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Applicant Communicative (In)Competence in the Temporary Employment Interview:

Unpacking How the Expression of Identity in Social Interaction

and Problems Which Occur During this Speech Event

Influence Outcomes for Applicants Hired and Not Hired

By

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Applicant Communicative (In)Competence in the Temporary Employment Interview:
Unpacking How the Expression of Identity in Social Interaction and Problems Which Occur
During this Speech Event Influence Outcomes for Applicants Hired and Not Hired

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Abstract

Hudson, Nancie Jeanne (M.A., Communication)

Applicant Communicative (In)Competence in the Temporary Employment Interview:

Unpacking How the Expression of Identity in Social Interaction and Problems Which Occur During this Speech Event Influence Outcomes for Applicants Hired and Not Hired

Thesis directed by Professor Karen Tracy

This research study investigated communication in job interviews in an employment agency from a practical perspective and a critical perspective by conducting an interpretive discourse analysis which characterizes the job interview as a speech event and analyzes interactional strategies the applicant uses to make a positive impression, communicative problems which occur during social interaction in this context, and how identity influences social interaction and the outcomes of job interviews. The job interview is a test of the applicant’s verbal skills, and the interviewer’s expectations for those skills are analyzed and defined as Applicant Communicative Competence (ACC). This discourse analysis identified communicative patterns for 20 applicants in temporary employment interviews and found that identity is a factor which can cause problems between interlocutors with dissimilar identities.
Acknowledgements

This research project would not have been possible without the direction of my faculty advisor, Professor Karen Tracy, who helped me refine my ideas, guided my research journey, and critiqued my drafts, and whose unwavering confidence in me, a master’s student, inspired me to try to accomplish the seemingly impossible task of finding an employment agency that would give me permission to record actual job interviews for communication research, a feat which had only been done once before in the United States, by a doctoral student at Stanford, Julie Kerekes. I also must acknowledge the contributions of four other members of the faculty in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder who prepared me for this project and helped me succeed in my academic quest: Department Chair and Professor Bryan Taylor, who taught me the joy of conducting qualitative communication research; Professor Karen A. Ashcraft, who taught me the importance of studying gender, race and work from a critical perspective; and Associate Professor Cindy White and Assistant Professor David Boromisza-Habashi, who served on my advisory committee and gave me excellent feedback which enhanced the design of my research project and improved the validity of my data. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder for the $400 Graduate Student Research Grant I received for this project.
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Chapter 1:
Communication in Job Interviews as a Research Topic

During the 1990s, I interviewed numerous recruiters in employment agencies, and whenever I asked these recruiters to reveal their hiring criteria–how they whittled their long list of job applicants down to one person–they said their top priority was to find a person who was “a good fit.” When pressed to define a good fit, however, they could not. Judge and Ferris (1992) also found this trend when they interviewed recruiters who hired human resources managers; like the recruiters I interviewed, those recruiters said they based their decision to hire a person on an intuitive “feeling” during the job interview that the applicant will be “someone who fits,” yet they could not explain what they meant by that phrase. Reflecting on these recruiters’ ambiguous hiring criteria, I realized that the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant during the job interview and the interviewer’s hiring decision may be more political than rational, more subjective than objective, and more opaque than transparent.

From a communicative standpoint, how do applicants succeed in making a positive impression on the interviewer during social interaction in the job interview? In this chapter, I will discuss why communication in the job interview is an important research topic, and I will summarize the results of previous research studies which furthered knowledge about issues which are relevant to social interaction in the job interview, including the expression of identity using language, the nature of social interaction in the job interview, and identity factors which influence the applicant’s ability to build rapport with the interviewer. After providing the rationale for this research study and reviewing the literature which pertains to communication in job interviews, I will present the research questions which motivated this scholarly inquiry.
Rationale for the Research Study

The job interview is a significant human interaction because it prevents some applicants from obtaining employment, but surprisingly few research studies have been conducted which analyze communication in actual job interviews. Most research about this topic involved simulated job interviews with college students. The only two sociolinguistic studies that analyzed communication behavior during actual job interviews vis-à-vis outcomes found gender discrimination (Bogaers, 1998) and racial discrimination (Kerekes, 2005). Those studies gathered data more than 10 years ago (Kerekes gathered her data for her 2001 dissertation at Stanford University), and Bogaers gathered her data in Europe, where communication styles differ from communication styles in the United States. The job interview which occurs in a temporary employment agency differs from the traditional human resources job interview, and Kerekes is the only researcher who studied the temporary employment interview. Therefore, further communicative studies of actual job interviews in a temporary employment agency are needed to contribute to scholarly communication research and employment interview research.

Literature Review

The job interview is a standard procedure in the recruiting process, and the purpose of the job interview is to test the applicant’s social skills in what equates to a verbal performance. The interviewer asks questions and controls the structure and flow of interaction, and the applicant answers questions; therefore, the interviewer wields more power than the applicant (Akinnaso & Ajirotutu, 1982). This social interaction is a gatekeeping encounter because a representative of an institution asks an outsider about his or her personality, work experience, and life to evaluate
the outsider and uses that evaluation to decide whether to offer the person an opportunity to join the organization (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Schiffrin, 1994). Akinnaso and Ajirotutu (1982) found that the outcome of a gatekeeping encounter is more apt to be positive if the interlocutors establish rapport, and building on their study, Gumperz (1992) found that establishing rapport in a gatekeeping encounter increases the probability that the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant’s verbal performance will be positive and the outcome of the interview will be successful. Evaluating applicants for management positions on the basis of verbal performances is rational, because management positions require strong verbal skills (Jablin, 2001). Yet even in job interviews for light industrial jobs (unskilled manufacturing, such as packing and shipping clerks), work which does not require strong verbal skills, Kerekes (2007) found that interviewers in an employment agency evaluated applicants based on verbal performances and on whether they established rapport with the interviewers—even though each applicant, if placed in the position, would not have worked directly with the interviewer in the agency and would not have needed strong verbal skills while working in the unskilled job within the client company. Her study suggests that every job applicant needs to establish rapport with the interviewer so he or she will be evaluated favorably by the interviewer, even when strong verbal skills are not needed for the actual job.

From the applicant’s perspective, what exactly is “rapport” and what factors contribute to the establishment of rapport in this gatekeeping encounter? Advice for job interview success is abundant in popular publications such as Psychology Today, which compare the job interview to dating and define rapport as bonding or connecting with the interviewer by talking about common interests or aspects of identity (Ancowitz, 2009; Dehne, 2008). In scholarly research, Spencer-Oatey (2005) defines rapport as “the relative harmony and smoothness of relations
between people” (p. 96). Clark, Drew and Pinch (2003) provided a more specific definition of rapport as “a relationship between two or more people, characterized by feelings of mutual positivity, harmony, cohesive bonding and co-interactants being ‘at one with’ each other” and “reciprocated displays or expressions of other-involvement, such as attentiveness, empathy, friendliness, warmth, interest, liking, approval, agreement, interest, enthusiasm, understanding, cooperation, support, closeness, and the like” (p. 26). Clark et al. (2003) analyzed the discourse of 14 business-to-business field sales encounters between salesmen and prospective buyers in the United Kingdom and concluded that: (a) small talk was necessary to establish rapport in initial meetings; (b) rapport was established through a process of verbal agreements, affiliations, and reciprocal assessments; and (c) personal identities were revealed during the assessments.

Applying these findings to the present research, when the applicant meets the interviewer for the first time in the job interview, does the applicant’s identity affect his or her ability to establish rapport with the interviewer? To answer that question, I will begin by reviewing the findings of previous research which studied how people express their identity using language.

Identity Expression in Language

Linguistically, individuals use discourses to express their identities, and discourses are “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles” (Gee, 1996, p. viii). Discourses of social groups determine the criteria for conversation which are socially acceptable in specific settings, and individuals choose language which will help them fit in and obtain status within a social group. Hymes (1972a) described the knowledge which is necessary to use language properly within social context as “communicative competence” and explained that it includes
knowing language structure in terms of what *can* be said, having the ability to encode and decode utterances during social interaction, and knowing when language *should* be said within a situated context. Different aspects of identity create meanings within the context of social interaction; in addition to “master identity,” a person’s gender, race and age, and “personal identity,” his or her attitudes and character, individuals also choose language based on “interactional identity,” the person’s social role in the dyad, which in this study is the applicant and the interviewer, and “relational identity,” the relationship between the interlocutors (Tracy, 2002, p. 18-19). Together these aspects of identity determine what type of dialogue is appropriate for the specific social situation according to the “norms” or shared rules for acceptable social interaction in a situated context (Hall, 1988/89). Therefore, in addition to personal identity factors, the context of the job interview as a social interaction frames expectations for “interactive etiquette” for the interviewer and the applicant (Gumperz, 1992).

*Social Interaction in Job Interviews*

The job interview is an actively co-constructed social interaction in which both the applicant and the interviewer create and interpret meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Job interviews are “emergent conversations” which are jointly coordinated by both speakers through conversational rules such as turn-taking; when the speaker stops talking, it is understood that the other person can then speak, or when the speaker asks a question, the other person understands that it is his or her turn to talk, because the speaker will pause and wait for an answer to the question (Clark, 1996). In this emergent conversation, Einhorn (1981) found that applicants adapt to the interviewer’s preferences. She recorded and analyzed the discourse of 14 actual job interviews with college seniors in 1978 and found that in successful job interviews, the applicant
“appeared to sense what the interviewers liked and disliked from cues discernible in their questions” (Einhorn, 1981, p. 222).

How does the applicant know what to say during the co-constructed job interview? According to interview etiquette, the role of the applicant is to converse formally, politely, and respectfully, and if the applicant does not conform to this expected conversational style due to identity factors, the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant likely will be negative (Akinnaso & Ajirotuto, 1982). Jablin (1985) posited that applicants learn during their childhood, adolescence and adult life which communicative behaviors are appropriate for the workplace through socialization: talking with their families and friends, learning in school and on the job, and reading or watching mass communications. He argued that books, magazines, and television portray unrealistic stereotypes of communication in workplaces, and these impressions skew expectations for acceptable ways to communicate at work. For example, television shows portray employees dealing with personal problems rather than discussing work and engaging in aggressive interpersonal behavior, such as standing up to or humiliating the boss. Therefore, applicants may think they know but may not know what is appropriate to say at work or in a job interview.

In a literature review of interpersonal communication studies from 1970 and 1999 which analyzed discourse in job interviews, Jablin (2001) concluded that interviewers evaluate more favorably applicants who: (a) engage actively in conversation; (b) agree; (c) tell personal stories; (d) explain their answers; (e) say they would fit into the organization; and (f) give verbal performances which meet the interviewer’s expectations in terms of content and appropriate behavior. Einhorn (1981) also found that interviewers gave higher ratings to applicants who gave longer answers, so in accordance with Grice’s (1975) quantity maxim, an appropriate
amount of talk is one of the interviewer’s expectations. Therefore, there are rules for social interaction during job interviews, but applicants may not be aware of those rules, and not knowing the proper way to interact socially with the interviewer in accordance with the interviewer’s expectations can adversely affect the applicant’s ability to establish rapport during the job interview and thus can influence the outcome of this gatekeeping encounter.

Identity and Rapport in the Job Interview

Identity factors such as gender, race, class, culture, and linguistic background affect whether the outcomes of gatekeeping encounters are successful or unsuccessful (Akinnaso & Ajirotutu, 1982; Gumperz, 1992; Kerekes, 2006; Tannen, 1982, 1984). In a literature review of job interview research from 1911 to 1982, Arvey and Campion (1982) introduced a model of factors which influence job interviews and job interview outcomes, and their model includes master identity characteristics in both the applicant and the interviewer: gender, race, and age. Arvey and Campion found that identity factors such as gender and race can affect the interviewer’s expectations of the applicant, which may coincide with gender and racial stereotypes and subsequently influence the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant in a negative way. Powell (1987) also found that gender influenced interviewers’ expectations for and evaluations of applicant behavior in his literature review of organizational psychology job interview studies that were conducted from 1975 to 1985; however, most of those studies were simulated job interviews with college students, not actual job interviews.

Eleven years later, Bogaers (1998) studied social interaction between men and women during job interviews for middle-management jobs in Amsterdam by analyzing the discourse of four actual job interviews. Her discourse analysis coded cooperative and non-cooperative
interruptions and initiations and responses; supportive interruptions such as finishing the speaker’s sentence were categorized as cooperative utterances which did not disrupt the speaker, but interruptions which disrupted the speaker with the intent to “take the floor” were categorized as noncooperative. Bogaers found that in all of the interviews, the female applicants were interrupted twice as often as the male applicants. Bogaers also identified a “sociolinguistic hierarchy” which was defined by gender communication rules in Dutch culture, and by power or a lack of power, depending on one’s status as interviewer or applicant. At the top of the hierarchy were male interviewers, followed by female interviewers, male applicants, and female applicants. She concluded that in the job interview setting, Dutch men and women follow different rules for formal conversation, and job interviews in Amsterdam favor male applicants.

Organizational communication research by feminist scholars has focused on gender as a major factor in social identity and power in the workplace (Ashcraft, 2005). During the 1990s, the perception of male and female speech styles as binaries established norms for social interaction in the workplace, but the female speech style was based on white, middle-class women and cast women as the less powerful “other” in “neutral” organizations. More recent studies have posited gender as a way of organizing jobs and employees in the organizational hierarchy in ways which grant power to men and deny power to women, and feminists seek to deconstruct the ways in which organizational communication creates inequity for women in the workplace. Tannen (1990) concluded that “gender differences can be understood as cultural differences” (p. 88).

What aspects of cultural identity affect social interaction practices in job interviews? Tannen (1982) found that interlocutors who have similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds are able to establish rapport with less difficulty, because when two people share the same speech
style in a conversation, they feel as if the other person understands them and they are both “on the same wave length” in the dialogue, so they bond in terms of identity. Speech styles are individual, yet they are influenced by culture, linguistic history, and ethnic stereotypes; for example, native New Yorkers in Jewish communities are more likely to interrupt one another than people who grew up in Midwestern states. Misunderstandings can occur between interlocutors who use different speech styles, because native speech styles convey meanings which outsiders may not understand.

Gumperz (1992) analyzed cross-cultural job interviews in a study conducted during the early 1980s between white British interviewers and minority applicants from India who spoke English as a second language and wanted to enter a job-training program in the United Kingdom. The interviewers negatively assessed the minority applicants’ language use, because even though the applicants spoke English, the applicants used rhetorical strategies from their native language—such as short and high-pitched answers—which violated British etiquette for conversation. In addition to influencing language choice, identity factors such as culture affect how individuals communicate nonverbally, so in a cross-cultural job interview, even if the job applicant speaks in proper grammar, his or her non-linguistic cues such as a lack of eye contact can create misunderstanding or be assessed negatively by the interviewer (Gumperz, 1982).

Seven years later, Fairclough (1989) found that the powerful interviewer sets the parameters for discourse in cross-cultural job interviews because he or she represents the dominant discourse. In the typical cross-cultural job interview in Britain with a white middle-class interviewer and a minority applicant from Asia, West India or Africa, Fairclough theorized that the interviewer evaluates the applicant’s discourse within the limitations of British job interview etiquette because it is the dominant communicative speech style. He argued that if the applicant’s speech
style does not conform to that social norm, the applicant is likely to be evaluated negatively and thus not receive a job offer due to the interviewer’s lack of sensitivity to the applicant’s culture and speech style. Grimes (2002) argued that white individuals who hold powerful positions in organizations may discriminate unintentionally and unknowingly. Due to the “invisibility” of “whiteness,” they bond with other white people, do not bond with people of color, and do not realize that they are discriminating based on racial difference.

Racial attitudes have changed over time, yet only four years ago, Campbell and Roberts (2007) found discrimination in job interviews based on cultural communicative styles. They analyzed the discourse of 60 actual job interviews conducted with diverse job applicants in seven British organizations and found that applicants were positively or negatively evaluated on the basis of whether their communicative styles fit the interviewer’s expectations. Successful job applicants who obtained job offers expressed their professional and personal identities, told personal narratives, and aligned their culture and values with those of the organization. Unsuccessful job applicants, many who were minorities, were marginalized because they did not present social identities which fit the job and/or organization; for example, if they talked too much about their personal lives, they were judged as unprofessional. Campbell and Roberts concluded that job applicants must project social identities which conform to the cultures and values of the organization they wish to join.

Social class is another part of an individual’s identity, and Scheuer (2003) found that class disparity between the interviewer and the applicant can result in a negative evaluation of the job applicant. He conducted a discourse analysis of a tape-recorded job interview with a white male applicant, a former salesman who was a candidate for a management position at a university in Denmark. The applicant did not receive a job offer after the interview, and the
interviewers, the university’s board of directors, said one of the main reasons they evaluated him negatively was he dominated the conversation using working-class speech. Class also was a factor in Scheuer’s 2001 study, which analyzed the discourse of 12 tape-recorded job interviews in a company in Denmark. Successful job applicants displayed speech styles typical of the middle class, told personal narratives, talked approximately 50% of the time, gave longer answers, and listened more actively by giving minimal responses which indicated that they understood what the interviewer had said. He concluded that job applicants are evaluated based on the identity they project, and class affects the interviewers’ evaluation of an applicant’s verbal performance. Therefore, job interviews favor certain applicants because interviewers “distinguish between applicants on the basis of particular attributes of social identity” and “types of communicative socialization” (Scheuer, 2001, p. 240). Job applicants who performed their verbal test of social skills in the same (or in a similar) communicative style as the interviewer were more successful.

Regardless of differences in identity, interactional strategies such as small talk can establish rapport between interlocutors during gatekeeping encounters. In their study on educational counseling interviews, Erickson and Shultz (1982) found that small talk during interviews created comembership, “shared attributes of social identity,” between counselors and students when they discovered that they had things in common, such as common interests, acquaintances, or experiences. During the beginning of the interviews, socially awkward moments occurred as the counselors and students attempted to establish rapport with a stranger in an institutional setting, but discussing commonalities established a personal connection, and the social interaction which followed was cooperative and rhythmic. The outcomes of the interviews revealed that rapport is a factor in positive and negative outcomes, because students
who established rapport with the counselor received more information than students who were not able to establish rapport with the interviewer. The Erickson and Shultz (1982) study found that engaging in small talk with the interviewer and establishing common bonds through comembership can bridge the identity gap in conversations between interlocutors who have different identities, and Kerekes (2007) found that same trend in job interviews in her discourse analysis of 48 job interviews in a national employment agency in San Francisco; 24 men and 24 women applicants were interviewed, and in all of the successful interviews, the applicants engaged in chit-chat with their interviewer. In her study, Kerekes interviewed the (female) interviewers to record their perceptions of the applicants and gathered background data on the applicants. Her findings indicated that male and female applicants for light industrial jobs who related socially to the interviewers obtained job offers, but male and female applicants for light industrial jobs who could not relate socially to the interviewers in the employment agency did not obtain job offers.

