). The phrase indicates hesitance and discomfort in asking a direct question. This is then followed by a string of self-repairs, these continuing the indirectness while at the same time showing indecisiveness in how to pose the question. Khadija's talk begins with "well," which Schegloff and Lerner (2009) noted indicates a response that will not be straightforward. Khadija begins by offering a contrasting understanding of religion in her life. Instead of directly explaining how it "plays a role" in her life, she declares that it instead is "the way I live my life" upgrading the assertion that religion simply has a role to play to declaring it determines the course of her life as a whole. I offer "mm hm" in line 11, acknowledging her assertion. In line 10 Khadija orients to the "mm hm" by continuing her account without any further prompting from me. What follows in line 12 then is a further unpacking of what was said in line 10. She continues by using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) that religion is what offers guidance of correct action in life, something she "always" thinks about in line 12. After a two second pause, I again offer the continuer and acknowledgement token "mm hm," to which Khadija seemingly completes her response by directly answering the original question, explaining religion plays a major role in her life.

The overlapping speech in lines 20 and 21 as well as lines 23 and 24 shows a negotiation of the conversational floor. In line 20 I use the pre-shift token "yeah" after which I attempt to take the speaking turn, yet my speech cuts off allowing Khadija to re-assume control of the conversation. Interestingly, in line 21 Khadija then downgrades her initial assertion that religion plays a major role by offering her guidelines for how to live her life to saying it is "just a part of my life." After she finishes speaking in line 21, I ask a question, a formulation of my interpretation of Khadija's talk, in line 22 based on her explanation that perhaps her religion provides structure to her life. Overlapping turns occur again in lines 23 and 24 in which Khadija answers my clarifying question while at the same time I softly request acknowledgement that my assumption behind the question in line 22 is correct. The overlapping turns here show a continued negotiation of the conversational floor. As all three interviews with Khadija happened over the telephone, we were unable to use body language as an indication of a completed speaking turn.

Khadija's "mm hm" on line 25 acknowledges my assertion of religion's role while my following "mm hm" in line 26 acknowledges her agreement. It is also taken up as an invitation to continue since Khadija again begins another turn with "well," indicating an indirect answer and an upcoming contrast to the assumption expressed in the questions in lines 22 and 24. In reply, from lines 27 through 44 Khadija's talk is indirect and she provides a narrative with extreme case formulations, such as on line 29 that God gives "all" guidelines to follow in life and the job of the believer is to follow them. We again see such a formulation on line 41 that Khadija does "all the prayers on time" and line 42 that she reads the "Qur'an every

day." During this narrative, my "mm hm" on line 33 is taken up as a request for Khadija to continue her explanation. In line 32, Khadija ends her talk with "you know?" As Gardner (1998) explained, the phrase "you know" is used when the speaker is seeking support on the part of the listener. In response to this request for congruence in knowledge, I give support through "mm hm," again serving as both a continuer and as an acknowledgement token, offering a positive assessment of her explanation. This excerpt illustrates Khadija's response to the token "mm hm," orienting to it as a continuer as she then gives an explanation of how she tries to follow God's guidelines.

The excerpt above is a negotiation, in which both speakers are orienting to Khadija's proposition that religion does not simply play a role in her life, it defines how she lives her life. Even when contradicting the assumptions embedded in the researcher's questions and formulations, Khadija is willing to provide a lengthy explanation in response to the continuer "mm hm." This disagreement (Pomerantz 1984a), that is prefaced with "well" in both lines 10 and 27, indicates a level of comfort in providing a detailed account to the researcher. This comfort, noted in the transcript, is representative of the developing rapport between speakers.