_Social Interaction in Employment Agency Job Interviews_

Most organizations hire new employees only periodically, but employment agencies conduct job interviews and hire new workers on a regular basis. These agencies find qualified workers for companies which need short-term and long-term staff by matching applicants with job openings for which they are qualified. The job assignments range from permanent positions to temporary assignments which may lead to permanent employment if the worker performs the job successfully. In both cases, the employment agency serves as a broker between organizations which need to hire temporary or permanent workers and workers who need employment as soon as possible (Kerekes, 2005). During economic downturns, more organizations use employment
agencies to hire temporary workers, because hiring temporary workers through an employment agency costs less than hiring permanent workers and paying their benefits; therefore, many adults are obtaining work through employment agencies. Some employment agencies provide computer training for job applicants, but the primary function of the staff is to screen applicants through the employment application, skills testing, and the job interview. Therefore, employment agency interviewers routinely evaluate job applicants before hiring them for temporary job assignments or sending them to interviews for permanent positions within their client companies in the hopes of placing each worker in a job in which he or she will be able to succeed. The applicant pool in many employment agencies is diverse regarding gender, class, race, and linguistic background, and linguistic ability is of primary concern in the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant. In addition to language use, the interviewers in the Kerekes (2005) study assessed the applicants’ answers to questions in terms of whether the answers indicated “enthusiasm, leadership or the ability to take initiative, flexibility, reliability, and trustworthiness” (p. 121). Trust or lack of trust is established during the part of the interview that focuses on work history, when the interviewer questions the applicant about dates of employment and job duties at previous employers, because credibility is part of the criteria for predicting an applicant’s success on the job. Her study found that gaining the interviewer’s trust is a requirement for job interview success, and applicants gain the interviewer’s trust through verbal performances during the co-constructed social interaction.

Kerekes interviewed the female interviewers in the employment agency and found that in successful job interviews, the male and female applicants established rapport with the female interviewers by discussing identities both shared such as being married, being a parent, or knowing the same person. However, compared to the clerical applicants in her study, the light
industrial applicants were disadvantaged in this regard because the interviewers had negative stereotypes of workers who perform their job; “among the staffing supervisors, the label ‘light industrial’ conjures up images of candidates who are ‘casual,’ ‘lax,’ ‘not professional,’ and who have ‘weak’ speaking skills (e.g., ‘poor grammar’)” (Kerekes, 2005, p. 126). If the light industrial applicant is a person of color, he or she will be further disadvantaged in the job interview by preconceived racial stereotypes. Negative stereotypes of job applicant identities interfere with the establishment of rapport in job interviews, Kerekes argued, because they cause the interviewer to be “intolerant” of communicative behaviors which do not conform to interview etiquette and to evaluate similar work histories by different standards. For example, an African American man who applied for light industrial work was evaluated negatively for having a four-month gap in employment, but a Caucasian man who applied for clerical work was evaluated positively because he explained that his four-month gap between jobs was a “vacation.” Compared with applicants for clerical jobs, applicants for light industrial jobs had to work harder to establish rapport with the interviewer, and establishing rapport was even more difficult if the light industrial applicant was a person of color.

*The Interviewer’s “Hidden Agenda”*

The applicant’s ability to establish rapport during the job interview is constrained by the structure of the interaction, as neither the applicant nor the interviewer have the freedom to discuss whatever he or she want to discuss, because the interviewer’s questions focus on the applicant’s past work experience and skills. In answering those questions, the applicant’s goal is to make a positive impression by presenting “competence face” which will persuade the interviewer that he or she is qualified for the type of work being sought; the applicant wants to
present the identity of a capable candidate who would be an ideal employee if hired (Miller, 2005). Interviewers are aware that applicants may not be telling the truth in their efforts to make a positive impression, and they evaluate applicants on the basis of whether they think they are telling the truth, because if an interviewer does not trust an applicant, the interviewer will not hire the applicant (Kerekes, 2007). Two European studies of actual job interviews found that during social interaction, interviewers try to “trick” applicants into being too honest as part of their “hidden agenda,” which is to entice the applicant to say something which reveals his or her “hidden identity,” aspects of character which the applicant did not intend to disclose (Birkner & Kern, 2000; Komter, 1991). Birkner & Kern’s (2000) study in post-Communism Germany was a conversation analysis which included 41 job interviews with East German and West German applicants, and they found that West Germans were evaluated positively because they were more open in expressing their opinions and talking about themselves. Komter’s (1991) study in Amsterdam analyzed 35 actual job interviews using ethnography, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis, and she found that the interviewer’s hidden agenda created tension for the applicant due to “sayables” in this context; there are certain things which should not be said during a job interview, so for the applicant, talk during the job interview requires both “openness and camouflage” (p. 50). In spite of job interview advice which says applicants should be open and honest, therefore, the applicant should choose his or her words carefully, because the interviewer interprets the applicant’s verbal responses on two levels: on an explicit level regarding biographical information, and on an implicit level, regarding what he or she is not saying (Birkner & Kern, 2000; Komter, 1991). Komter also found that applicants were judged unfavorably on their circumstances, including unemployment, because of the belief in society that “people may be held at least partly responsible for their circumstances” in life; therefore,
unemployed applicants should downplay that aspect of their work history (p. 40). Therefore, applicants are evaluated by the language they use during the job interview, and the conflicting tasks of the interviewer and the applicant make this a “people sorting institution” like courtroom examinations, in-take interviews, and some medical exams, where a professional evaluates a layperson on the basis of discourse, knowing that the layperson will make language choices strategically in an attempt to influence that evaluation, and the evaluation is consequential for the layperson (Komter, 1991).

**Research Questions**

Although this review of research conducted by communication, human resources, linguistics, organizational psychology, and sociology scholars has answered questions about language as an expression of identity, about interpersonal dynamics in social interaction during job interviews, and about the importance of rapport in the job interview, reflecting on their findings has raised questions about job interview research and communicative gatekeeping encounters which prevent qualified job applicants from obtaining job offers due to the political, subjective nature of the job interview and history of gender and racial bias in evaluations of job applicants.

From a research perspective, many of the researchers who studied job interviews did not study communication behavior, so they asked research questions which were not communicative. Organizational psychology studies focused on character traits. Human resources and management studies aimed to find the person who was a perfect “fit” for the job, so they were conducted from the employer’s perspective. Methodologically, only seven research studies were communicative studies which taped actual job interviews (Bogaers, 1998; Campbell & Roberts,
2007; Einhorn, 1981; Kerekes, 2005; Komter, 1991; Scheuer, 2001, 2003). Other studies were simulated job interviews on college students, not actual job interviews, and many of those researchers did not study genuine human communication in real job interviews; they presented participants with fabricated transcripts, employment applications, resumes, and photographs of men and women who were presented as job applicants. Geographically, five of the seven studies which analyzed the discourse in actual job interviews were conducted in Europe, and perceptions, attitudes, speech styles, and social interaction practices invariably are different in Europe than in the United States. Only Einhorn and Kerekes conducted studies on actual job interviews in the United States, and Einhorn’s study defined “successful” job interviews based on pre- and post-interview questionnaires administered to the interviewers, not based on outcome, whether the applicant received a job offer, so her criteria for success differed. Therefore, future studies in the United States should extend Kerekes’ study to validate her findings, so the present research was designed to accomplish that objective.

What do we know about communication in job interviews? Scholars agree that social interaction during job interviews influences the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant in positive or negative ways based on the applicant’s verbal performance, and the applicant’s verbal performance is patterned by communicative choices which are shaped by the applicant’s identity, because gender, race, class, and cultural and linguistic background affect how people communicate. Together these communicative choices comprise the expression of identity in language, and identity plays an integral role in determining whether a job applicant will be able to relate to the interviewer, establish rapport, and subsequently receive a job offer after the job interview. Yet do these research findings apply to applicants in today’s job market? What aspects of identity affect social interaction in job interviews today? How do social interaction
practices during job interviews affect job interview outcomes? To address those issues, I developed the following four research questions:

*Research Question #1:* What is the character of the temporary employment interview as a speech event?

*Research Question #2:* What interactional strategies does the applicant use to make a positive impression on the interviewer?

*Research Question #3:* What communicative problems occur during this interaction?

*Research Question #4:* How do identity differences between the interviewer and the applicant surface in the job interview discourse and influence outcomes?

To build on Kerekes’ study, my research analyzes discourse in actual job interviews with diverse applicants in an employment agency to analyze social interaction during the job interview and how it affects the outcome of this gatekeeping encounter. Employment agencies are ideal research sites because of the high volume of job interviews conducted regularly and because employment agencies routinely screen a racially diverse pool of male and female applicants. Thus, the employment agency provides the opportunity to study the role of identity factors such as gender, race and class in social interaction between interviewers and applicants during actual job interviews. In the next chapter, I will describe my research methods in detail.


Chapter 2:

Methods

The data for this research study was gathered in an employment agency in Denver, Colorado which is the local branch of a well-known national employment agency, and this particular employment agency was ideal for gathering data about job interviews for research purposes because the applicants who typically apply for work in this agency are English-speaking adults ages 18 and older who are diverse in terms of gender, race, class, and work experience. Two professional interviewers (which this agency calls “Staffing Managers”) who work in that agency volunteered to participate in this study.

Methodology, Protocol and Logistics

This study was conducted during a five-month period which began in October 2011, and all of the participants volunteered to participate; the interviewers were not paid, and none of the applicants were paid. The project included seven research methods, which were divided into three stages entitled Parts A, B and C:

Part A: Preparation

(1) In-person conversational interviews were conducted with the two interviewers who work at the employment agency and routinely conduct employment interviews with applicants. The initial interviews were conducted to obtain general information about their standard hiring procedures and to give them the research materials for this study, which included the digital audio recorders, the verbal consent script to read to each applicant, 20 copies
of an information sheet so they could give one to each applicant, the logs (blank charts) for keeping a list of the job interviews they had recorded, and the numbered, labeled, sealable manila envelopes for the photocopies of the applicants’ employment applications.

Part B: Implementation

(2) As the two interviewers performed their routine job duties, they invited each applicant to participate in the study by reading the verbal consent script and giving the applicant an information sheet. Twenty applicants voluntarily consented to participate in this research study, so the interviewers recorded 20 employment interviews with a variety of applicants who were seeking temporary work assignments and/or temp-to-hire positions.

(3) After recording the job interviews, the interviewers made photocopies of those applicants’ employment applications and placed them in the manila envelope. These documents provided the applicants’ backgrounds in terms of education and work history.

(4) The interviewers emailed me after the job interviews had been recorded, and I made follow-up telephone calls to debrief them regarding their overall impressions of the applicants, how the applicants communicated with them during the job interview, and whether the applicants were hired. I typed notes during these debriefing interviews to keep a record of them and to document their remarks as quotations.

(5) When 20 job interviews had been recorded, I picked up the digital audio recorders and the manila envelopes which contained the photocopies of the employment applications and thanked the employment agency staff for their participation in the study.
Part C: Transcription and Analysis

(6) I transcribed my audio recordings of my initial interviews with the two interviewers, and a professional transcriptionist who was paid transcribed the audio recordings of the 20 employment interviews (verbatim, which included all words, the vocal sounds “uh” and “um,” repetitions, and overlaps, as in Tracy and Craig, 2010).

(7) I analyzed the data, which included the transcripts and audio recordings of my initial interviews with the two interviewers, the transcripts and audio recordings of the 20 job interviews, my typed notes from the debriefing interviews with the interviewers, and all of the documents (printed versions of the interview schedule for the job interviews, the agency’s Job Seeker Information Worksheet (JIW), and the employment agency’s online application, and the photocopies which the interviewers made of the applicants’ completed employment applications), and I conducted an interpretive discourse analysis to identify communicative patterns in the social interaction using Grounded Practical Theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995).

Throughout this research process, I also wrote fieldnotes to record my observations as a researcher. This information was gathered within the employment agency during my initial meeting with the owner of the agency, when I told her about the research study and requested her permission to ask her staff to participate in the study, during my initial interviews with the Staffing Managers, when I obtained information about their standard recruiting procedures, and at the end of the study, when I picked up the research materials; thus, my data also includes several fieldnotes. I also drew a map which illustrates the physical layout of the employment agency office (see Appendix A).
Human Subjects Protection

To protect the personal identities of the applicants and the Staffing Managers who volunteered to participate in this research study, several steps were taken to ensure their anonymity. First, the name of the employment agency has been omitted from all of the research data. Second, the names of the Staffing Managers were omitted from all of the research data, and they were identified only as “Staffing Manager A” and “Staffing Manager B.” Third, the data does not include the names of the applicants, because the interviewer assigned each applicant an applicant number in the order which the interviews were conducted and used applicant numbers throughout the study. The interviewer identified each applicant by applicant number, not name, at the beginning of the audio-recorded job interview, entered the data for that job interview on the log using the applicant number, blacked out the applicants’ names on the photocopies of the applicants’ employment applications, and wrote the applicant numbers on the photocopies of the applicants’ employment applications. The applicant numbers span from 2 to 21, because the job interview with the first applicant was not recorded due to a technical error.

The interviewers signed voluntary consent forms, and the applicants gave verbal consent after the interviewer read the verbal consent script aloud and gave them the information sheet. Both the verbal consent script and the information sheet explained that the applicants’ participation was voluntary, they did not have to participate in the study, and that declining to participate in the study would not affect their chances of being hired by the employment agency. A waiver of written consent was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado at Boulder because a written consent form would have been the only document which would have linked the research data to the applicants’ personal identities.
Data Analysis

The data in this research study was analyzed using Grounded Practical Theory (GPT), a qualitative method which studies communication from a normative approach (Craig & Tracy, 1995). GPT enables the researcher to analyze discourse from three levels: (a) the problem level; (b) the technical level; and (c) the philosophical level. On the problem level, the researcher reconstructs social practices in specific situations to identify tensions, dilemmas, and other communicative problems interlocutors experience during social interaction when the correct way to communicate is ambiguous in nature. On the technical level, the researcher identifies and describes the techniques and strategies which interlocutors use to manage these problems in conversation. On the philosophical level, the researcher identifies the beliefs, principles and ideals which guided the interlocutors in their decisions regarding how to interact. Theoretically, GPT interprets discourse using the increasingly reflective hermeneutic circle, so each stage in the analysis process builds upon previous analyses cumulatively. Methodologically, GPT is extremely beneficial for discourse analysts because it enables the researcher to analyze discourse in terms of the problems which surface in social interaction (see Chapter 4). The ultimate goal of GPT is to contribute to evaluative reflection which will improve communicative practices.

Overview

First, I provided an overview of the context for language use in this type of social interaction by analyzing the temporary employment interview (the interview which occurs in an employment agency which hires temporary workers) as a speech event. I described the character of this speech event using Hymes’ (1972b) S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G mnemonic, a model which is valuable in unpacking the following linguistic components:
S = the Setting,
P = the roles of the Participants,
E = the Ends or purposes, goals and outcomes,
A = the Act sequence, including the recruiting process and structure of social interaction,
K = the Key, the tone of the conversation,
I = the Instrumentalities, the communication mediums which are involved,
N = the Norms, the social rules for interaction in this situated context, and
G = the Genre, the type of speech event.

**Communicative Patterns**

To accomplish my primary objective, I looked for communicative patterns in the discourse of the job interviews. First, I identified and categorized four types of interactional strategies which applicants use to make a positive impression on the interviewer: telling personal narratives which display competence, highlighting commonalities shared with the interviewer, responding to or initiating small talk or humor to lighten the tone of the conversation, and using euphemisms to downplay negative aspects of identity. Next, to find communicative patterns which would be indicators of outcomes, I sorted the job interview transcripts into two piles—applicants who were hired, and applicants who were not hired—and identified several differences between the types and lengths of utterances and responses within each group. The lengths of utterances were categorized as short, medium, or long, the positive utterances and responses were categorized as the previously mentioned four interactional strategies, and the negative utterances and responses were categorized as: unexpected answers, face threats to the interviewer, negative remarks about a past employer, and inappropriate laughter about a serious
topic (definitions of all categories are provided in the detailed analyses in Chapters 3 and 4). Finally, in an effort to identify specific communicative practices which result in negative outcomes, I tabulated the frequency of negative utterances and responses in the applicants who were not hired and analyzed those patterns.

Identity

After identifying communicative patterns in the job interview transcripts, I reflected on the roles of the participants and how those roles influence the expression of identity in this situated context. To analyze identity as a factor in the outcomes of job interviews, I compiled statistics for all of the applicants which categorize the applicants according to gender, race, and outcomes and compare the ratios and percentages of each category with the total number of applicants in the study. It is important to note that because the sample consists of only 20 job interviews, my interpretation of this data cannot be generalized to the entire population.

Perspectives

My interpretation of the data in this research study included two perspectives. First, I analyzed the data from a practical perspective in terms of how the applicant succeeds in getting hired, to provide research findings which would contribute to employment interview research and help future applicants increase their chances for obtaining employment. Second, I analyzed the data from a critical perspective in terms of why some applicants do not get hired, because if applicants are denied employment based on identity factors such as gender, race, age or social class, increased awareness of those problems could lead to improvements in the recruiting process which could result in equal opportunities for all applicants, regardless of identity.
Summary

Therefore, this five-month research study was an interpretive discourse analysis of the initial interviews with the two interviewers who work in the Denver employment agency, the 20 actual job interviews those interviewers recorded during their routine job duties, the debriefing interviews with the two interviewers after they had recorded the job interviews, my observational fieldnotes, the map of the employment agency office, and all of the documents which are used in the recruiting process. Voluntary consent was obtained from all participants in the study, and all participants were anonymous to protect their personal identities. The data was analyzed using GPT (Craig & Tracy, 1995), Hymes’ (1972b) S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G mnemonic, and descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the temporary employment interview as a speech event, to identify communicative patterns in the discourse, and to discover how identity influences social interaction and outcomes from the applicant’s perspective. This analysis is an interpretation which cannot be generalized to the entire population due to the small sample size, but these findings are significant from a practical perspective and from a critical perspective in understanding the communication which occurs during job interviews in employment agencies and how that communication affects the outcomes for applicants in terms of being hired or not being hired.
Chapter 3:  

The Temporary Employment Interview as a Speech Event

Job interviews in employment agencies which hire workers for temporary and temp-to-hire work assignments differ in several ways from typical job interviews which occur in the human resources department of an organization which hires workers for permanent positions. The interviewer in the employment agency is a broker of labor services; she screens applicants to determine their suitability for work assignments in client companies, and she hires qualified applicants for work assignments within those client companies. The employment agency hires the applicant and pays the applicant’s weekly wages, and the employment agency collects those weekly wages and administrative fees from the client company. When the employment agency interviewer hires an applicant, the applicant completes new employee paperwork such as tax forms and the interviewer adds the applicant’s information to the employment agency’s computer database of available workers, but the applicant may or may not receive any work assignments. Being “hired” in an employment agency job interview thus has a different outcome than being hired in a typical job interview, where the applicant begins working soon after the job interview and new employee paperwork have been completed. In the employment agency, being hired means the applicant has cleared the first communicative hurdle on the path to employment. The interviewer in this context wants to hire as many applicants as possible to fill her database of available workers so she will have choices when she receives a job order from one of her client companies, as opposed to narrowing a list of finalists down to one person who is most qualified for a specific position, and her goal is to interview at least 10 applicants every week. Therefore, the employment agency job interview is a speech event which has different purposes, goals, and
outcomes than the typical job interview, and those variances influence social interaction between the interviewer and the applicant.

To understand the job interview as a speech event, it is vital to understand the context of social interaction in this communicative genre. The first part of this chapter will analyze the act sequence (A) by explaining the recruiting process, which includes the steps which precede the job interview. General patterns about the structure of the social interaction which occurs during the job interview, such as tone (K), instrumentalities (I), and norms (N), also will be noted. The second part of this chapter will describe the job interview setting (S) and the roles of the participants (P) and will discuss how those factors influence social interaction. Finally, I will provide a detailed analysis of how social interaction in the job interview is structured and how applicants use four interactional strategies which perform facework in order to comply with social and cultural norms, establish co-membership, build rapport, and create a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer, in the hopes of being evaluated favorably, hired, and receiving future work assignments which will provide short-term income.

The Recruiting Process

Even though the interviewer’s goal is to recruit as many applicants as possible to fill her database of available workers, she carefully screens every applicant to make certain that each applicant is qualified and suitable for specific work assignments before adding the applicant to her database or sending the applicant to a client company. The job interview is the final step in her comprehensive nine-step recruiting process. As Staffing Manager B said after she had explained this process: “We are really thorough.”
The nine steps in the recruiting process are organized as a flow chart in Figure 3.1 and subsequently are explained in detail:

Figure 3.1
Flow Chart of the Recruiting Process in the Temporary Employment Agency:
The Steps Which Precede the Job Interview

JIW = Job Seeker Information Worksheet

Step #1: Applicant Calls Employment Agency

The majority of applicants contact the employment agency by telephone in response to a help wanted classified advertisement which the employment agency posted on a popular website such as craigslist.com and monster.com. Staffing Manager B estimated that 90% of her applicants contact her first by telephone to inquire about one or more job openings in which they
are interested.

*Step #2: Applicant Sends Resume to Agency*

The applicants typically submit their typewritten resume to the interviewer in the employment agency via email, but they also can send it by the U.S. Postal Service. If the applicant does not have a resume because the type of work desired does not require a resume, as in the case of light industrial applicants, then no resume is required.

*Step #3: Interviewer Emails Job Seeker Information Worksheet (JIW) to Applicant*

This employment agency has a custom online form which includes brochure-type general information about the employment agency and the services it provides to job seekers (applicants) and client companies (employers) and a questionnaire about the applicant’s work experience and current work interests and desires. The “All About (Employment Agency Name)” section of this online form includes typical pay rates for temporary ($10-$12 per hour) and temp-to-hire ($10-$15) work assignments. The “Job Seeker Information Worksheet” section of this online form asks general questions about the applicant’s past work experience, type of work desired, and other questions which are standard for employment questionnaires. In addition, it also asks the applicant to enter a dollar amount for the minimum amount of compensation which would be acceptable and the amount which the applicant would like to earn.
Step #4: Applicant Completes JIW & Emails JIW to Interviewer

The instructions on the JIW tell the applicant to answer all questions on the form. Some of the questions require only short answers, such as how long the applicant has been looking for work, but other questions are open-ended and provide the applicant with opportunities to tell personal narratives. For example, Question 5 asks if the applicant has ever worked through an employment agency before, Question 11 asks the applicant about his or her strengths as an employee, and Question 13 inquires about the applicant’s long-term goals. In addition, the last question, Question 14, instructs the applicant to explain any gaps in employment, periods of time when the applicant was unemployed.

Step #5: Interviewer Reviews JIW Sent by Applicant

The interviewer reads the applicant’s answers on the JIW and then evaluates the applicant’s suitability for employment based on her interpretation of those answers, according to Staffing Manager B. She said the resume is limited by design; it can “only give you so much,” whereas the JIW reveals more of the applicant’s identity. Compared with the resume, the completed JIW is:

…more in depth—we can get a sense of their personality, too. A lot of people, their resumes are not representative of them, they are representative of their experience. This shows other things … like their writing style, and how they answer questions, in a more candid way. Once we review that, we determine if they are the kind of people we want and our clients want.

If the interviewer evaluates the applicant positively, the process proceeds to the next step.
**Step #6: Interviewer Calls Applicant to Schedule Job Interview**

The interviewer may call the applicant by telephone or may contact the applicant by email to schedule an appointment for a job interview.

**Step #7: Interviewer Emails Job Interview Instructions to Applicant**

After she has scheduled a job interview with the applicant, the interviewer sends the applicant an orientation and interview information document which instructs the applicant to print it and use it as a checklist for completing several tasks which are required prior to the interview. These tasks are detailed in Step #8.

**Step #8: Applicant Completes Online Application and Computer Skills Tests**

The orientation section of this two-page document confirms the date and time of the job interview and instructs the applicant to arrive 15 minutes early to fill out additional paperwork. Also, this section notifies the applicant that he or she must take the computer skills evaluations on the employment agency’s website (three tests which include a three-minute typing test and tests for assessing skill levels for using two different types of Microsoft software which are commonly used in organizations, MSWord and MSExcel). If those computer skills evaluations are not completed before the job interview, the applicant can take them in the employment agency office; the job interview typically takes one-half hour, but if the computer skills evaluations have not been taken, the job interview will span approximately one hour because it will include those online tests. This section informs the applicant that the agency does not reschedule interviews, but if the applicant cancels the interview before the appointment due to an emergency, he or she can reapply to the agency within six months.
The interview checklist section of this document instructs the applicant to complete the online employment application on the agency’s website and to bring the following documentation and information to the job interview: (a) proof of highest level of education completed; (b) proper identification for the I-9 (a federal form required for all U.S. citizens and non-citizens to confirm that they are authorized to work in the United States); (c) last three residential addresses, so the employment agency can run a criminal background check on the applicant; and (d) voided check from the applicant’s checking account, for the direct deposit of paychecks. The orientation and interview information document also provides driving directions to the employment agency and instructs the applicant to wear clothing which he or she would wear to a job interview.

Step #9: Job Interview

If the applicant completes all of the above requirements and if the interviewer evaluates the applicant positively, the next step in the recruiting process is the face-to-face job interview in the employment agency office. Social interaction in the job interview is friendly yet professional, and the language which the interviewer and applicant use can alternate between business talk and everyday talk, with changes in style and tone (K), as the interlocutors orient to one another during the course of polite conversation. The length of this speech event (A) is estimated at approximately 30 minutes on the agency’s orientation and interview information document, but in actual practice, the length of the job interview varies considerably; in this research study, the shortest job interview was only 10 minutes, and the longest job interview spanned 45 minutes. The job interview typically is shorter if the applicant is interested in a specific position which the agency advertised, because in those cases, the interviewer and the
applicant do not discuss every type of work which the applicant would be willing and able to perform; the applicant’s suitability for the advertised position is the only conversational topic. Another important factor which affects the length of the job interview is the completeness of the applicant’s JIW and online application, because if those documents are incomplete, the recruiter must ask the questions which were left blank; in some cases, those questions are difficult for the applicant to answer, so asking those questions extends the amount of conversation needed to accomplish the interviewer’s goal of gathering all pertinent information about the applicant. In addition, applicants who speak English as a second language (ESL) and applicants who lack basic computer skills sometimes make errors when completing online forms, so language ability, social and cultural norms (N), and instrumentalities (I) also are factors. The job interview, therefore, is the grand finale of the recruiting process, the final stage when the applicant’s ability to communicate verbally on the telephone and communicate effectively in writing while navigating unfamiliar software on a computer provide the foundation for and converge with the applicant’s ability to communicate face-to-face in social interaction. All three mediums—computer, telephone, and in person communication—are instrumentalities (I) which culminate in the job interview and influence the interviewer’s evaluation of “Applicant Communicative Competence” (ACC) in this setting. The physical setting also strategically affects the interviewer’s evaluation of ACC, so in the next section, I will discuss the materiality of this specific employment agency office as a setting for the temporary job interview.

The Focal Job Interview

The first section of this chapter provided the context of the job interview which occurs in a temporary employment agency, and it included several of the components of linguistic
interaction in Hymes’ (1972b) S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G mnemonic: (a) the purposes, goals and outcomes, which are grouped altogether as “ends” (E); (b) the steps in the recruiting process which precede the job interview and the length of social interaction in this genre, which analyzed the “act sequence” (A); (c) the tone of this social interaction (K); and (d) the instrumentalities (I) which influence the job interview. The next section of this chapter will delve deeper into the data to identify and analyze other components in that model: (a) the job interview setting (S); (b) the roles of the participants (P); (c) a detailed analysis of the structure of social interaction in the job interview (A); and (d) interactional strategies which the applicants use to comply with social and cultural norms (N).

Setting

The employment agency office was a long, rectangular-shaped suite on the ground level of a seven-story office building in a meticulously landscaped office park. The décor was classic and upscale, with paintings, carpeting, a lamp, a coat rack, a magazine rack, and only one chair, a leather wingback guest chair, in the waiting room. The setting was comfortable, like a living room, and as I sat waiting in the wingback chair, I thought no one was watching me, because the receptionist’s desk faced sideways and the interviewer appeared to be reading intently behind her desk, which faced the waiting room and was approximately 25 feet from the wingback chair in the waiting room (see Map of the Employment Agency, Appendix A). There were no private offices with doors, which I thought was unusual for an employment agency, because job interviews typically are conducted behind closed doors; instead, the work areas in this office were separated by six-foot modular cloth-covered partitions. From the applicant’s chair, the interviewer’s work area, with a desk, guest chair and bookcase, was clearly visible. As a result
of the open-air furniture arrangement, the sounds of telephone conversations, conversations between co-workers, and discourse between interviewer and applicant could easily be overheard.

During my initial interview with Staffing Manager B, she explained that she begins evaluating the applicant from the beginning of the recruiting process and takes into consideration the applicant’s communications with her via telephone and email. In addition, her last utterance made me realize that her in-person evaluation of the applicant’s communicative skills within the agency office begins before the job interview begins, before the applicant’s name is called, and before the applicant is invited to move from the waiting room to the guest chair by her desk. While explaining how she makes her hiring decision by the end of the job interview “99 percent of the time,” she said that she evaluates “how they treat (receptionist’s name), because she’s the one that interfaces with them until they get here; if they’re rude to her, it’s not even going to happen.” Even though the interviewer appears to be preoccupied when the applicant enters the agency, she can (and does) see and listen to the social interaction which is occurring in the waiting room.

If the wingback guest chair was situated in any other area of the waiting room, the interviewer would not be able to see the applicant from her desk. That aspect of the arrangement of furniture in this office, combined with the interviewer’s utterance about not hiring an applicant who does not converse politely with the receptionist, led to my conclusion that the wingback guest chair is strategically placed in the waiting room so the recruiter can watch the applicant covertly. Even though the waiting room in this employment agency seems like a safe “buffer zone” where the applicant can relax before the job interview and chat with the receptionist, the applicant is being observed in a “fishbowl” setting.
Therefore, unbeknownst to the applicant, the applicant's communicative behavior is observed and evaluated covertly by the interviewer in this employment agency prior to the job interview as part of the interviewer’s “hidden agenda” to “uncover” the applicant’s “personality” and “hidden identity” (Birkner & Kern, 2000; Komter, 1991). The physical layout of the furniture in that office enables that observation to take place, and a negative evaluation of ACC can negatively affect the outcome of the job interview before social interaction with the interviewer actually begins.

**Roles of the Participants**

The interviewer’s hidden agenda is a factor which camouflages her role as a participant (P) in social interaction during the job interview and distorts roles in this setting. The interviewer perceives herself as and actually is a “sorter” of people in an institutional setting (Komter, 1991). In that role, she represents the client company’s interests and the interests of the employment agency. The applicant, however, sees the interviewer as an agent who represents the applicant’s interests, which are to find suitable work and earn wages as soon as possible. In numerous job interviews within this study, the applicant confided in the interviewer as if she was a friend who would help the applicant overcome unfortunate circumstances in life, not as if she was a critical judge who would evaluate the applicant negatively. The interviewer sees the applicant as a performer who is acting like an ideal worker in order to make a positive impression on the interviewer and thus be hired, and due to that perception of the applicant as being in a performance role, trust is an issue for the interviewer. The applicant is performing for the interviewer to present an identity which conforms to social and cultural norms (N), so the performer role is an actual role. Therefore, the interviewer’s role as an agent and the applicant’s
role as a client are perceived roles which are incorrect, but the interviewer’s role as a sorter and
the applicant’s role as a performer are actual roles which are correct:

Table 3.1
Perceived versus Actual Roles of the Participants

Actual Roles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Sees</th>
<th>As</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer</td>
<td>Applicant</td>
<td>Performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Sorter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perceived Roles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Sees</th>
<th>As</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applicant</td>
<td>Interviewer</td>
<td>Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Client</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four roles of the participants (P) influence social interaction during the job interview in several ways. As a sorter who sees the applicant as a performer, the interviewer attempts to make the applicant relax to increase the chances that the applicant will express negative aspects of his or her true identity which are being hidden (Komter, 1991). Conversely, because the applicant sees the interviewer as an agent, the applicant is more inclined to tell the truth about negative aspects of identity. Applicants who did so in this study were thanked by the interviewer for their honesty, but the applicant who was evaluated by Staffing Manager B as not communicating openly was judged as untrustworthy and was not hired. Therefore, the roles of the interviewer and the applicant affect interaction during and the outcomes of job interviews, because: (a) the actual and perceived roles of the participants (P) influence the extent to which applicants openly express their identities; (b) the extent to which the applicants express their
identities openly is a criteria for gaining the interviewer’s trust; and (c) the interviewer’s trust is a vital factor in a positive outcome for the applicant in the temporary employment job interview (Kerekes, 2006).

Structure of the Social Interaction

The job interview typically is a routine sequence of questions and answers. The corporate office of this national employment agency provides interviewers in its local branch offices with an interview schedule, a list of questions they should ask all applicants during job interviews. The interviewers in this branch office, however, do not ask the questions in order and do not always ask all of the questions, and other variations occur during social interaction during the job interview. Overall, the structure of the social interaction during these interviews contains similarities in content and patterns in communicative strategies yet significant variations in the number of questions asked and the order of the questions asked. Many of the questions on the interview schedule are identical or similar to the questions on the JIW, so if the applicant answered those questions properly and in detail, the interviewer may or may not ask them again in person. The following section will analyze patterns in the opening, body, and closing of the job interview.

Openings: These job interviews typically began with the interviewer asking the applicant to provide information with either a request to “Tell me a little bit about yourself” or a question about the type of work the applicant prefers. If the applicant had already expressed interest in a specific position which was advertised, the opening question asked why the applicant was interested in that specific position, but if the applicant had not expressed interest in a specific
position, the interviewer began by asking: “What type of work are you looking for?” Two of the interviews began with the interviewer asking the applicant to confirm his or her cellular telephone number, one interview began when the interviewer asked the applicant to confirm that his age was within the 21-25 age range for the position he wanted, a temporary secret shopper work assignment, and the interviewer began one interview by thanking the applicant for completing all of the pre-interview requirements within a shorter than usual period of time. In four of the interviews, however, the interviewer began by initiating friendly small talk, either a general inquiry about the weather outside, a self-deprecating joke about the interviewer’s messy desk, or the interviewer’s humorous prediction that she would probably be “downing” her glass of water quickly during the interview because she is “parched.”

Table 3.2

Variances in Openings of Job Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task-Oriented</th>
<th>Ratio of Total Job Interviews</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Job Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me a little bit about yourself</td>
<td>5/20</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of work are you looking for?</td>
<td>5/20</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are you interested in this position?</td>
<td>2/20</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirm applicant’s cell phone number</td>
<td>2/20</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirm appropriateness of age</td>
<td>1/20</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanks for quickly completing all requirements</td>
<td>1/20</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ratio and percentage:</td>
<td>16/20</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non-Task-Oriented

Small talk                                          | 4/20                          | 20%                               |
As Table 3.2 shows, the overwhelming majority of the job interviews in this study began when the interviewer immediately referenced her information-gathering tasks which are part of the recruiting process; in only a small percentage of the job interviews, she began by initiating small talk with the applicant. This conflicts with small talk as the routine job interview opening that Komter (1991) found in her Amsterdam study of traditional job interviews (conducted by human resources managers who were searching for one person to hire for one position which was available within the company where they worked). Because the present study was conducted in a temporary employment agency, my data suggests that this genre of job interview typically begins with task-oriented talk initiated by the interviewer, which establishes a goal-related “let’s get to work” tone (K) for social interaction in this context.

**Body:** In addition to the above variations in the openings of job interviews, the sequence of questions which followed did not proceed in accordance with the corporate-approved list of interview questions for this employment agency, which are listed in order below (the list is not numbered, but the following list is numbered for referencing purposes, and the following interview schedule is verbatim, including errors in grammar and punctuation):

**Interview Schedule**

1. Are you looking for: Full Time Hours ___ or Part Time Hours ___
2. What is your *minimum* hourly salary requirement?
3. What is your *desired* salary?
4. What is your minimum hourly requirement for temporary work?
5. What type of work are you looking for? i.e. Receptionist, Data Entry, Admin. Asst., etc.
a. 1st choice:
b. 2nd choice:
c. 3rd choice:

6. How long have you been looking?

7. Have you ever worked for a temporary service before? Yes ___ No ___

8. If yes, what companies have you worked at through agencies? Please do not list agencies, rather the actual name of the company at which you were assigned.