## Attention to participant accounting

Carolyn Baker (2002: 781) explained that ethnomethodological analyses of research interviews treat participants' answers as individual accounts in which responses are "sense-making work" that provide order to their presentation of events or individuals. Thus, "interviewees can be seen to account for themselves as competent members of the social category to which the interviewer has assigned them" (781). Acknowledgement tokens can function as a way for a listener to indicate "attending, assessing, confirming, linking, and acknowledging" the talk of the speaker (Bavelas, Gerwing, and Healing 2017). Used in this way, they align the listener with the speaker and offer the speaker support in their turns at talk (Stivers 2008). All of these functions show the listener's continued engagement in the conversation. In Excerpt 2 below, occurring during the second interview conducted with Khadija, she continues her explanation characterizing her inclusion in the category of being Muslim, accounting for her personal connections with Islam. "Mm hm" seen in this excerpt is again used as both a continuer and an acknowledgement token. Yet in the excerpt, instead of primarily serving to indicate the speaker should continue with the turn, here the response token is specifically used to accept her accounting work.

Excerpt 2. Interview 2 (4: 46–6: 52)

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1    E:   ↑yeah, so I'm just wondering, when you think back (0.3)
2         >and you think about< your experience in group (.) um
3    K:   [mm hm
4    E:   [how would you describe that? what's it like
5         >participating ↓in this group<?
6         (2.0)
7    K:   it's um.
8         (2.0)
9    K:   it has gotten ↓more comfortable (.) over over over time?
10        and I think <when I think back to the early ↓years> I
11        definitely was not in the sa:me (.) um comfort level with
12        my↑self and the knowledge that I (.) h(h)ad at the time
13        when we first started to speak ↑out=I could really speak
14        about my own personal experiences? but not (2.0) from a
15        lo- from a more learned (.) um and having studied (.)
16        over the ↑years <I feel a lot more confident °in the
17        information that I can ↓provide°>.
18   E:   mm hm.
19   K:   although although it's still (.) obviously um (1.0) with
20        a personal (1.0) ↑viewpoint because it is it is my own
21        experiences and how I (.) um (.) <I don't want to say the
22        word interpret> but how I ↑apply (.) <what I know about
23        my religion to my life>.
24   E:   [°mm hm,°
25   K:   [and so that makes me ↑unique and I think everyone would
26        agree that (.) if their own (.) the way they (.) you know
27        your personality is very unique and so how you (.) take
28        things in, and learn things, and apply them, is going to
29        be different to everyone even though you might be at the
30        same (.) starting point °of information°.
31   E:   mm hm. .hhh       [↑So-
32   K:                and [there are different situations in your
33        life that (.) help you connect to ↓religion or to certain
34        things (.) that you know about, you've read about (.)
35        but certain things in your life, certain experiences,
36        <certain situations make it come to ↑life> (.) a lot
37        ↓more.
38        (2.0)
39   E:   °can you give me an example?°
40   K:   well you know I, I read the Qur'an every day and I've
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41        read it (.) multiple times through? and then it feels
42        like (.) if I'm havin:g some situation (h)happen (.03) in
43        my life and I (.) >open up the Qur'an to where I am at
44        that ↑point< and I start reading it's almost like the
45        answer (.) jumps out (.) off the page right at me.
46   E:   [°mm, mm hm.°
47   K:   [so it just reinforces my (.)↓connection (.) >to my
48        faith<.
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In Excerpt 2, Khadija's talk represents her participation in the interfaith dialogue group not as a scholar, but as a practicing Muslim with her own personal orientation to Islam. She does this using several conversational resources including extreme case formulations, emphases on particular words, and the construction of lists. From line 9 to the end of the excerpt, Khadija's talk accounts for the personal viewpoint of Islamic teachings she shares in dialogue sessions by using extreme case formulations to explain that everyone has their own unique personality which impacts their religious experiences and because of this she is not representing a monolithic conception of the religion "Islam" in group meetings. She begins her account in line 9 by expressing that she was first uncomfortable sharing in group because her knowledge of Islam was based primarily on personal experience. But, as she mentions in line 15, in the time since she first began participating in the group she has studied Islam further and now can contribute through both personal experience and scholarly knowledge.