9. Will you work:
   Temp ___ Temp-to-Hire ___ Career/Client paid ___ Career/Applicant paid ___

10. What are your strengths as an employee?

11. What are your short term career needs?

12. What are your long term career goals?

13. What three things do/did you like about your present or last job/company?

14. What don’t/didn’t you like about your present or last job/company?

15. Do you understand that (agency name) is your employer and that any and all issues regarding an assignment need to be brought to the attention of (agency name) Staff?

16. Is there any reason that you would not be able to be at work every day and on time?

17. Are you aware that tardiness and absences from any assignment, temp or temp-to-hire, may result in termination?

18. Do you agreed to adhere to all policies and procedures as outlined in the (agency name) Employee Handbook?
The interviewers in this agency do not ask every applicant all the questions on the interview schedule, and the interviewers never asked all of the questions in order. Many of the questions on the interview schedule, Questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12, also are included on the JIW. If the interviewer asked those questions during the job interview, the applicant had already read and/or answered them on the JIW, so they were not “surprise” questions. If the interviewer did not ask those questions during the job interview, I assumed that she already had the answers to those questions because the applicant had answered them on the JIW. Sometimes when the interviewer asked one of these questions, it was obvious that the applicant had not answered the question on the JIW or had answered the question incorrectly on the JIW (examples of the latter will be analyzed in chapter 4), and in other instances, the interviewer admitted that the applicant had already answered the question but said “we ask them anyway.” Thus, there is a considerable amount of variation between the interview schedule questions which are asked of each applicant during job interviews in this employment agency.

In addition to the questions from the interview schedule, each interviewer said that she asks questions regarding the applicant’s preparedness for the type of work the applicant is seeking. For light industrial work, applicants need to have safety clothing and gear such as steel-toed boots, a back brace, and safety goggles, so the interviewer typically asks that type of applicant if he owns those items and how many pounds he can lift comfortably. For some types of hospitality work, the applicant needs to have “tray experience,” experience as a food server, because the worker needs to know how to carry and balance large round trays which are laden with several plates of food. During the course of asking questions, the interviewer also asks the applicant to elaborate on aspects of a specific answer or to provide more details about a personal
narrative. Such queries give the applicant opportunities to express identity, which will be elaborated on in the next section.

_Closings:_ By the end of the job interview, the interviewers in this employment agency have decided whether they will hire the applicant (Staffing Manager A 100% of the time, and Staffing Manager B 99% of the time). Applicants who are hired know that they have been hired because the interviewer asks the final question on the interview schedule regarding the applicant’s agreement to comply with the policies and procedures in the employee handbook, and after the applicant says yes, the interviewer asks the applicant to fill out and sign employee authorization forms for federal and state income tax deductions from earned wages. Applicants who are not hired, however, may or may not realize that they have not been hired and the agency will not call them for any work assignments, because the interviewer always politely and professionally finishes the interview but does not explicitly announce her decision. For example, in the job interview with Applicant #20, the interviewer signaled that the job interview was nearing an end by telling the applicant: “I have all your information here, your application, this information, and we’ll call if something does come up, we’ll get you to do some paperwork at that time.” That applicant may have inferred that he was not hired, but he may not have reached that conclusion.

Therefore, the structure of social interaction in the temporary job interview varies considerably depending on which questions the interviewer asks, the type of work the applicant is seeking, and the (in)completeness of the JIW, online application, and computer skills tests. There are, however, communicative patterns which generally occur in this type of job interview. The interview usually opens with task-oriented talk initiated by the interviewer, the sequence of
questions loosely follows the corporate-approved interview schedule, and the social interaction typically ends with hired applicants knowing that they have been hired but rejected applicants not being told explicitly that they have not been hired. To elaborate on the communicative patterns which I found in these types of job interviews, the next section of this chapter will identify and analyze strategies which applicants use during social interaction with the interviewer.

Impression Management Strategies Applicants Use

Due to the high volume of applicants in employment agencies, the employment agency interviewer probably does not remember all of the applicants in her database, and applicants who are remembered are more likely to be called when job orders are received. Societal discourses about job interviews emphasize that the applicant needs to “connect” with the interviewer in order to be remembered; popular literature describes this connection as “bonding” with the interviewer on a personal level and creating “chemistry” by talking about common aspects of identity, interests, or background (Ancowitz, 2009; Dehne, 2008). Academic publications describe this connection as building “rapport” through small talk and co-membership (Birkner & Kern, 2000; Clark et al., 2003; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Kerekes, 2006; Komter, 1991). Strategies to manage the impression which the applicant is making on the interviewer in positive ways (Birkner & Kern, 2000) as a means to establish this personal connection were found in many of the job interviews in this research study, because the applicants: (a) told personal narratives that displayed competence; (b) highlighted common aspects of identity, interests, or background which they shared with the interviewer; (c) responded to or initiated small talk or humor to lighten the tone of the conversation; and (d) used euphemisms to downplay negative
features of identity. In the following section, I will unpack how these four interactional strategies comply with social and cultural norms (N) to establish co-membership and build rapport with the interviewer and ultimately create a positive, memorable impression which will increase the probability that the applicant will be hired.

Applicant Strategy #1: Tell Personal Narratives that Display Competence

Many of the applicants expressed their personal and professional identities through personal narratives about their lives and past work experience. Some applicants told stories which reflected positively on their personal character; for example, Applicant #9 talked about volunteering at her church and opening a school for homeless children, and Applicant #4 talked about being a caregiver for her physically disabled adult son. When applicants told personal narratives about past work experience, their stories presented competence face.

The first example of an applicant who told a personal narrative to present competence face is a Caucasian male in his twenties who has worked as a barista in a coffee house, as a cashier and cleaner in a movie theatre, and as a deckhand on an Alaskan fishing boat. In my debriefing interview with the interviewer, she said at first he “seemed pretty shy” but then after she asked him questions about his past work experience, “he really opened up. So I really liked him.” The following excerpt is the point when he began talking about his fishing boat experience, after she asked him to name three things he liked about his last job:

Excerpt 3.1: The Alaskan Fisherman (A21, Lines 50-64)

T1 A: Well when we opened the fishing, they’d regulate it all through the um wildlife department so you’re not allowed to just fish and fish and fish, you’d kill all the salmon so they-
T2 I: Right.

T3 A: They’d wait for them to get to a certain mass, and they’d say fish for eight hours, or fish for four hours, and sometimes they’re just like fish for 24 hours, and so if you’re not fishing, you’re not making money.

T4 I: Oh my goodness.

T5 A: They don’t let you sleep, so that was challenging. And uh it was um interesting, it was exciting. That’s I guess a little different from interesting.

T6 I: Okay, how bout one thing that you didn’t like?

T7 A: Um, did it long-term, so it was- I had to stay out on a boat for a month and a half I think, duration I guess.

T8 I: So what was that like, working- doing that as a job?

T9 A: It’s- I mean it was fun, it’s fun for the first ((laughs)) two weeks or so-

Explaining why he was not able to sleep while working on the Alaskan fishing boat was a presentation of competence face because his story indicated that he is a hard worker; the implication being that if he were not a hard worker, he would have quit that seasonal summer job. It is interesting to note that while answering the interviewer’s question about three things he liked about his last job, he complained that it was “challenging” because during 24-hour fishing periods, he was not allowed to sleep. So even though he had already answered her next question, to name one thing he did not like about his last job, she asked the question anyway, and after he gave another reason he did not like that job, she asked him a follow-up question which was not on her interview schedule: “So what was that like?” He enthusiastically continued his personal narrative about that job for several minutes, and the interviewer finally said, “Okay, well thanks for sharing all that.” Even though most of his narrative consisted of complaints, she found the story interesting and encouraged him to continue talking about it because he was “opening up”
and sharing his feelings. By the end of the job interview, the interlocutors were joking and laughing, and she hired him for a temporary, ongoing work assignment as a secret shopper.

During my debriefing interview with the interviewer, she said “he really communicated well” after she asked him about his fishing boat experience, and in evaluating him after the interview, she said “he seems like an honest guy,” and “I guess I trust him.” Therefore, telling a personal narrative during the job interview was an effective interactional strategy for this applicant because his story performed competence face (“an honest guy”), established rapport by revealing the applicant’s identity as an adventurous young man who has a strong work ethic, and made a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer.

A second example of how narratives were used by applicants to display competence face is a Caucasian female college graduate who has worked as an academic advisor and a meeting planner. She has worked for another branch of this employment agency and created co-membership during the introductory phase of the job interview by referring to the employment agency as “you guys” three times (instead of saying the employment agency’s name) to link herself to the interviewer as a “co-worker” who has worked for the same company, because the interviewer currently works for this national employment agency and the applicant worked for them as a temporary in the past. A professional dancer who is struggling to start her own entertainment business in the annual meetings industry, Applicant #15 is looking for any kind of temporary office clerical work. She told several personal narratives, and this first story recalled exciting aspects of a previous job after she was promoted from registration coordinator to meeting services manager by new owners who bought the company where she worked.
Excerpt 3.2: The Meeting Planner (A15, Lines 40-66)

T1 A: Um, they quickly promoted me. They saw a lot of my assets within the company, and they- they knew that I had a lot to provide to the company. So they promoted me, and I became the Meeting Services Manager, so I actually ran the department that I was formerly part of.

T2 I: Wow!

T3 A: Um, which- you know it was an interesting position. I was the youngest person in the company. And I now became the boss of people who were there for 17-plus years.

T4 I: [Mhmm. That would be tough.

T5 A: Yeah, but it was actually a very easy transition.

T6 I: Good!

T7 A: Um, you know my skills, assets that I gained from the university as well just as a MER-

T8 I: Mhmm.

T9 A: Um, I learned a lot about myself. I learned a lot- how to lead people and be assertive. I learned um how to be a team player.

T10 I: Mhmm.

T11 A: So I was able to wear multiple hats, I- I- I could assist at a registration table as needed, or I can lead an entire event. Um so as a Meeting Services Manager, I ran over 70 meetings a year, all over America, I got to Travel quite a bit all over North America as well.

T12 I: Do you have a favorite area that you got to-

T13 A: The Caribbean.

T14 I: ((laughs)) Yeah, I guess I would like that best.

T15 A: So yeah, we only stayed at the five-star resorts.

T16 I: Ah!
This applicant began her narrative in “business talk” to present competence face. She used the word “promoted” twice and chose key words and phrases which would present her image as a business manager. She described her skills and experience as “assets” (“They saw a lot of my assets”), portrayed herself as an “assertive” leader (“I learned a lot- how to lead people and be assertive”) of a group of workers who were all older than herself (“I now became the boss of people who were there for 17-plus years”), and used the well-known phrases “team player” and “wear multiple hats.” The interviewer, who also is a Caucasian female college graduate in her twenties, encouraged this applicant to continue telling her story and overlapped with a thoughtful “Mmhmm” as soon as she heard the word “youngest,” so she identified with that aspect of the story, being a young manager and having to supervise older co-workers. As soon as the applicant talked about her extensive travel, the interviewer asked her if she has a favorite geographic area, and before she finished her question, the applicant immediately answered, “The Caribbean,” as if her decision required no thought. The interviewer laughed and agreed that she, too, would prefer the Caribbean, which indicates that she understood her choice. At that point, the applicant transitioned into ordinary talk and boasted that while working as a Meeting Services Manager, she “only stayed at the five-star resorts.” The interviewer indicated that she understood the context of the utterance and she was impressed that the applicant had organized meetings in hotels which featured luxurious accommodations (“Ah!”). Through this personal narrative, Applicant #15 was able to make a positive impression on the interviewer and present competence face by elaborating on specific details of her past managerial experience (“I ran over 70 meetings a year, all over America”).

In my debriefing interview with the interviewer, she evaluated the meeting planner applicant as “awesome” and “a great candidate” who “was really good at communicating and
had interesting stories to tell.” She described her as “engaged and engaging” and “charismatic,” and she said “I really liked her.” The interviewer specifically mentioned the personal narrative about meeting planning and said, “When she was telling me about her last job, it felt like she was telling me a story, the way she worded her experiences. I was very interested in what she had to say.” This job interview was the only job interview in my data in which the interviewer said that she was assertively working at placing the applicant in a suitable temporary work assignment: “I’m trying to find her a job.” Telling a personal narrative which made a positive impression on the interviewer clearly made this applicant memorable and increased her chances of receiving a work assignment.

Another applicant who used personal narrative as a strategy for impressing the interviewer and making herself memorable was a Caucasian female high school graduate in her late twenties who has worked in front-office and back-office clerical jobs during the past eight years. She emphasized her strong work ethic and said she learned it while working as a temporary for a U.S. Marine Corps office: “I learned that you leave no man behind. That means you work through lunch, you work through break, you work late, whatever it takes to get the job done is really my philosophy.” This applicant told the following personal narrative while answering the interviewer’s question about three things she liked about her last job:

Excerpt 3.3: The Excel Queen (A6, Lines 105-118)

T1 A: Um, the fact that my boss- she really um- we went through a huge computer conversion,

T2 I: Oh wow.

T3 A: It was big, it took us a year just to get through the conversion, and it was another 2 years before we got to the point where we were comfortable with it, but in the process we lost a lot of reports that we needed-
T4  I: Yeah.

T5  A: And couldn’t get back. But they’d give us a piece here and a piece there, and my boss just was so great, she said here you go, you’re the Excel queen-

T6  I: Aw!

T7  A: Fix it, put it back together, and I just- I loved that she had a lot of faith in me.

T8  I: That’s awesome!

This personal narrative portrayed the applicant as an expert in using Excel, a Microsoft brand of software which is commonly used in businesses to compile important reports using spreadsheets. Excel is complicated and difficult to use unless one has taken an Excel training course or has extensive experience using it, so the ability to use Excel is considered an asset in organizations. Telling this story during the job interview enabled Applicant #6 to present competence face (because she is a skilled office worker who was treated with respect by her former boss), and reflecting on that experience enabled the applicant to tap into the heartwarming aspects of the story and make a personal connection with the interviewer, who also is an office worker. By describing her former boss as “so great” because that boss had confidence in her to recreate important company reports which had been lost in the computer conversion, she was able to express admiration for and gratitude to a former employer, which complies with the social norm that one should never say anything bad about a former employer during a job interview. By quoting her former boss, the applicant was able to describe herself as the leading expert or honorary “queen” of Excel users in that office; she was able to compliment herself in a humble rather than boastful way, which complies with the social norm that people should not boast about themselves. The interviewer responded to this story on an emotional
level ("Aw!")}, because she understood that being trusted to recreate important company reports meant that the former boss had the utmost confidence in the applicant’s computer skills. The interviewer understood the context of the utterance, that being called the Excel queen and being asked to recreate the reports was high praise from a supervisor which made the applicant feel appreciated. This personal narrative created rapport because it created co-membership between two experienced office workers and because both interlocutors expressed positive, heartwarming feelings of appreciation for a “great” boss, a highly regarded employee, and an example of the employee’s problem-solving ability which helped an organization recreate vital company data.

This applicant was being considered for a job order for an office clerical worker in a warehouse, a job which the interviewer said does not require strong verbal skills. The interviewer hired her for the job and told me during the debriefing interview that the applicant “was friendly” and “communicated very well, surprisingly so. I wasn’t expecting that kind of communication, just because of the nature of the position. There wasn’t any phone work or anything like that.” Therefore, the applicant exceeded the interviewer’s expectations from a communicative standpoint, and the interviewer concluded, “I really liked her.” Telling the personal narrative about being called the “Excel queen” helped the applicant make a personal connection with the interviewer, and by the end of the interview, the interlocutors transitioned from business talk (such as wanting to find a job with a “stable company”) into everyday talk (“hang on to it for now cuz”). The applicant even admitted that she couldn’t remember which position this interview was for, because she had applied for so many jobs, and the interviewer identified with that experience: “Sure! Absolutely. I- I know when I was looking for work I was just shoving my resume out there.” The Excel Queen applicant laughed, and the interviewer hired her for the clerical warehouse work assignment and gave her the instructions for that job;
therefore, personal narrative was a useful interactional strategy for this applicant because it made a positive impression on the interviewer.

**Applicant Strategy #2: Highlight Commonalities Shared with Interviewer**

Making a personal connection with the interviewer was easier for those applicants who shared common aspects of identity, interest and/or background with the interviewer, which confirms the findings of previous job interview research studies (Birkner & Kern, 2000; Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Gumperz, 1992; Kerekes, 2006). Connecting with an interlocutor with whom one shares commonalities was most obvious in the job interviews with applicants who share similar master identities as Caucasian females in their mid-twenties and in job interviews where both interlocutors also shared similar cultural identities as college students/college graduates and/or newlyweds.

For example, during the introductory phase of the job interview, Applicant #18 explained that she is a college student who only needs one more class to earn a bachelor’s degree in management. The interviewer graduated from college within the past year, and she indicated to me that she enjoyed college and sometimes wishes she was still in college. The following excerpt occurred when this applicant was explaining her life situation and emphasized how hard it is to work 40 hours a week and take two or three college classes:

Excerpt 3.4: The College Experience (A18, Lines 127-148)

T1 A: This last time I was taking three, and I- I felt very stretched! (((both laugh)) And I had to move, so- but uh, you know, I mean school is probably not as valued about- when people go to school, about how much work that you have to do if you wanna maintain good grades. I have a 3.89 grade point average.
I: That’s what I graduated with, so yeah, I know exactly where you’re coming from.

A: Well, you know and I just got two B’s and uh and um it was really a Matter of- of actually having a t- one teacher that did not explain the stuff well enough, and you’re only as good as your teachers are.

I: Mmhmm. ((laughs))

A: And uh so um sometimes-sometimes students, have you heard of those? ((both laugh)) Sometimes uh students just don’t try, and uh I have uh a guy in my class, and I actually think it would be great if employers did look at grade scores.

I: Yeah, I agree.

A: Because um some people um brag about um just coasting by on as little work as possible.

I: Mmhmm.

A: And uh unfortunately, a lot of us get stuck in groups with them where they don’t do any work. And then- and then you have to supplement all of it.

I: Yeah.

The applicant established co-membership with the interviewer through commiseration about the college experience as an academic struggle which is unfair when one is in a group with non-serious students, because the serious student has to do extra work to compensate for the “sometimes” students. Expressing her frustration regarding working in teams, however, was an “unsayable” within the context of the job interview, because when workers talk about teams, typically they express competence face that they are a good “team player” who can work well in teams. The dialogue also framed the college experience as an academic accomplishment which is unrecognized by employers that consider degrees only, rather than evaluating grade point averages, when hiring. The interviewer agreed (“Yeah, I agree”) and affiliated with the applicant’s complaints (“I know exactly where you’re coming from”), perhaps because the
interviewer is a recent college graduate who was a serious student and still remembers the frustrations of her own college experience. Despite that “unsayable” about teams, the applicant was able to make a positive impression, establish co-membership, and make a personal connection with the interviewer by highlighting their mutual college experiences.

Another example of this interactional strategy was Applicant #10, who used it twice. After she had already established co-membership with the interviewer because both are college students, this applicant highlighted the fact that she was now using her “married name” and then laughed. That utterance expressed her identity as a newlywed and initiated the following conversation with the interviewer:

Excerpt 3.5: The Newlywed Bride (A10, Lines 219-236)

T1   I:   How long have you been married?
T2   A:   Since May.
T3   I:   Oh, that’s when I got married.
T4   A:   Congrats!
T5   I:   Yeah thanks. What date?
T6   A:   Um, we got married May 21st.
T7   I:   Okay, very cool. We got married the 29th or 30th – 30th.
T8   A:   Great timing.
T9   I:   Yeah it really was, it was windy but whatever.
T10  A:   It was a little windy in ours too, this one picture we did an outside wedding-
T11  I:   Yeah.
T12  A:   My veil is like a superman cape.
T13 I: Oh yeah.

T14 A: Like wrapped around my face.

T15 I: Oh no!

((both laugh))

T16 A: Not cute.

This social interaction cemented the rapport between the applicant and the interviewer, because they had already made a personal connection through the shared identities of being Caucasian female college student/graduates who reside in the Denver area. Discovering that they also are both newlywed brides bonded them emotionally, and discovering that their weddings occurred nine days apart during the same month, May, when the weather was windy, created a deeper level of co-membership as young women who have recently succeeded in attracting a marriage partner and have met expectations for a prominent discourse in society which creates social and cultural pressure for young women to find a suitable man and marry him. Therefore, highlighting commonalities such as marriage during the job interview can be an effective interactional strategy for the applicant in making a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer.

**Strategy #3: Respond to or Initiate Small Talk or Humor**

Another interactional strategy for making a positive impression during the job interview is to be responsive to small talk and humor which the interviewer initiates or to initiate small talk or humor within the context of the conversation. Small talk is casual conversation about common topics such as weather, opinions, and experiences which most people relate to easily.
Also known as chit chat, small talk typically occurs at the beginning and end of a conversation, and it is a useful strategy for establishing friendly relationships with new acquaintances. When engaged in appropriately, small talk can establish rapport in social interaction during the job interview.

The interviewer initiated small talk about weather at the beginning of the job interview with Applicant #17, a Caucasian female 63-year-old administrative office worker:

Excerpt 3.6: Small Talk about Weather (A17, Lines 1-13)

T1  I:  This is applicant 17. Okay, so thanks so much for coming in like I said on such short notice. How’s the weather turning out out there?

T2  A:  It’s getting colder.

T3  I:  I heard that it was snowing in the foothills already. Things are turning greyer by the moment! ((laughs))

T4  A:  Well they say we’re supposed to have snow about 7 o’clock tonight.

T5  I:  Yeah, that’s the news.

T6  A:  Maybe an inch.

T7  I:  Well that’s not too bad.

T8  A:  No, that’s practically nothing!

T9  I:  Okay.

T10 A:  For us! ((laughs))

T11 I:  Well. That is a good point. It’s important to keep it in perspective.

In addition to “breaking the ice” for this intense face-to-face encounter, this series of utterances establishes co-membership, because both the interviewer and the applicant are residents of the Denver area. Together the interlocutors cooperatively review the local weather
forecast for their geographic area and frame a forecast for one inch of snow as positive when one considers Denver’s typical snowfall amounts. This social interaction during the introductory phase of the job interview establishes a personal connection and sets a cooperative, rhythmic tone for the conversation which will follow (Erickson & Shultz, 1982). Small talk at the beginning of this job interview eased social awkwardness and helped build rapport between strangers in an institutional setting. When the interlocutors have different identities such as the age difference between this 25-year-old interviewer and 63-year-old applicant, small talk is an interactional strategy which can “bridge” the identity gap.

Identity motivated another applicant in this study, Applicant #14, to initiate small talk with the interviewer during the conversation. He is a Caucasian male recent college graduate from Illinois, and early in the job interview after the interviewer asked him about his background, he found a window of opportunity to express his identity as a Chicagoan by fondly remembering Chicago-style pizza:

Excerpt 3.7: Small Talk about Culture (A14, Lines 49-54)

T1  A: Deep dish.
T2  I: Yeah. I’ve never had it.
T3  A: You’ve never had deep dish pizza?
T4  I: Uh uh.
T5  A: You’re missin out!
T6  I: That’s what I hear, so um yeah.

By introducing Chicago-style pizza into the conversation, the applicant expressed his cultural identity as a college student who lived in a geographic area which is nationally known
for its delicious deep dish pizza. Assuming that the interviewer had tasted and probably enjoyed eating deep dish pizza, he mentioned this regional specialty food to make small talk. After she said that she had never tasted deep dish pizza, he expressed his surprise and recommended that she eat deep dish pizza, as one would recommend a well-known popular cultural delicacy to a new friend who had never eaten it. Therefore, this applicant used small talk to express his cultural identity and establish a friendly tone of conversation during the job interview.

Jokes are another casual form of speech which can ease the tension of this intense face-to-face interaction, establish bonds which make a personal connection, and make a positive impression on the interviewer (when humor is used appropriately in conversation about non-serious topics, which will be discussed in Chapter 4). Telling rehearsed and impromptu jokes and then laughing during the social interaction was a common pattern in my job interview data. As the previous Newlywed Bride excerpt (Excerpt 3.5) illustrated, jokes and laughter can strengthen co-membership which had already been established; however, this strategy also can help bridge the identity gap between interlocutors who have dissimilar identities. For example, Applicant #13 is an African American male high school graduate who is applying for light industrial work or bill collection and has experience doing both types of work. Other than being approximately the same age and living in the Denver area, he and the interviewer appeared to have different identity characteristics (African American vs. Caucasian, male vs. female, high school graduate vs. college graduate, and light industrial/bill collection vs. staffing manager). Toward the end of the interview, he told a joke about his wife after the interviewer asked him for an emergency contact telephone number, because that information had not been entered on his online application. (Note: Number symbols have been substituted for actual telephone numbers in all transcripts to protect the personal identities of the applicants.)
Excerpt 3.8: Joke about Marriage (A13, Lines 190-201)

T1 A: Okay, that’d be uh ###- uh I will have to look it up.
T2 I: Okay.
T3 A: My wife’s number. She’d probably be mad if I told her I didn’t know it.
T4 I: No, I won’t tell her ((laughs))
T5 A: Um, alright ###- nope, ###, I even had that part wrong!
T6 I: That’s okay.
T7 A: ###-##.
T8 I: And what is her first name?
T9 A: Brianna.
T10 I: Two n’s, one n?
T11 A: B-r-i-a-h-n-a.
T12 I: That’s way prettier than the way I was spelling it.

Telling that joke established co-membership between the applicant and the interviewer, because she also is married, so humor bonded two dissimilar interlocutors in social interaction in this institutional setting. The joke thus established co-membership about marriage between interlocutors with dissimilar identities and helped the applicant impress the interviewer that he has the communicative competence (Hymes, 1972a) to joke about his marriage in a socially appropriate self-deprecating context; joking about his wife was acceptable according to social norms (N) for the job interview, because he did not insult his wife. During my debriefing interview with the interviewer, she evaluated him as an applicant who has “the ability to communicate” and said that she hired him. Therefore, telling this joke during the job interview
was a successful strategy for impressing, establishing co-membership, and building rapport with the interviewer, and for relaxing the tone of the social interaction during the job interview.

Another applicant who used humor as an interactional strategy to bridge the identity gap in the job interview was Applicant #9. She is a 35-year-old African American female community college graduate who is certified as a nurse’s aide and also majored in business management at a trade school but did not complete enough courses to receive a degree. This applicant is a mother who has two children, and she has work experience in the restaurant industry, in the security field, and most recently as a customer service coordinator in an apartment complex. She is looking for office clerical or hospitality work, and during the introductory phase of the job interview, she told a joke about her age:

Excerpt 3.9: Joke about Age (A9, Lines 7-10)

T1 A: Okay, Well, my name’s (applicant name). You know that already.
T2 I: ((laughs))
T3 A: I am 35 years old, going on 20.
T4 I: Of course. ((both laugh))

Telling this joke at the beginning of the job interview eased the tension of the initial social interaction, when two interlocutors with dissimilar identities (African American vs. Caucasian, age 35 vs. age 24, certification vs. college degree, married vs. single, and mother vs. no children) began talking, but it also was a strategy to establish co-membership with the interviewer regarding age and bridge the identity gap between their “youthful” and “over-30” ages. America has a youth-centered culture which values the chronologically young members of society, particularly people between the ages of 18 and 25, and people over 30 often are
considered “old” by this standard. The implied message of the joke was: “Chronologically, I may be years older than you, but I am young at heart and I think like a young person, so we share that common identity characteristic.” The interviewer responded to the joke by saying, “Of course,” which is an agreement that acknowledges understanding, and then both interlocutors laughed at the same time, which is an indicator of rapport. Establishing co-membership this early in the job interview set a cooperative, lighter tone for the conversation which would follow, and that was important from a rhetorical perspective, because this applicant later revealed that she truly needed work as soon as possible because she was in the midst of a housing crisis. Rhetorically, this joke illustrated the applicant’s talk as strategic word choice which gave her the agency to choose her own image as a “young” person in society and therefore relate easier to the youthful interviewer. Culturally, this joke was rooted in the discourse in American society that it is better to be youthful than it is to be old.

During my debriefing interview with the interviewer, she said that she “really liked” Applicant #9, and “she was connecting with me.” The applicant told other jokes during the job interview which were not rehearsed (the first joke obviously was rehearsed), and even though the interviewer said a few of those jokes were “sarcastic” and “too casual” for that institutional setting, she hired Applicant #9 regardless of those norm violations, because of her extensive and varied work experience and because “she has a good personality” (for complete debriefing interview, see Appendix B: Sample Debriefing Interview). Therefore, initiating humor during the social interaction of the job interview, appropriately and rhetorically using a casual tone and strategic word choice, was effective in helping this applicant bridge the identity gap between herself and the interviewer and make a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer.
**Applicant Strategy #4: Use Euphemisms to Downplay Negative Features of Identity**

Applicants also can use strategic word choice during the job interview if they are asked to divulge aspects of their identity or details of their past work experience which are likely to be judged negatively by the interviewer. In such cases, cloaking the meaning of a message in a euphemism, a socially acceptable word or phrase which is substituted for socially unacceptable language, signals the interlocutor’s meaning yet will not violate the norms (N) for job interview discourse. Some applicants candidly tell their personal and work-related problems to the interviewer, but other applicants subtly hint at what they really mean when the need arises to explain to the interviewer an aspect of their life which does not conform to social norms (N).

For example, compensation from a past employer was a sensitive topic for Applicant #11. He is an African American male who has experience in light industrial and general labor, including concrete, welding, painting, and moving furniture, and he is certified as a forklift operator. He recently relocated to Denver from Michigan, and he had been unemployed for five months. When the interviewer asked him for details about his past work experience, he did not answer a question directly regarding how much one of his past employers paid him.


T1 I: Okay so this looks pretty good. Um, as far as when you worked with (name) how much an hour were you making?

T2 A: (name) he’s the head director, so I worked for him-

T3 I: Gotcha.

T4 A: I did a lotta work for him. Now sometimes, it was they’d have cash on hand, and then sometimes it was just for him as a favor.

T5 I: So just kind of a volunteer basis with some compensation?
A: With- with some compensation.

I: Okay.

A: So if he sent me to- say like if I had to move furniture or something like that, that would involve cash.

I: Okay.

A: Just for helping him uh unload trucks or go to a warehouse or something like that just for him personally-

I: Mmhmm.

A: That would be for free.

I: Okay.

A: But there was some money, I mean that’s why I had to put- you know

I: That was a good experience.

A: Yes.

This applicant did not answer the interviewer’s question regarding his hourly wage during that employment because that employer did not pay him an hourly wage; that employer paid him illegally or not at all (“that would involve cash” and “as a favor”). The applicant was trying to make a positive impression on the interviewer, so when he was asked to explain his compensation from a past employer who did not comply with laws which require employers to deduct federal and state income taxes from all wages which are paid to employees, the applicant said that he had been paid cash, which implied that he had been “paid under the table” by that employer. Knowingly accepting cash from an employer is a norm violation in the business world because it is illegal. Furthermore, working for the same employer on other occasions and not being paid implies that the relationship between employer and employee was coercive, because if he did not work for free when asked, he would not be paid for other work when asked. The
applicant hinted at this relationship when he did not finish his explanation: “I mean that’s why I had to put- you know.” That signaled his intended meaning that he felt financial pressure to work for that employer even though he had to accept illegal compensation and sometimes work for no compensation as a requirement to maintain the relationship with the employer. The interviewer’s response (“That was a good experience”) framed that situation positively because that situation could have been embarrassing for the applicant if the interviewer had expressed shock or distain for his past actions within the context of this social interaction. Using a euphemism, therefore, enabled the applicant to avoid violating a norm for job interview discourse and create a positive impression on the interviewer. In my debriefing interviewer with Staffing Manager B, she said that she “really liked him” and “sensed that he would be a good asset to our team; reliable, engaged.” From a rhetorical perspective, this interactional strategy enabled the applicant to choose his own image; instead of framing his identity as a lawbreaker, he expressed his identity as a hard-working laborer who tolerated having to accept illegal payments from a previous employer because he needed the income.

Explaining past behavior which is likely to make a negative impression also was a task during the job interview for Applicant #7. She is a Caucasian female college graduate in her late fifties who was a full-time mother, and now she is looking for part-time temporary office clerical work to supplement her family’s income because her husband’s business in Denver, where she, her husband, and her adult daughter worked, went out of business due to the economy. This applicant was extremely friendly and used the interviewer’s first name four times during the job interview, and her language was unusually casual throughout the job interview, which I know from my past experience as an interviewer and as an interviewee are norm violations for job interview discourse. The applicant established co-membership with the interviewer during the
introductory phase of the social interaction when she said she has been married for 38 years; the interviewer recently married, so she enthusiastically congratulated the applicant on her successful marriage and said that is “awesome!” Later in the job interview, when the interviewer asked the applicant why she decided to look for work through an employment agency, the applicant said that she had worked for an employment agency before and admitted that she had not completed a temporary work assignment.

Excerpt 3.11: The Two-Day Employee (A7, Lines 149-164)

T1 A: You know, I actually did this once before, but to be honest with you (first name), it’s not even worth mentioning, because it was a situation- I don’t even remember the company, cuz this is a little over 10 years ago.

T2 I: Okay.

T3 A: And it was a first job.

T4 I: Mmhmm.

T5 A: And it was at the United States Tennis Association on- I don’t know if it’s Parker or what, and I started on a Monday, and I believe 9/11 happened on a Wednesday, my sister-in-law died Thursday,

T6 I: Oh my gosh!

T7 A: So we had to go and take care of all that, so I thought okay, well, that was it! ((laughs))

T8 I: Oh my goodness! That was a rough week.

T9 A: Yeah! It was a rough week, you bet, you bet. Anyway, I knew that when I contemplated working, I struggled with the commitment to a full-time job.

T10 I: Right.

From the interviewer’s perspective, the worst outcome which can happen is to hire an applicant to be a temporary employee for the employment agency, assign that employee to work
at a client company for a designated period of time, and be notified by that client company that
the employee did not show up for work. During my debriefing interview with Staffing Manager
B after her job interview with Applicant #21, she characterized the scenario of an applicant not
reporting for a work assignment as the applicant “screwing me.”

Applicant #7 accounted for this serious norm violation using the euphemism “situation.”
She explained that she had started a temporary work assignment on a Monday and had stopped
going to work at the client company two days later because: (1) a national emergency, the Sept.
11, 2001 terrorist attacks, had occurred on Wednesday; and (2) a death in her family had
occurred on Thursday. Cultural values in America prioritize patriotism, and this applicant
framed her failure to report for work for her temporary work assignment on Wednesday of that
week as an appropriate reaction to the aftermath of 9/11, when Americans were mourning the
loss of thousands of innocent American civilians. Cultural values in America also prioritize
dedication to family, so this applicant further substantiated her norm violation in the business
world by a sudden and unexpected death in her family the day after the 9-11 terrorist attacks.
Since both of those events involved mourning, and the right to mourn following death is a
cultural norm in society, the applicant was able to mitigate the potentially negative impression
which her violation of the business norm would have made on the interviewer had it not been
euphemized and explained. Therefore, Applicant #7 used the euphemism “situation” rhetorically
within the context of her cultural values to soften the negative impact of her norm violation in
the business world, present competence, and create a positive, memorable impression on the
interviewer. By reframing her identity through strategic word choice, this applicant was able to
increase her chances of obtaining temporary employment.
The “situation” euphemism also was a useful strategy in impression management for Applicant #9 (previously identified in Excerpt 3.9 “Joke about Age”). She is a 35-year-old African American female community college graduate who is certified as a nurse’s aide and has a wide range of work experience in restaurants, security, and office clerical. She has two children, her boyfriend drives her to work because her car is in need of repairs, and she is looking for “a career, not a job.” Twice during the job interview, this applicant used the word “situation.” During the part of the job interview when the interviewer and applicant discuss the proximity of the applicant’s residence to various job sites for the purpose of figuring out how many miles of driving would be feasible for the applicant, the interviewer asked the applicant where she lives in the Denver area, and the applicant did not answer the question immediately.

Excerpt 3.12: The Housing Crisis (A9, Lines 540-547)

T1 A: I really don’t live in Denver-
T2 I: Okay.
T3 A: I just took my- my P.O. Box, but we really need to move, we’re in a situation-
T5 A: with the landlord.
T6 I: Sure, not to worry. That general area is that in, just so I have an idea?