My "mm hm" in line 18 is taken up as a response indicating Khadija should continue her explanation, evidenced by her taking the next speaking turn. With its falling contour, this token recognizes that Khadija's turn may be finished. Here, the "mm hm" serves two functions. First, it accepts that Khadija's account of and justification of her change in confidence in speaking in the group. Second, it acknowledges understanding on my part of how she sees her participation. It does not, however, lead to speaker incipiency on my part and Khadija retains the floor. In line 19 she reorients the talk to the fact that while she has done further study in Islam, how she participates in the interfaith dialogue group is still informed by personal experience. After another "mm hm" on my part in line 24, this time with a slightly rising contour, a more common prosodic formulation of "mm hm" as a continuer (Gardner 2000), Khadija continues explaining that because her understanding and application of Islam is based on personal experiences, how she embraces and follows the religion is unique to her, stressing the words "unique" and "own." She notes in lines 25–30 that "everyone" has their own, unique connection with their own religion that is based on their own personal experiences. With this extreme case formulation, she justifies her sharing of personal experiences

by adding that everyone else is the same as she is, thus adding support to her explanation (Pomerantz 1986).

In line 31, I again offer "mm hm," followed by an intake of breath. With the falling contour, here "mm hm" is not uttered as a continuer, since I attempt to take the conversational floor, but as an indication of acknowledgment and that her turn is complete (Gardner 2000). Support for this intent comes from the uttered "so" used to signal an upcoming shift in speaker (Jefferson 1984a). However, Khadija interjects and our talk overlaps in lines 31 and 32. As a result of this overlap, I cede the floor allowing Khadija to re-assume the turn in line 32. Thus, rather than taking the "mm hm" up as a signal for a shift in speaker turn, Khadija orients to the "mm hm" on line 31 as another continuer. In her next turn from lines 32–37, Khadija works to add further evidence to her position that everyone has a unique orientation to their own religion and how they apply their beliefs to life. She does this by offering a three-point list beginning in line 35, that it is through certain "things," "experiences," and "situations" that allow someone to develop their own unique view. Jefferson (1990: 73) explained that the three-part structure to lists is a conversational resource that "serves as a sequential resource" signaling the completion of a speaker's turn. This is indeed how this is taken up in this excerpt, as after waiting in two seconds of silence I assume the speaking turn.

In line 39 I softly ask her to provide an example for further explanation of what these "things, experiences, or situations" may be that help people have personal connections with their traditions. This question for clarification comes after Khadija's three-point list that was vague, in which she explained that "things," "experiences," and "situations" allow people to apply their religion to their own lives. In line 40 Khadija's turn again begins with "well" signaling resistance to providing a specific description to elaborate on her previous list, yet she offers the example of reading the Qur'an as such an experience of how she applies her faith and tradition to her life. She uses the Qur'an as authoritative evidence of how Islam is an integral part of her life, her talk showing examples of how Qur'anic teachings are incorporated in her everyday experiences. At what I assume to be the end of this turn, I offer "mm" with a slightly rising contour, a weaker acknowledgment token than "mm hm" used previously or the more common "yeah" (Gardner 2000; Jefferson 1984a). This comes in close proximity to another "mm hm" which indicates a positive and encouraging assessment of her account (McCarthy 2010). As this overlaps with Khadija's speech on line 47, it can be assumed that Khadija considered the turn to still be hers.

Throughout the excerpt, we see conversational resources such as Khadija's repetition that her experience of Islam is unique and personal, multiple pauses, and vague descriptions of how this is so. During this excerpt she responds to my "mm hms" as my acceptance of her account and invitations to continue speaking,

thus she maintains the floor. Excerpt 2 is an elaborate yet at the same time vague explanation of how Khadija does not represent "Islam" in the group but shares primarily her own personal experiences, albeit these are informed by scholarship. Vague language such as this may be used intentionally "so that its interpretation can be stretched or shrunk according to the strategic needs of communication" (Zhang 2013: 88). Research indicates that such language must be interpreted in context and the interpretation of it is different according to the individual (Carter and McCarthy 2006; Channell 1994; Gassner 2012; Prince, Frader, and Bosk 1982; Zhang 1998, 2013). Specific to sensitive topics, Zhang (2013: 89) argued that most speakers will often take this "indirect and implicit approach" that includes "abstract and vague references" among other conversational resources.