This was the second time the applicant used the word “situation” during the job interview (for complete job interview transcript, see Appendix C: Sample Job Interview Transcript). The first time, she used “situation” within the context of needing to earn money as soon as possible.
The second time, she used the same word within the context of where she lives and extended the meaning to include “with the landlord.” Together with her disclosures that she just rented a post office box to receive her mail and she “really” needs to leave her current residence, the word “situation” is a euphemism which cloaks her intended meaning that her “situation” is a housing problem, and she is unsure where she will be living in the near future. If she needs to move soon yet does not have a job, she may not qualify to rent an apartment, because most apartment management companies require a prospective tenant to be employed. A person who does not have a legal residence is considered homeless; therefore, Applicant #9 is an unemployed mother of two who is worried about becoming homeless in the near future. Within the context of the job interview, her housing crisis is socially embarrassing, because homeless persons are stigmatized in American culture. She could not candidly reveal her housing crisis without losing competence face as a mother and as a responsible adult, so she used a euphemism to signal to the interviewer that she really needs to work as soon as possible to avoid becoming homeless.

During my debriefing interview with the interviewer, she told me that after the job interview was officially over and she had turned off the voice recorder, she hired the applicant, and while the applicant was filling out new employee income tax deduction forms, she extended the meaning of her “situation” euphemism further. The interviewer had just explained that she would need the applicant to “call in” every few days, and the applicant said, “I won’t be working every day?” When the interviewer answered “no,” the applicant said, “Well, I guess I’ll have to head up Colfax, then.” While reporting this social interaction to me, the interviewer said that at first she did not understand the applicant’s remark, but after the applicant laughed, the interviewer inferred that it was meant as a joke, and because Colfax Avenue is a main street in downtown Denver where prostitutes solicit customers, the interviewer inferred that the
applicant’s remark was a joke about having to become a prostitute in order to earn money to provide housing for herself and her two children if she did not receive enough work from the employment agency. That was the moment when the interviewer understood that the applicant had cloaked her social reality as a mother of two children who is on the brink of homelessness in the “situation” euphemism to avoid admitting to being in an economically dire situation which is perceived negatively in society. Using a euphemism and hinting at the truth about her socially awkward circumstances, therefore, was an effective rhetorical strategy for this applicant during interaction in the job interview, because it enabled her to choose her own image and reframe her identity in a positive light as a woman who is eager to work as a temporary in order to pay for housing for her family. Through strategic word choice, she was able to create a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer (who “really liked” her), and increase her chances of being hired.

Summary

The temporary job interview is a different genre (G) of communication than the traditional job interview which is held in the human resources department of an organization. This type of job interview is the last step in a comprehensive nine-step recruiting process (A) which requires the applicant to perform his or her ACC using three instrumentalities (I): (a) verbally on the telephone; (b) technologically in writing using a computer for email correspondence with the interviewer and to complete the JIW, the online application, and (in most cases) three online computer skills evaluations; and (c) in person during the final face-to-face, across-the-desk social interaction. The “fishbowl” setting (S) of the waiting room in the employment agency also tests ACC because it enables the interviewer to covertly observe the
applicant before the job interview begins, as part of the interviewer’s hidden agenda to uncover the applicant’s hidden identity, and due to the fact that the applicant may not be aware that he or she is being watched, the degree of (dis)harmoniousness in the social interaction between the applicant and the receptionist in the waiting room can negatively influence the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant and thus affect the job interview outcome, whether the applicant is hired or not hired. Also constraining the applicant’s ability to accomplish ACC are the distorted roles of the participants (P) in this setting, because the applicant falsely perceives that the interviewer is acting as his or her agent and that the applicant is the interviewer’s client, and those false perceptions encourage the applicant to divulge negative aspects of identity, which can result in a negative evaluation and outcome. Although the applicant is constrained by these factors and by the fact that the temporary job interview is structured as a sequence of questions which the interviewer asks the applicant, social interaction during this speech event varies considerably, and the friendly tone (K) and flexible nature of this conversation enable the applicant to express personal identity within task-oriented talk. From the rhetorical perspective, applicants use four interactional strategies during social interaction in the temporary job interview to express and reframe personal identity: (a) tell personal narratives that display competence; (b) highlight commonalities shared with the interviewer; (c) respond to or initiate small talk or humor; and (d) use euphemisms to downplay negative features of identity. Using these four interactional strategies, applicants can establish co-membership with the interviewer, build rapport with the interviewer, and make a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer which will increase the likelihood that the applicant will be evaluated favorably and hired, receive a temporary work assignment, and earn income in the near future (E). Therefore, although social interaction in this situated context varies considerably, communicative patterns
have been found in this data which reveal that the temporary job interview is a speech event which tests ACC explicitly and implicitly yet also provides opportunities for applicants to express and reframe their identity within social and cultural norms (N).

In the process of analyzing these patterns, however, I have also analyzed communicative tensions and dilemmas in the recruiting process which pose problems for the applicant, and I have identified significant differences in social interaction between applicants who were hired and applicants who were not hired. Those issues and problems will be analyzed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Problematizing Communicative Practices in the Speech Event

Considering that the interviewer’s goal is to hire as many applicants as possible to fill her database of available workers so she will be able to choose a person who is a good fit for every job order she receives from her client companies, one would think that almost anyone could be hired by a temporary employment agency—that the temporary employment interview would be a “revolving door” through which all qualified workers could enter and subsequently emerge with a positive outcome. The data in this research study, however, showed that only 16 out of 20 applicants were hired by the interviewer, even though the four applicants who were not hired were well qualified for the positions they were seeking. One of the applicants had to be rejected because of a weapons conviction on his criminal record due to the employment agency’s corporate policy of not hiring any person who has a history of violence, but the other three applicants were not hired because the interviewer did not like the way they communicated during the job interview, according to my debriefing interviews with the interviewer. Since communication was the factor which prevented them from being hired, what did those three applicants do differently from a communicative standpoint? Exactly how did they violate norms for Applicant Communicative Competence (ACC)? From a critical perspective, do the norms for ACC favor certain identities? Is it easier for men to clear this communicative hurdle to employment (Bogaers, 1998), and is it more difficult for minorities (Kerekes, 2007) to pass the discursive tests required by this institutional sorting mechanism (Komter, 1991) in society which prevents some people from obtaining jobs even though they have the required skills and previous work experience?
This chapter will compare the communicative patterns of applicants who were not hired with the communicative patterns of applicants who were hired to analyze outcomes as indicators of the specific practices which the interviewer evaluated negatively. After examining the problems in social interaction which prevent the applicant from accomplishing his or her goal of being hired, I will analyze the diversity of applicants in this study by gender and race, compare those master identities in terms of applicants who were hired and not hired, and unpack identity as a factor which influences successful and unsuccessful job interviews. Finally, this chapter will analyze specific places in the structure of the job interview where communicative tensions and dilemmas occur for all applicants.

**Differences in Utterances and Responses of Applicants Hired and Not Hired**

Three of the applicants in this study were not hired because of the way they communicated during the job interview. The interviewer who conducted job interviews with those three applicants evaluated their communication as “really weird” for Applicant #12 and “just bizarre” for Applicant #20, and she evaluated Applicant #17 as “rude” and “a little hostile.” Comparing the transcripts of the job interviews with the applicants who were not hired with the transcripts of the job interviews with the applicants who were hired resulted in the emergence of several patterns. First, the length of their answers to the interviewer’s questions differed; while closed-ended questions typically were answered with short “yes” or “no” answers, the length of answers to open-ended questions varied considerably. To analyze the length of utterances which were responses to the interviewer’s open-ended questions, I developed three categories: (a) short answers, which I defined as less than one sentence, including answers which were one or two words or a phrase; (b) medium answers, a category for answers which were one to two sentences
long; and (c) long answers, including answers of three or more sentences. There also were patterns in positive and negative utterances and responses. To analyze the differences in the number of positive utterances and responses between applicants hired and not hired, I categorized them using the four interactional strategies discussed in Chapter 3: (a) telling personal narratives that displayed competence; (b) highlighting commonalities shared with the interviewer; (c) responding to or initiating small talk and/or humor to lighten the tone of conversation; and (d) using euphemisms to downplay negative features of identity. To analyze the differences in the number of negative utterances and responses between applicants hired and not hired, I looked at the interviewer’s criticisms of applicant communication in job interviews with the three applicants who were not hired, and I categorized similarities in the interviewer’s criticisms of the negative utterances and responses which were given by those three rejected applicants: (a) unexpected answers (“not answers I was looking for, not answers I was expecting”), which included applicant responses that did not answer the interviewer’s question (“it wasn’t an answer to the question I was asking”) and/or answers which were not considered polite according to social norms for conversation (“able to get her point across, but it was rude”); (b) negative remarks about a past employer (“he talks a lot about how his last job wasn’t fair”); and (c) inappropriate laughter about a serious topic (“he laughed at really inappropriate times”). In addition, I noticed in the transcripts for Applicants #12, #17, and #20 that all three of these applicants threatened the interviewer’s face at some point during the job interview (“But you’re young!”), and I wanted to see how many of the applicants who were hired also made a face threat to the interviewer, so face threats became a fourth category in negative utterances and responses.

Table 4.1 (below) compares the above categories of applicant utterances and responses for applicants who were hired with applicants who were not hired to examine the similarities and
differences between these two groups. This analysis is an interpretation—not a generalization which can be applied to the entire population—and each of the following actions will be illustrated subsequently using examples from the interview transcripts:

Table 4.1

Comparison of Communicative Patterns of Applicants Hired and Not Hired

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of answers to interviewer’s open-ended questions</th>
<th>Applicants Hired</th>
<th>Applicants Not Hired</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short answers (less than 1 sentence)</td>
<td>6/16 (38%)</td>
<td>3/3 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium answers (1-2 sentences)</td>
<td>15/16 (94%)</td>
<td>2/3 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long answers (3 or more sentences)</td>
<td>14/16 (88%)</td>
<td>0/3 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive Utterances and Responses

| Told personal narratives that displayed competence      | 13/16 (81%)      | 3/3 (100%)           |
| Highlighted commonalities shared with interviewer       | 5/16 (31%)       | 0/3 (0%)             |
| Responded to or initiated small talk or humor           | 13/16 (81%)      | 2/3 (67%)            |
| Used euphemisms to downplay negative features of identity | 3/16 (19%)      | 0/3 (0%)             |

Negative Utterances and Responses

| Unexpected answers                                      | 1/16 (6%)        | 3/3 (100%)           |
| Face threats to interviewer                             | 1/16 (6%)        | 3/3 (100%)           |
| Negative remarks about past employer                    | 0/16 (0%)        | 2/3 (67%)            |
| Inappropriate laughter about a serious topic            | 0/16 (0%)        | 2/3 (67%)            |

Amount of Talk

There were definite patterns in the lengths of the answers which were uttered by applicants who were hired versus applicants who were not hired. Answers to open-ended questions such as “Why do you like doing that kind of work?” were analyzed, because answers to closed-ended questions such as “Are you interested in temporary assignments?” typically are “yes” or “no.” Applicants who were hired gave medium and long answers to the interviewer’s
open-ended questions and most of them did not give any short answers, but all of the applicants who were not hired gave short answers, and none of them gave long answers. Using outcomes as indicators, these patterns suggest that the length of the applicant’s answers to open-ended questions can influence the outcome of the job interview, because short answers to open-ended questions are perceived negatively by the interviewer, and medium answers and long answers to open-ended questions are perceived positively by the interviewer. My initial interview with Staffing Manager B, the interviewer who conducted the three job interviews with applicants who were not hired, confirmed that finding; when I asked her how well applicants for light industrial work communicate with her during the job interview, she complained that they “didn’t really go into additional detail,” so she had to “pull [information] out as opposed to them offering information.” Therefore, Grice’s (1975) quantity maxim regarding the right amount of talk seems to apply to applicants in the temporary employment interview.

Positive Utterances and Responses

Communicative patterns also were identified in the occurrence of interactional strategies employed by applicants who were hired versus applicants who were not hired. The majority of all applicants engaged in small talk and/or humor and used personal narratives that displayed competence to make a positive impression on the interviewer, but applicants who were not hired did not highlight commonalities shared with the interviewer and did not use euphemisms to downplay negative aspects of identity. Interestingly, applicants who were not hired did the opposite of applicants who were hired; whereas many of the applicants who were hired highlighted commonalities they shared with the interviewer and used euphemisms to downplay negative aspects of their identity, applicants who were not hired highlighted how they were
different from the interviewer and highlighted negative aspects of their identity (patterns which will be analyzed in detail in the next section of this chapter). Therefore, highlighting commonalities shared with the interviewer and using euphemisms to downplay negative aspects of identity can positively influence the outcome of the job interview, because both applicants who were hired and applicants who were not hired told personal narratives which displayed competence, and both groups responded to or initiated small talk or humor, but only the hired applicants highlighted commonalities with the interviewer and downplayed negative aspects of identity.

Negative Utterances and Responses

The most significant communicative patterns in Table 4.1 were found in the differences between the occurrence of negative utterances and responses during the job interview. All of the applicants who were not hired gave unexpected answers (“it’s just that I find it very hard to work for a company that belittles its employees”) and made face threats to the interviewer (“But you’re young!”), and the majority of the applicants who were not hired also uttered negative remarks about a past employer and laughed inappropriately about a serious topic. In comparison, none of the applicants who were hired made negative remarks about a past employer or laughed inappropriately about a serious topic, and only one applicant who was hired gave an unexpected answer and made a face threat to the interviewer. Therefore, this data suggests that giving unexpected answers, making face threats to the interviewer, uttering negative remarks about a past employer, and laughing inappropriately while discussing a serious topic are utterances and responses which may be perceived negatively by the interviewer and may adversely affect job interview outcomes.
Although the applicants who were not hired were qualified for the types of work which they sought, told personal narratives that displayed competence, and responded to or initiated small talk or humor, an analysis of the frequency of each type of ACC norm violation reveals the cumulative impact of their negative utterances and responses, which the interviewer described as “really weird” for Applicant #12, “rude” and “a little hostile” for Applicant #17, and “just bizarre” for Applicant #20:

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Unexpected Answers</th>
<th>Total Face Threats to Interviewer</th>
<th>Total Negative Remarks re: Past Er</th>
<th>Total Responses of Inappropriate Laughter</th>
<th>Total Norm Violations of ACC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applicant #12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant #17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant #20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unexpected answers were the main problem for Applicant #12, a Hispanic male light industrial applicant. The interviewer said he was “pretty quiet” and gave answers which were “not answers I was looking for, not answers I was expecting.” This applicant did not respond to some of her questions with pertinent, complete information which answered the questions. For example, when she asked him a question about the maximum weight he could lift on the job, which is a standard requirement for light industrial applicants, he did not directly answer the question:
Excerpt 4.1: The “Quiet” Applicant (A12, lines 36-43)

T1 I: What’s the most you are comfortable lifting if you had an eight-hour shift for the whole time?

T2 A: I’m pretty comfortable.

T3 I: Like how much though, like what—what kind of a weight limit would you do?

T4 A: Well I’ve done pretty heavy before.

T5 I: Like up to 50 pounds, would you say?

T6 A: Yeah, I could do that.

The interviewer wanted to know how many pounds the applicant could lift, because light industrial workers are required to lift heavy items such as boxes of products in warehouses, but the question she asked (“what’s the most”) assumed that he would understand her meaning without specifically saying the word “pounds.” He responded to her question by addressing the issue of whether or not he would be comfortable lifting items for an eight-hour shift (“I’m pretty comfortable”), but he did not specifically state a number of pounds that he would be comfortable lifting, so she asked follow-up questions to “pull” the information out of him. Competence using the English language was a factor; for example, when he described his previous experience working as a cashier, he said: “I was a cash register.” Altogether, this applicant gave six unexpected answers, made one face threat to the interviewer, and made a negative remark about a past employer, so he committed a total of eight norm violations of ACC. Coincidentally, the past employer he criticized was another branch office of this same employment agency in another U.S. state, so the cumulative impact of his negative utterances and responses was out of
the ordinary and seemed “really weird” for the interviewer, compared with the job interviews she conducts on a daily basis. In addition, the interviewer said that light industrial applicants do not require strong communication skills for the job, but they “need to be able to understand orders, understand what they’re being asked to do,” and she evaluated this applicant’s responses as not meeting that requirement. Therefore, within the context of the typical job interview, this applicant’s responses to questions did not conform to the interviewer’s expectations for light industrial applicants and did not conform to the norms for ACC, and this data suggests that unexpected answers due to inadequate language competence which are exacerbated by utterances which threaten the interviewer’s face and criticize a past employer may negatively affect the outcome of the temporary employment interview.

A combination of ACC norm violations also resulted in a negative outcome for Applicant #17, a 63-year-old Caucasian female applicant who has extensive experience in office clerical work and was overqualified for the office clerical position she was seeking. In addition to giving short answers and unexpected answers, she laughed inappropriately, joked about the long period which she had been unemployed, and made face threats to the interviewer. The interviewer described the applicant’s communication as “rude” and “a little hostile” and said she was “taken aback” by the applicant’s utterances, specifically mentioning the applicant’s response to her request for proof of highest level of education, which for this applicant was proof of a high school diploma:

Excerpt 4.2: The “Rude” Applicant (A17, lines 80-94)

T1 I: Are you able to get proof of education to me?

T2 A: No.
T3 I: Okay, there’s no way at all?
T4 A: I graduated in ’67!
T5 I: Okay.
T6 A: No!
T7 I: Okay, um we’ll have to work around that somehow, so-
T8 A: My diploma is uh long gone.
T9 I: I’m sure, I mean I don’t know where my high school diploma is either, so I-
T10 A: But you’re young!