My request for clarification on line 39 then, attempts to mitigate interpretational inaccuracies by suggesting that Khadija herself provide the "meaning boundary" (Zhang 2013) defining her commentary. While Khadija originally avoids offering specific descriptions, possibly also indicating discomfort with discussing the topic, she does offer a clear example of how she applies her religion to her own life. I argue that her willingness to provide additional elaboration after first answering questions on a difficult topic with vague language, indicates interactionally how the relationship between interviewee and interviewer is strengthening. An additional signal of developing rapport is that her response follows minimal and non-probing response tokens that acknowledge and support her talk (Miller 2017; Rapley 2006). Overall this excerpt exemplifies Khadija's "sense-making work" (Pomerantz and Fehr, 1997) in explaining how, and justifying why, she brings her own personal experiences into the group discussion during interfaith dialogue meetings.


## Silence

In addition to the use of "mm hm" to encourage further elaboration and to acknowledge interviewee accounting, a final conversational resource used to elicit further talk from the participant and create a deeper level of rapport examined in this paper is researcher silence. Silence between turns can at times indicate disagreement between speakers (Gardner 2000). However, the silence in Excerpt 3 below is often proceeded or followed by "mm hm" as a continuer and acknowledgement token. Because it is not followed by a marker of "dispreference" or disagreement (Gardner 2000), silence here is used to accomplish a patient and polite request for the speaker to continue while offering indications of agreement with the talk (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). Thus, the longer silences in the excerpt below surrounded by the researcher's response tokens keep talk going rather than demonstrating a lapse in the conversation (Gardner 2000). While this resource

also occurs in the excerpts above, Excerpt 3 below is offered as an example of this resource due to the frequency of silences and the length of time they last. This final excerpt appears 44 minutes into my third interview with Khadija.

Excerpt 3. Interview 3 (44: 09–45: 57)

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1    E:  and we, we talked a lot <in the beginning> about (.) um
2        some ne:w behaviors? (.) that you have? about <you know
3        con_fidence, and being able to speak in larger ↓groups,
4        and how that's (.) you know translated over into
5        wo:rk?>. I'm wondering if (.) through this experience
6        and (.) and ↓your (.) moments of introspec↑tion if
7        you've actually learned anything about yourself
8        personally.
9        (3.0)
10   K:  o:h(h), that's a loaded question (.) Liz (.)↑man .hhh
11       (heh heh heh) Um.
12       (1.0)
13   E:  answer it however [you feel most comfortable [(heh heh)
14   K:                     [okay.                     [well (.)
15       I think that I've said this before and I know >that I
16       have heard others say< it um (0.2) during the trialogue
17       it's like (.) when we say certain things and we
18       describe certain things, and we talk about the
19       differences? betw:een (.) what the other traditions
20       ↓say about that >sa::me story or topic?< (.) it just
21       makes me (1.0) >continue to< get stronger in my own
22       belief.
23       (1.0)
24   K:  and I think <many people feel [that ↓way>.
25   E:                                 [°mm hm°
26       (2.0)
27   K:  so, that's one thing that I: (.) I'm definitely (.)
28       walking away with every time we come out of one of
29       those ↓meetings.
30       (1.0)
31   K:  is that (.) yeah I'm you know it just makes me that
32       much more con_fident about (1.0) not only in myself? but
33       in my ↓belief (.)↓and what I'm doing.
34       (2.0)
35   E:  °mm hm.°
36   K:  and, I'm, I'm ↑glad actually to hear other people say
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37        that about their their own (.) um take-away from what's
38        going on with the with the trialogue.
39        (4.0)
40   K:   >I think people of any ↑faith who get stronger in their
41        own faith?< (1.0) may:b:e not such a bad thing.
42        (6.0)
43   E:   °yeah?°
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On lines 9, 26, 34, 39, and 42 we see lengthy silences, two seconds or more, which are beyond Jefferson's (1989) standard of one second as the maximum of silence in mundane conversation. While at times long silences in research interviews can be regarded as negative (Montgomery 2012), I argue that is not the case here. After each of these silences Khadija continues her explanation, elaborating her answer to the question on lines 5 through 8. Only on lines 25 and 35 do I offer a response token requesting her to continue speaking, which she does. Otherwise Khadija continues the explanation on her own. These silences are taken up as an invitation to continue her control of the turn. They also have the effect of mitigating the interactional difficulty of overlapping speech, resolving possible confusion as to which speaker should have the next turn. This is evidenced by the fact that there are only three brief instances of overlapping speech, occurring in lines 13 and 14 and lines 24 and 25. Rather than these moments of overlap causing hesitancy in Khadija's reply or an end in Khadija's speech, the moments of overlap in this excerpt actually further the conversation with the researcher attempting to offer additional support to Khadija in answering the question. Her willingness to continue speaking throughout the rest of the excerpt in response to the silences, i.e. without further prompting from the researcher, may also show a level of comfort and increased willingness to engage with difficult questions.

In line 10, Khadija pushes back against the question, identifying it as difficult to answer, then laughing at her assessment. In line 10, after identifying the question as "loaded" and thus difficult to answer, I offer her the opportunity to answer the question however she feels best in line 13, also ending in laughter. While Jefferson (1984b) identified laughter as marking troublesome interactions between speakers in naturally occurring interactions, Myers and Lampropoulou (2016: 87) found in their study of research interview transcriptions that transcribed laughter is "usually put at the end of the non-serious bit" of conversation and "what immediately follows is serious." Such is the case here. Khadija laughs after declaring my question to be "loaded" and after my suggestion that she "answer it however you feel most comfortable." I then laugh. This interaction is less serious than her response beginning in line 14, during which she soberly returns to the topic of discussion in the research interview in a businesslike manner. Lavin and Maynard (2001)

explained that in standardized survey phone interviews where rapport between researcher and participants is arguably still important (Bell, Fahmy, and Gordon 2016) but lacking, participants may laugh at certain instances in the interview but the researcher is unlikely to do so as well. With this in mind, laughter from both the participant and researcher in this portion of the excerpt shows comfort between speakers.

In our overlapping speech in lines 13 and 14, Khadija smoothly moves into a lengthy explanation. Similar to the explanation we see in Excerpt 2, Khadija again offers vague language to support her case, seen in lines 15 through 22. As opposed to the tactic of offering a continuer, in this excerpt I wait in silence for her to continue. While Khadija continues speaking, the silences only increase as I use this resource to allow her continued control of the floor. As represented in this excerpt, silence used in this way prevented negotiation of the conversational floor as seen particularly in Excerpt 1 above.

In response to the lengthy silences, Khadija continues her explanation of what she has learned through participating in the interfaith dialogue group. Again she uses extreme case formulations, justifying her impressions and experiences by connecting them to similar experiences other members of the group have. While pausing throughout, she refers to "others" in lines 16, 24, and 36. Again, these connections to other individuals function to add strength to her assertions by situating them within a conception of what is normal and common for participants in the interfaith dialogue group. In this excerpt, instead of researcher silences increasing the threat level in the conversation, they are taken as opportunities for Khadija to continue speaking. That they are taken up this way signifies the level of rapport developed between us across the course of her three interviews.