These utterances were unexpected for the interviewer because providing proof of highest level of education is one of the requirements listed on the orientation form which the applicant receives prior to the job interview, so from an operational standpoint, she expects everyone to provide that documentation, and discursively, the applicant’s refusal to provide that requirement two times in a row threatened the interviewer’s face, because she challenged the interviewer’s authority. In highlighting the 40-year age difference between the 63-year-old applicant and the 23-year-old interviewer, the applicant highlighted how she was different from the interviewer instead of what they had in common. Pointing out that the interviewer is “young!” raised a sensitive issue for the interviewer because she is a recent college graduate who has been working full time for less than a year, and in the business world, youthfulness indicates a lack of work experience, so older, more experienced workers perceive recent college graduates as less competent than older, more experienced workers. Under the circumstances, the interviewer was “taken aback” by the applicant’s responses because those utterances did not conform to the
norms for ACC and threatened her authority as a staffing manager. The applicant also highlighted her long period of unemployment by joking that she didn’t know which day of the week it was because “when you’ve been out of work as long as I have, the days run together.” Collectively, the applicant’s 11 norm violations for ACC resulted in a negative evaluation: the interviewer “didn’t like her.” Therefore, even if the applicant has extensive experience in the type of work he or she is seeking, a combination of numerous unexpected answers, face threats, and inappropriate laughter by the applicant during the job interview may collectively create a negative impression on the interviewer which adversely affects the outcome of the job interview.

Being out of the workforce for a long period of time also was a problem for the third applicant who was not hired, Applicant #20, a Caucasian male college graduate in his mid-thirties who was an experienced telephone customer service representative. He had been unemployed for 18 months after quitting his previous job, and he was still collecting unemployment benefits at the time of the job interview. His 25 norm violations of ACC included all four types of negative utterances and responses, including 16 unexpected answers, 2 face threats to the interviewer, 3 negative remarks about his past employer, and 4 responses of inappropriate laughter. For example, he laughed before answering serious questions she asked, such as “What are your career goals?” The interviewer said that he did “not [communicate] very well” during the job interview, “his overall attitude was pretty negative,” and social interaction during this job interview was “just bizarre.” For example, the following short excerpt from that job interview contains 3 norm violations of ACC:

Excerpt 4.3: The “Bizarre” Job Interview (A20, lines 65-73)

T1 I: So how long have you been looking for a position?
T2  A:  This time around? Uh August of last year, so a year and a half?

T3  I:  Okay. And what made you decide to go through a staffing agency?

I guess I contacted you.

T4  A:  Um, yeah you contacted me. Um I’ve been signed up before with (agency name) and I’m not sure which others, but there’s just no jobs there either, or no jobs they’re willing to give me.

T5  I:  It’s tough out there right now for sure.

T6  A:  ((laughs)) Yeah.

Instead of downplaying his long period of unemployment and framing his identity as an experienced worker who is eager to find a job, this applicant highlighted his unemployment several times during the interview and expressed his true identity as a disgruntled applicant who had registered with other employment agencies yet had never been called for a work assignment ("or no jobs they’re willing to give me"), and that unexpected response framed his identity as an undesirable applicant. When the interviewer asked him how long he had been looking for work, she expected him to answer a specific length of time, but she did not expect him to preface that information with a bitter remark which highlighted his unstable work history ("This time around?"), so that was another unexpected response. Later in the interview when she asked him “What are your strengths as an employee?” he again raised the topic of his on-and-off-again work history by giving another unexpected answer: “You know I haven’t worked for over four years.” That remark was not accurate and it highlighted the fact that before he worked as a telephone customer service representative, he was unemployed for one year. Instead of immediately answering her question by listing his attributes in the workplace, he highlighted the
two long periods of unemployment on his online application. Unemployment during an
economic recession is a serious situation, not a laughing matter, yet he laughed about the “tough”
job market, which was the third violation of norms for ACC in this excerpt. Altogether, his 25
norm violations of ACC made a negative impression on the interviewer as “just too grouchy,”
and although she progressed all the way through the job interview, she did not hire him and
described him in her interview report as “someone who has a definite chip on his shoulder about
the job scenario.” Therefore, the cumulative impact of making negative rather than positive
utterances and responses—unexpected answers which highlight negative aspects of identity
instead of giving expected answers which highlight positive aspects of identity, making face
threats to the interviewer instead of highlighting commonalities shared with the interviewer,
making negative remarks about a past employer instead of framing one’s identity as a desirable
employee, and laughing inappropriately about a serious topic instead of using humor
appropriately in conversation regarding non-serious topics—violates several norms for ACC and
may create a negative impression on the interviewer which negatively influences the outcome of
the temporary employment interview. Three out of four of these communicative patterns involve
identity, so in the next section of this chapter, I will analyze how identity can be a factor which
creates problems within the context of the temporary job interview.

Identity as a Factor in Creating Problems

In analyzing the social interaction between the interviewers and the applicants in this
research study, problems or potential problems in making a positive impression and in
establishing rapport were identified among applicants whose identities differed from the
identities of the interviewers. Whereas the two interviewers were both Caucasian female middle-
class recent college graduates in their mid-twenties, the 20 applicants were a wide range of ages from 23 to 63, and the group included persons of color, males, low-income workers, and high school graduates who had never attended college. The role of identity as a factor which influences the evaluations and the outcomes of the temporary job interviews was complex, because in addition to master identity, interactional identity and personal identity also were factors.

*Master Identities*

The majority of the applicants in this study were female. This temporary employment agency primarily hires office clerical applicants, and office clerical applicants are typically female, so the gender ratio of 13 female applicants to 7 male applicants can be attributed to the high frequency of that job category during the data-gathering period. Most of the applicants also were Caucasian, but the group also included African American, Asian American, and Hispanic persons, and two of the applicants’ races were unknown (the interviewer did not ask the applicants “What is your race?” because that could have been perceived as racial discrimination, which is illegal, and for the same reason, there was no “race” question or box to check on the employment application). Outcomes within gender and race also were analyzed, because previous employment interview studies have identified discrimination against women applicants (Bogaers, 1998) and discrimination against minority applicants (Kerekes, 2005). For heuristic purposes, Table 4.3 (below) sorts these master identities and compares them in terms of hired versus not hired, noting each category as a percent of all the applicants who participated in this study:
Table 4.3

Applicant Statistics: Percentages by Gender, Race, and Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Applicants</th>
<th>20</th>
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</table>

**Gender**

<table>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>65%</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>35%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Applicants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Applicants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Race**

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<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>15%</th>
<th>1 female</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>2 male</th>
<th>10%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1 female</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0 male</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0 female</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1 male</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>10 female</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3 male</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1 female</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1 male</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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**Outcomes**

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<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>16/20</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>12 female</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>4 male</th>
<th>20%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Hired</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Not Hired</td>
<td>4/20</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1 female</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3 male</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Hired</td>
<td>11/13</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>9 female</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>2 male</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Not Hired</td>
<td>2/13</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1 female</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1 male</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Hired</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>2 female</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1 male</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Not Hired</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0 female</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2 male</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages were calculated as percent of all applicants in this study.

In addition to the prevalence of Caucasian female applicants, several other patterns were found. Contrary to the discrimination against women which was found in Bogaers’ (1998) study, this study found that within the 80% of applicants who were hired, 60% of the hired applicants were women, and only 20% of the hired applicants were men. From a gender standpoint, the applicants who experienced the most difficulty being hired were male, as only 4 out of 7 male applicants were hired, whereas 12 out of 13 female applicants were hired. When race was
factored into the outcomes, 85% of the Caucasian applicants were hired, but only 40% of the minority applicants were hired. Within the minority category, the 2 female minority applicants were hired, but 2 out of 3 of the male minority applicants were not hired. Therefore, the outcomes for these applicants suggest that male applicants, especially minority male applicants, may be the least hired applicants in the temporary employment interview. To further analyze these findings, the communicative patterns of male and minority male applicants will be examined and discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.

In addition to differences in gender and race, an age difference between the applicant and the interviewer can interfere with the applicant’s efforts to establish co-membership and rapport within this context if the applicant does not manage them well from a rhetorical perspective. Being 40 years older than the interviewer created a problem for Applicant #17 because the confrontation (Excerpt 4.2) regarding the applicant’s refusal to provide proof of education stemmed from the differences in their ages and the differences in their highest levels of education; while it is typically easy to obtain a transcript from a college many years after graduation, it may be difficult to obtain a transcript from a high school 45 years after graduation. The high school which this applicant attended in 1967 may no longer exist, and even if the building exists and is still being used as a high school, her academic records may no longer exist due to physical space limitations and budget constraints. The college-educated interviewer, therefore, perceived this requirement as a reasonable request, but the applicant perceived this requirement as unrealistic due to the 45 years which have passed since her high school graduation. Social class also was a factor, because in American society, middle-class families typically can afford to pay their children’s college expenses, but low-income families cannot. The confrontation created a negative, memorable impression on the interviewer, who recalled it
during my debriefing interview with her, and this applicant was not hired. Therefore, differences in age and social class may cause problems in social interaction during the job interview and create a negative impression on the interviewer which adversely influences the outcome of the job interview.

In other job interviews, however, two applicants who were many years older than the interviewer used interactional strategies to manage potentially awkward moments in the job interview which occurred when the applicant’s answer to the interviewer’s question highlighted an age difference. For example, Applicant #4, a 51-year-old female Caucasian office clerical applicant, told a personal narrative which displayed her computer expertise. When the interviewer asked her where she learned those skills, she replied that she had learned them while working at the University of Denver 30 years ago, but in her next utterance, she framed her identity positively as a desirable employee: “So I have a lot of experience, daily experience as well as 30 years ago.” Likewise, Applicant #19, a 36-year-old female Asian American office clerical applicant, also framed her identity as a competent worker, and she used humor to lighten the tone of the conversation:

Excerpt 4.4: The Experienced Applicant (A19, lines 48-63)

T1 I: So have you ever worked for a temp service before?

T2 A: I have actually.

T3 I: Okay.

T4 A: Um earlier in my career, um oh probably a good m- just a little bit over a year-

T5 I: Okay.
By giving an estimate of how long ago that temporary work experience occurred, laughing and joking about the length of time which had passed, and portraying herself as savvy regarding the details of the temporary employment process, this applicant framed her age positively as an attribute, in a humorous context, and mitigated the social awkwardness which could have resulted due to the age difference. Applicant #4 and Applicant #19 were hired, so these outcomes suggest that from a rhetorical perspective, *framing extensive experience in the business world as competence can create a positive impression during social interaction in the temporary job interview which can bridge the identity gap between applicants and interviewers who have dissimilar ages.*

In addition to age differences, racial differences can create problems during social interaction in the temporary job interview. For example, Applicant #12 (the Hispanic male light industrial applicant previously identified as The “Quiet” Applicant in Excerpt 4.1) was not hired,
and in addition to language incompetence and violations of social norms, other pertinent factors in the interviewer’s evaluation of his ACC included his lack of familiarity with online employment applications, which are typical requirements for U.S. employers. Even though he had previous computer experience and scored well on the online computer skills evaluations, he made mistakes while entering data on this employment agency’s online computer application, including the minimum wage that he would accept for temporary work. His online application indicated that he would work for 48 cents an hour, and the interviewer joked about that unrealistically low wage during the job interview: “I’m guessing you wanna work for a little more than that ((laughter)).” The average wage for temporary light industrial workers is $13 an hour and he had previously earned $8 an hour for temporary light industrial work at another branch of the same employment agency in California, so lacking fluency in the English language and not understanding American norms for compensation in one’s occupation may influence social interaction and negatively influence the outcome of the temporary job interview because those factors frame the applicant’s identity as an “other” who would not fit into the American workplace. The norms for ACC thus seem to discriminate against light industrial non-fluent English speakers, because strong language skills are not a requirement for the type of work this well-qualified (four years of light industrial experience) applicant sought, light industrial work.

Another light industrial applicant whose racial identity differed from the interviewer, however, used interactional strategies to make a positive impression on the interviewer, and even though he had made a similar mistake while filling out the online application, he was evaluated positively by the interviewer, and he was hired at the end of the job interview. Applicant #13 was an African American male light industrial applicant (who previously was identified in Excerpt 3.8 “Joke about Marriage”), and he had worked in light industrial and as a bill collector.
He used nonstandard grammar (“they was in business for like a year”) yet also used humor and told personal narratives about working hard in his last two jobs. When the same computer entry problem with his online application was discussed, he had already established rapport with the interviewer, and she dismissed his error as a computer glitch, which implied that it was not the applicant’s fault:

Excerpt 4.5: The Computer Glitch (A13, lines 175-181)

T1 I: Okay, so- okay so this always messes up, I’m assuming when you worked with (company name) you worked for $12 an hour?
T2 A: Correct.
T3 I: Okay, cuz right now it says $1200.
T4 A: Ah.
T5 I: Which would be awesome!
T6 A: I would love that!

If the computer software on this employment agency’s online application “always messes up” the decimal when the applicant enters the hourly wage amount for a past employer, why was the previous light industrial applicant held accountable for the error? What were the differences between these two light industrial applicants in terms of their communicative practices? The Hispanic male applicant who speaks English as a second language (ESL) gave short answers and made one negative remark about a past employer, but the African American male applicant gave long answers and displayed a positive attitude toward work and a strong work ethic. The interviewer recalled one of the latter applicant’s personal narratives which displayed competence
during my debriefing interviewer with her, so his stories made a positive, memorable impression on her: “He said, ‘I always had to do my best.’ He likes the competitiveness of collection. Even like when he worked for (company name), he always wanted to pack the most boxes of potato chips.” This data analysis suggests that displaying a positive attitude toward work and using interactional strategies which make a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer can help applicants with master identities which are dissimilar to the interviewer bridge the identity gap and mitigate the negativity of errors they make while entering their personal data on the online employment application.

Interactional Identity

In addition to master identity, the roles of the interlocutors in this setting also influence the expression of identity and the outcome of the temporary job interview, because as previously discussed in Chapter 3, the applicant’s false perception of the interviewer as an agent who is acting on his or her behalf and the applicant’s false perception of self as the interviewer’s client encourage the applicant to reveal negative aspects of identity which are evaluated by the interviewer. Six out of 20 of the applicants in this study expressed negative aspects of their personal identity in a confessional tone during the job interview, admitting to a weak work ethic, irresponsible behavior, or breaking the law, which were indications of attitudes and character.

Personal Identity

Starting with the least serious confessions, Applicant #7 told the interviewer that she has “never been a career-minded person,” she did not enjoy managing her husband’s business, she once quit a temporary job after working only two days (previously explained in The Two-Day
Employee, Excerpt 3.11), and she would not be available to work a temporary assignment which would begin the same day she was called (same-day assignments are routine in the temporary employment business). This Caucasian former homemaker, who has been married for 38 years (and established co-membership with the interviewer when she mentioned that fact at the beginning of the job interview), only has two years of work experience other than working for her husband, so these utterances collectively implied that this applicant does not like to work, something people do not normally say in a job interview, because it gives the impression that the applicant will not be an ideal employee. In the temporary employment interview, however, the interviewer hired her and assured her that she would find some type of temporary work which the applicant could do: “We’ll find ya something.”

Admitting irresponsible past behavior was another way in which applicants expressed negative aspects of personal identity. While recalling specific dates in her past work history, Applicant #8, a 23-year-old Caucasian female home health care worker, needlessly blurted out that she had “wrecked” her car, which implied that she was involved in a car accident which she had caused; therefore, her utterance implied that she had not been driving responsibly. After that accident, she had to ride the bus, so her car must have been seriously damaged. Along those same lines, Applicant #14, a Caucasian male college graduate between the ages of 21 and 25, revealed at the beginning of the job interview that he had speeding tickets on his driving record:

Excerpt 4.6: The Driving Record (A14, lines 9-16)

T1   I:   Do you have a background free of any violent offenses, anything that is major as far as um-

T2   A:   Felonies, or-
The interviewer did not ask that same line of questioning in job interviews with women applicants, but she asked this applicant, a male who had attended college within the past few years, specific questions about his driving record and whether he had ever received a ticket for driving under the influence (DUI) of alcohol, so gender was a factor and the social stereotype of the reckless male college student played a role in her choice of questions. The applicant voluntarily divulged that he had received two speeding tickets “my freshman year” and she responded in a casual tone that she did not regard those as serious offenses (“I will allow those to slide”) and then laughed. In both instances where applicants admitted to past behavior which could be judged as irresponsible, the interviewer acted like an agent who was willing to overlook those minor offenses and would try to find temporary work for the applicant.

The most serious admissions of negative aspects of personal identity were confessions to criminal activities, but even in those instances, the interviewer responded sympathetically in an understanding tone, as if she were a counselor or a friend rather than an evaluating gatekeeper in an institutional setting. Applicant #4, a 51-year-old Caucasian female office clerical applicant, confessed that she had accepted cash “under the table” under a false name from a past employer who did not want to pay taxes while she was working three jobs in order to support her three children and pay for all of their school activities. From the rhetorical perspective, the applicant
reframed that negative aspect of her character, breaking the law in the past, as a positive aspect of her character, being a good mother. The interviewer responded to that personal narrative supportively and acknowledged that her devotion as a mother was “clearly admirable,” and the applicant was hired. The only applicant who confessed to negative aspects of personal identity and was not hired was Applicant #11, an African American male light industrial applicant who admitted to accepting cash under the table from a past employer and revealed that he was a felon who had been convicted of drug possession and weapon possession. The interviewer said that she would have to check with the agency’s corporate office to determine whether possession of a weapon is considered a “history of violence,” because corporate policy prohibits hiring any person who has a history of violence. During the job interview, she downplayed that issue as “the weapon thing” and said, “I really appreciate you being upfront about that.”

Appreciation for honesty was a common theme in this data. Several times during these job interviews, the interviewer thanked the applicant for being honest about a negative aspect of personal identity. Altogether, this research suggests that applicants who express positive and negative aspects of their identity are evaluated as trustworthy. For example, the interviewer said that Applicant #21 (previously identified as The Alaskan Fisherman Excerpt 3.1) “really opened up” when he began telling personal narratives about his past work experience on an Alaskan fishing boat, and during my debriefing interview with her, she said that she “really liked him” and “I trust him.” The applicant who discloses his or her identity meets the interviewer’s expectations for ACC, because one of her goals during the job interview is to encourage the applicant to express his or her “hidden identity” (Komter, 1991). Even if the applicant’s personal identity includes negative aspects, she wants to know; in my initial interview with this interviewer, she said: “I try to be friendly and loosen them up a bit, so they will be a little more
open about themselves and about any potential wonderful things or potentially scary things that they might not have been open to telling me about before.” If the applicant does not “open up” as in the case of Applicant#12, the interviewer gets an “uneasy feeling” and does not trust him or her, and a lack of trust was the reason she cited for deciding not to hire that Hispanic male light industrial applicant: “It was because of how he communicated with me, because I felt like he was trying to hide something in his background, and that made me uncomfortable.”