## Discussion

The analysis above identified common conversational resources used by both parties of a research interview. Khadija's accounts used repetitions, extreme case formulations, upgrading and downgrading, indirect and vague language, self-repairs, pauses, elaboration, trailing off, overlapping talk, response tokens, the construction of lists, emphasis on specific words, and laughter. My talk commonly used continuers, acknowledgement tokens, frequent feedback, laughter, overlapping talk, increasingly long silences, and summarizing formulations, all indicating active listening.

The focus of this chapter has included utterances offered by the listener, in this case the researcher, in order to better understand the role that listeners play in social action and the co-construction of talk in research interviews. While at times

characterized as minimal, in mundane conversation these responses are impor-
tant to the relational and social actions accomplished in conversation (McCarthy
2010). Gardner's (2000) extensive analysis of response tokens in mundane speech
argued that focus on these forms of speech in research offers an invaluable look
at the role the listener plays in both receiving and co-constructing talk. Gardner
(2000: 3) noted their importance in talk-in-interaction, writing:

> Together with assessments, response tokens provide information to other par-
> ticipants in the talk not only about how some prior talk has been receipted, but
> also some information on how the response token utterer is projecting further
> activities in the talk, for example whether they approve of, agree with, disagree
> with, will remain silent on, or have something to say about the prior talk.

Such an analytical focus has merit when carried over into research interviews,
yet as Richards (2011: 96) explained, the training of novice qualitative researchers
to conduct interviews often ignores these responses, "embedded within general
advice" that encourages interviewers to be supportive and yet "interactionally
neutral" at the same time. This lack of focus is reminiscent of Gardner's (2000)
assessment 18 years ago, that analysis of listener feedback was lacking and at times
considered a peculiar or trivial pursuit. But neutrality in research interviews is not
so easy to accomplish and overlooking interviewer response tokens to interviewee
talk, particularly in interviews conducted over the phone, ignores the influence
these utterances and feedback have in the construction of talk in an interview.
In research on sensitive subjects, interaction on the part of the researcher in the
interview becomes even more important for a successful interview and relation-
ships between researcher and participant. Miller (2017: 85) described qualitative
interviewing specifically on difficult topics, saying:

> Interviewing then cannot be neatly dis-entangled from our own lives and biogra-
> phies or desires to sometimes help our participants make sense of experiences and
> feel better about their selves; and conversely the opposite could be achieved. These
> are emotional encounters and rather than try to achieve objectivity in any positiv-
> ist sense, the interview requires transparency and rigour in relation to reflection
> on our own role in the collection and production of data.

Thus, this chapter attempted not to gloss over the researcher's side of the con-
versation, but examine both sides of the interaction with the aim of enhancing
researcher reflexivity and refinement of interviewing technique. As Roulston
(2016: 71) argued, such a detailed examination of research interviews, in this case
a focus on the signals of active listening, offers a powerful way for the researcher
to "recognize features and characteristics of their own talk – thus contributing
to the development of … 'researcher reflexivity'". The examination above is such

a reflexive analysis on researcher response tokens, the role they play in the co-construction of talk, and how such instances show the development of rapport in interaction. The following section further considers how such an analysis of an interviewer's use of continuers, acknowledgement tokens, and silence in research interviews is significant in understanding how they influence the relationship developed with the participant.

### Continuers, acknowledgement tokens, and silence in developing rapport

Rapley (2006) made the case that researchers use mundane conversational tactics in research interviews. This chapter's examination focused on the use of response tokens in this setting specifically with the aim of understanding how rapport is visibly constructed and maintained through talk in interaction, exploring a much-discussed topic in the literature on qualitative interviewing. Prior (2018: 488) noted that it is within "autobiographic, narrative, in-depth, and ethnographic" interviewing styles that researchers attempt to develop "personal connections built on mutual trust, respect, and consent" with their participants that create a "dynamic, person-centered space" in which the concept of rapport "has found a foothold." He re-specified that building rapport in research interviews involves using interactional practices examined by conversation analysts, namely "*alignment*, i.e. those that structurally support the activity in progress, and *affiliation*, i.e. those that endorse the speaker's perspective" (491; emphasis in the original).

The data above suggests that "mm hm" as a continuer and acknowledgement token accomplished this alignment and affiliation within research interviews with the outcome of the development of rapport between researcher and participant. Feedback in this way is important in interviews, particularly those on sensitive topics, for a variety of reasons. First, response tokens show continued attention and support of the interviewee's talk. Second, they can offer agreement and positive assessment of the conversation. And third, they show that a researcher understands, and thus aligns with, the interviewee's expressions. Each of these functions helps build key aspects of rapport, attention, positivity, and reciprocation (Abbe and Brandon 2014). Norrick's (2012: 574) analysis revealed that it is possible that "mm hm" shows the listener is being more considerate of the speaker because it is "less like a normal turn and more clearly a pure continuer." Such consideration follows along with indicating the researcher's respect for the participant throughout an interview, which, along with alignment, are additional pieces to the process of building rapport in research interviews (Prior 2018).

Response to silence in conversations as an interactional resource may differ culturally. While in English speaking cultures turn-taking is organized to "achieve close timing" allowing for little lag time between utterances, Stivers et al. (2009)

indicated that in other cultures, such as Nordic countries, long delays between turns is more preferred (10588). The growing use and length of silences across each excerpt examined here shows that rather than silence being an interactional problem in interviews, silence can be a powerful resource in allowing the participant to maintain the conversational floor in order to further elaborate on her answers, possibly a sign of the growing comfort level between interviewee and interviewer. Yet, for many novice qualitative researchers, silence is uncomfortable. The analysis above demonstrates how the use of silence can have a positive effect on the course of the interview. Additionally, the three excerpts above show the researcher's increased comfort with silence over time, representative of the in-the-moment refinement in the researcher's interview technique, an ability lauded by Richards (2011), as well as increased rapport throughout the interview series.

## Conclusions

I attended to each of the three components of establishing rapport reviewed above, namely taking the time and effort to establish rapport, honest engagement with participants, and expressions of active listening, throughout the course of the case study. First, not only did I take time to have a foundation of budding rapport before reaching out to possible interview participants, I conducted three ethnographic interviews with each participant over a period of three months utilizing Seidman's (2013) three interview series (20–23). Second, I offered each participant time to ask questions at the end of each interview which allowed an opportunity for honesty and transparency on my part, particularly important when interviewing on difficult topics (Miller 2017; Oakley 2016). Third, in each interview the researcher indicated active listening through the use of continuers as response tokens. The structure of these interviews offered opportunities for both the participant and researcher to co-create interview talk through open engagement.

In specifically looking at the use of response tokens and silence, this chapter's analysis offers a look at the interactional track record in establishing rapport. It also provides the researcher with the opportunity of increasing analytical sensitivity. Richards (2011: 109) indicated the importance of this is that the researcher develops a new "awareness of how the interviewer's contributions can help shape interviewee's responses and influence the development of the talk." Such an awareness helps novice interviewers understand their own impact on the construction of interview talk and this reflexivity contributes to a nuanced and practice-informed honing of a qualitative interviewing skillset. Understanding the influence that even minimal responses have on the course of an interview can allow researchers to deepen their expertise and can potentially lead to more successful interviews.

Interactionally minimal feedback has the power to shape the course of a conversation and such considerations can provide guidance to researchers in attending to the role their responses have in the content and course of a research interview.

Finally, analyses such as this provide researchers with an understanding of how rapport is continually developed and informed by the actions of the researcher throughout the course of their interactions with their participants. In this vein, future research may examine further conversational resources used by interviewers to establish rapport and their impact on the construction of talk. Future research may also more closely examine the work of interview participants in establishing rapport and the outcome of these conversational resources on the quality of the interview talk.