Therefore, the constitutive roles of master identity, interactional identity and personal identity as a factor in the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant and on the outcome of the job interview are complex, but the applicant should express positive aspects of personal identity and reveal negative aspects of personal identity, because disclosure is an expectation for ACC within the context of the temporary employment interview.

**Communicative Tensions and Dilemmas**

Bearing in mind that the applicant is expected to communicate openly during the job interview yet is being evaluated according to norms for ACC and norms in society which are based on values about honesty and a strong work ethic, some of the questions on the interview schedule force the applicant to answer difficult questions about sensitive issues which are awkward within the context of social interaction. These “hard questions” create tensions and pose dilemmas for the applicant during the temporary employment interview because they pertain to future income, present unemployment, and negative aspects of past employment.
Future Income

There are three questions on the JIW and the online application which ask the applicant about goals for future income, and the interviewer sometimes asks similar questions during the job interview. According to the orientation form which the applicants receive via email prior to completing the online application and getting an appointment for a job interview, temporary workers typically are paid between $10 and $12 an hour, so most applicants for temporary work enter an hourly wage between those amounts when they answer the question about income on the JIW, “What is your minimum hourly requirement for temporary work?” When the interviewer asks the applicant similar questions about goals for future income, the questions she asks are almost identical to the questions on the JIW online form and the interview schedule, but the questions are confusing and pose a decisional dilemma for the applicant.

“What is your minimum hourly salary requirement?” is a confusing question because “hourly” and “salary” are two different types of earnings which are structured differently; hourly is a set wage which is paid for each hour the employee works, so hourly income can vary, but salary is a specific amount which is paid to the employee, typically professional employees such as managers, on a monthly basis, and the monthly payment totals a set annual amount, regardless of how many hours the employee worked. Temporary employees are paid hourly wages, yet the interviewer uses these terms interchangeably, as if they referred to the same type of compensation. In addition, the interviewer also asks a form of the question: “What is your desired salary?” For example, while interviewing Applicant #9, she asked the applicant about her answers to these questions on the JIW: “So, let’s see here as far as your salary goes, um your minimum salary you have down is $13.75 an hour,” and then asked her if she would be willing to work for less. In addition to being confusing, these questions are hard questions to answer.
because they create tension and force the applicant to choose between two risky options: (a) specify a low hourly wage which would increase the applicant’s chances of receiving a temporary work assignment yet result in less weekly income; or (b) specify a higher hourly wage which would result in higher weekly income yet reduce the applicant’s chances of receiving a temporary work assignment. Like most temporary applicants, Applicant #9 is unemployed and is desperate for work because she needs money as soon as possible. She is looking for any type of work, but preferably temp-to-perm office clerical work which pays up to $15 an hour, because she needs to move and be able to pay rent for a new place to live so she and her two children will not be homeless (as previously described in The Housing Crisis Excerpt 3.12). She discussed compensation with the interviewer for 10 minutes before making a decision, and her anxiety is apparent in the following excerpt from the job interview:

Excerpt 4.7: The Hard Decision (A9, lines 615-632)

T1 A: So if you get something for $15 you’ll call me?
T2 I: Oh yeah.
T3 A: If it’s $14 you’ll call me, if it’s $13 you’ll call me-
T4 I: If you put in $13 and I get something for $10, I won’t call you.
T5 A: So if you get something- if I put in $13, if you get one for $12.50 you won’t call me?
T6 I: I will call you for that one probably. Whatever your bottom dollar is, that’s what I wanna put in here, like would you work for $10?
T7 A: No.
T8 I: Would you work for $11? That’s okay, that’s okay! You have a lot of
qualifications, you don’t have to work for $10. Would you work for $11?

T9  A:  ((laughs)) I should say yes though because-

T10 I:  But what do you need?

T11 A:  Ah-

T12 I:  Cuz ultimately I don’t want you taking a job just cuz it’s what I gave you, if it’s not gonna be what you need.

T13 A:  $12.50?

T14 I:  $12.50 works, I’ll put $12.50.

As this excerpt shows, choosing a minimum wage she would accept was a difficult decision for this applicant because there is no way to predict what the hourly wages will be for future job orders which the interviewer will receive from her clients. Therefore, these questions regarding future income are hard questions for the applicant to answer, and asking them creates awkward moments in social interaction during the job interview.

*Present Unemployment*

Another socially awkward question on the interview schedule is the question about the length of time the applicant has been searching for a job: “How long have you been looking for work?” This creates communicative tension for the applicant because it forces him or her to admit to long periods of unemployment. Unemployment is stigmatized due to values in society which frame hard work as desirable and which hold unemployed persons partially responsible for their situation (Komter, 1991). The longer an applicant has been unemployed, therefore, the less desirable the applicant is to employers, so admitting to a long period of unemployment casts
a negative impression of personal identity on the interviewer and pressures the applicant to explain why he or she has been unemployed for so long.

Race and class also are factors in this sensitive issue, because as Kerekes (2005) found in her study of temporary employment interviews in California, my data revealed that it is acceptable for Caucasian people to be out of the workforce for long periods of time, but people of color are judged negatively for gaps in employment. For example, Applicant #14, the previously described Caucasian male college graduate who confessed to the speeding tickets while he was a freshman (The Fast Driver Excerpt 4.6), described his long period of unemployment after he graduated from college as a “long-term vacation” during which he visited “some guys that were skiing in Vail” and “went to a Rockies [baseball] game” in Denver. Light industrial applicants who have been unemployed for a length of time, however, are questioned by the interviewer about their lack of employment. In my initial interview with Staffing Manager A, she said that “solid work history” is a consideration for light industrial applicants because “if we’re hiring them for a job, we want them to stick around. So, you know, kind of going over their resume and seeing if there are any red flags, like ‘Oh, I didn’t work for three months because I was in prison’ ((laughs)) or something like that.” In addition to revealing this interviewer’s ignorance of the criminal justice system (prison terms are always for at least two years), this data is troubling because it confirms Kerekes’ findings that interviewers judge light industrial applicants, who typically are men of color, by a different standard than Caucasian applicants for white-collar work when applicants have time gaps between jobs in their work history.
Negative Aspects of Past Employment

Another hard question on this employment agency’s interview schedule which the interviewer asks the applicant is, “What don’t/didn’t you like about your present or last job/company?” Most of the applicants in this employment agency are unemployed, so the question is: “What didn’t you like about your last job?” This question creates tension for the applicant because applicants should never say anything negative about a past employer; as this analysis of negative utterances indicated, negative remarks about past employers are violations of norms for ACC and therefore may adversely affect job interview outcomes. This question also creates a dilemma for applicants who have had bad experiences at their last job because if they comply with the norms for ACC and disclose those experiences, they will be evaluated negatively, because applicants who make negative remarks about a past employer frame their attitude toward work as negative and thus taint the interviewer’s impression of the applicant’s personal identity, yet if the applicant does not disclose those experiences in the hopes of making a positive impression, the interviewer may sense that the applicant is not being “open” and may feel “uneasy” and evaluate the applicant as untrustworthy.

Another communicative pattern in this study was the tendency among many of the applicants to cope with these hard questions from the interviewer by giving humorous responses: joking that the minimum wage which would be acceptable was “$30 an hour,” saying that the days of the week “run together” because I’ve been out of work for so long, or quipping that the “pay” at my last job could have been higher. Although that strategy was effective for some applicants who were able to reframe their personal identity about a sensitive issue in a positive light, it was not effective for all applicants in doing so; thus, humor is not a universal solution to coping with these hard questions about sensitive issues during the temporary job interview.
Summary and Conclusion

From a practical perspective of how applicants succeed in being hired, an analysis of the communicative patterns of the applicants in this research study which compared the length of answers to open-ended questions, positive utterances and responses, and negative utterances and responses of applicants who were not hired with the same data for applicants who were hired found several patterns which indicate that long answers generally are perceived positively as communicating “well” and short answers may be perceived negatively, highlighting commonalities shared with the interviewer and using euphemisms to downplay negative aspects of identity can positively influence the outcome of the job interview, and giving unexpected answers, threatening the interviewer’s face, uttering negative remarks about a past employer, and laughing inappropriately about a serious topic may adversely affect job interview outcomes. The interviewer’s questions which ask the applicant about goals for future income, length of unemployment, and negative aspects of past employment are difficult questions about sensitive issues which create communicative tensions and dilemmas for the applicant, and although many applicants use humor to respond to these questions, humor is not a universally effective strategy for dealing with those problems. Identity is a factor which can cause communicative problems between interlocutors with dissimilar identities, but displaying a positive attitude toward work and using interactional strategies which make a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer can help the applicant bridge the identity gap. One of the interviewer’s goals is to learn the applicant’s “hidden identity,” so the interviewer expects applicants to disclose both positive and negative aspects of personal identity.

Based on this data and analysis, the interviewer’s criteria for applicants—in addition to
work experience which relates to the type of work sought--can be defined as:

**Applicant Communicative Competence (ACC)**

Engaging in conversation according to social norms for the temporary job interview:

- Answering open-ended questions with medium to long utterances, not short answers
- Responding to questions as expected, with pertinent, polite answers
- Expressing positive aspects of identity
- Disclosing negative aspects of identity which are relevant to the recruiting process

Using interactional strategies to establish co-membership, build rapport, and make a positive, memorable impression:

- Telling personal narratives which display competence
- Highlighting commonalities shared with the interviewer
- Responding to or initiating small talk or humor appropriately about non-serious topics
- Using euphemisms to downplay negative features of identity

Refraining from negative utterances and responses which make a negative impression:

- Not saying anything which would be a face threat to the interviewer
- Not making any negative remarks about past employer
- Not laughing inappropriately about serious topics
- Not highlighting the issue of unemployment, especially long periods of unemployment

From a critical perspective, however, what are the implications of the interviewer’s criteria that all applicants must conform to the norms of ACC in order to be evaluated as “a good
fit” and be hired? This analysis has shown that gender, race, age and class are identity factors that influence the applicant’s ability to “do” social interaction within the constraints of ACC, and those findings suggest that the temporary employment interview may not be a level playing field for all applicants. This study suggests that men, not women, experience discrimination in the temporary job interview, which is contrary to Bogaers’ (1998) findings in her study of traditional job interviews in human resources departments. In the temporary employment interview, the typical interviewer is a woman, and establishing co-membership and building rapport with the interviewer may be easier for women applicants because women share the gender aspect of master identity, and when women highlight that shared aspect of identity in discourse, they use one of the interactional strategies which produces positive outcomes for applicants. Admittedly, the women applicants in Bogaers’ study were applying for middle-management jobs, an occupation which in Amsterdam is dominated by men, and in this study, most of the job categories were occupations that typically employ women, such as office clerical, so occupational gender segregation was a factor. Yet even when men who participated in this study applied for work in an occupation which traditionally hires male workers, light industrial, or an occupation which employs both male and female workers, telephone customer service, the male applicants—and particularly applicants who were men of color—had more difficulty meeting the interviewer’s expectations for ACC, in written communication submitted via computer on the JIW and when completing the online employment application prior to the job interview, and in social interaction during the face-to-face job interview, because of problems which were due to computer errors, and for ESL applicants, a lack of fluency in the English language which resulted in short answers and unexpected answers. These findings, therefore, support Kerekes’ (2007) findings that light industrial applicants—who typically are men of color—experience
discrimination during the temporary employment interview, because even though light industrial workers do not need strong verbal skills on the job, they are evaluated for that job based on the interviewer’s criteria that all applicants possess strong verbal skills. In addition to gender and race, identity differences such as age and social class also can create problems for the applicant in the temporary job interview, because age and class differences make it harder for older applicants and low-income applicants to establish co-membership and build rapport with the interviewer. These findings support Kerekès’ (2007) findings that race and class are factors which influence the interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant, because low-income people of color are evaluated negatively regarding periods of unemployment on their work history, but middle-class Caucasian applicants are evaluated positively for periods of unemployment when they frame the time gaps on their resume as “long-term vacation.” Altogether, the interviewer’s expectations for ACC in the temporary employment interview seem to favor applicants whose identities are similar to the interviewer’s identity, which typically is a middle-class, college-educated, Caucasian woman in her mid-twenties, because differences in identity—gender, race, age, and social class—which surface during social interaction can cause problems for applicants if their utterances and responses: (a) do not conform to social norms within this situated context; (b) interfere with the establishment of co-membership and the building of rapport between the interlocutors; and (c) create a negative impression rather than a positive, memorable impression on the interviewer.
Chapter 5:

Conclusion

Overall, this discourse analysis of actual job interviews in an employment agency has produced practical results, because the communicative patterns and problems which were identified and analyzed can be used to help future applicants meet the interviewer’s criteria for Applicant Communicative Competence (ACC) and thus increase their chances for being hired, and from a critical perspective, these findings are useful because they may increase awareness of the communicative problems which can occur in social interaction between interlocutors who have dissimilar identities in the job interview and thus may create sensitivity to the negative evaluation and the potential for discrimination which may stem from identity differences between the applicant and the interviewer. After reviewing what was previously known about communication in job interviews, this thesis expanded that knowledge with a detailed analysis of present day data, and the findings of this research study are relevant to and significant within communication research and employment interview research. In this final chapter, I will review the highlights of the new data, reflect on those findings as a researcher, discuss the limitations of this study, and provide suggestions for future research.

Summary of Findings

This analysis has provided answers to the research questions which were asked in Chapter 1, so this summary of findings will answer those four research questions using the new data in this study:
Research Question #1: What is the character of the temporary employment interview as a speech event?

The temporary employment interview is a verbal performance which explicitly and implicitly test the applicant’s ability to meet the interviewer’s expectations for communicative behavior which meets the social norms for interaction within this context, which are: (a) to speak in a professional and polite yet friendly tone; (b) to disclose positive and negative aspects of identity within the context of qualifications and work experience; (c) to answer questions directly with pertinent answers; and (d) to respond to open-ended questions with long answers of three or more sentences. The latter conclusion confirms the data in Einhorn’s (1981) study and in Scheuer’s (2001) study that applicants who give longer answers are evaluated more favorably.

Research Question #2: What interactional strategies does the applicant use to make a positive impression on the interviewer?

Rhetorically, applicants use four interactional strategies to make a positive impression on the interviewer: (a) tell personal narratives that display competence; (b) highlight commonalities shared with the interviewer; (c) respond to or initiate small talk or humor to lighten the tone of conversation; and (d) use euphemisms to downplay negative features of identity.

Two of these interactional strategies—highlight commonalities shared with the interviewer, and use euphemisms to downplay negative features of identity—were used by many of the applicants who were hired but were not used by any of the applicants who were not hired; applicants who were not hired did the opposite and highlighted negative aspects of their identity.
and how they were different from the interviewer.

*Research Question #3:* What communicative problems occur during this interaction?

The tensions and dilemmas which the applicant experiences when the interviewer asks the applicant about future income, present unemployment, and negative aspects of past employment can cause communicative problems during this interaction because those are hard questions to answer and thus can cause social awkwardness in the interaction. When the interviewer asks open-ended questions, short answers of less than one sentence, including answers of one word or a few words, may cause a communicative problem, because the interviewer thinks the applicant is not being “open” and therefore the interviewer has to “pull” information out of the applicant by asking follow-up questions. In addition, there are four categories of applicant utterances and responses which generally are perceived negatively by the interviewer: (a) unexpected answers which do not answer the interviewer’s question or are “rude” according to social norms; (b) face threats to the interviewer; (c) negative remarks about a past employer; and (d) inappropriate laughter about a serious topic such as the tough job market.

The last five communicative problems appear to be indicators of outcomes. Only 38% of applicants who were hired gave short answers to open-ended questions, but 100% of applicants who were not hired gave short answers to open-ended questions. Only 0-6% of applicants who were hired gave negative utterances and responses, but 67-100% of applicants who were not hired gave negative utterances and responses.
Research Question #4: How do identity differences between the interviewer and the applicant surface in the job interview discourse and influence outcomes?

Identity differences between the interlocutors in this social interaction can make it harder for the applicant to establish co-membership because they have fewer things in common, and differences in gender, age, race, and social class can interfere with the applicant’s attempts to make a positive impression on the interviewer when such differences cause tension and confrontation, because the applicant becomes the “other” who may not fit into the workplace. In those instances, the applicant’s overall communicative competence is factored into the interviewer’s hiring decision. If the applicant manages those differences rhetorically using one of the four interactional strategies, however, he or she may be able to bridge the identity gap using humor to lighten the tone of the conversation, or by positively framing aspects of identity which could be perceived as negative, such as framing being 30 years older than the interviewer as being competent in the workplace due to many years of work experience.

Differences in identity also can cause communicative problems if the interviewer perceives that the applicant is not disclosing aspects of his or her identity. My findings confirmed Birkner and Kern’s (2000) and Komter’s (1991) findings that the interviewer has a “hidden agenda” which seeks to relax the applicant so the applicant will reveal his or her “hidden identity”–negative aspects of identity the applicant did not intend to divulge during the job interview. The applicant is expected to disclose positive aspects of identity and negative aspects of identity, which is vital to being perceived as trustworthy, and trust is an issue because my findings confirmed Kerekes’ (2006) finding that if the interviewer does not trust the applicant, the applicant will not be hired. Kerekes’ (2006) found that identity differences can cause the
interviewer to mistrust the applicant, and my data supports that claim because the “quiet” Hispanic male light industrial applicant who gave short answers and did not disclose his identity was evaluated as untrustworthy by the interviewer and was not hired.

With regard to outcomes, the small number of applicants in each category made it hard to draw conclusions, but patterns were found. Male applicants seemed to experience more difficulty being hired than female applicants, and when race was factored into the outcomes, 85% of the Caucasian applicants were hired, but only 40% of the minority applicants were hired; thus, minority male applicants were the least hired category. Because those applicants were light industrial applicants, my findings support Kerekes’ (2007) findings that light industrial applicants who are typically men of color and low-income experience racial and occupational discrimination during the temporary employment interview because: (a) they give short answers and do not meet the interviewer’s criteria for communicative competence; and (b) differences in gender, race and social class make it harder for them to build rapport with the interviewer. When identity differences are analyzed in this context, the interviewer’s expectations for communicative competence seem to favor applicants who have identities which are similar to the interviewer, which typically is a middle-class, college-educated, Caucasian woman in her mid-twenties, according to my data and Kerekes’ (2005) study of temporary employment agencies.

*Applicant Communicative Competence (ACC)*

Based on these findings, I developed the concept of Applicant Communicative Competence (ACC), which encapsulates the interviewer’s expectations for the applicant’s communicative behavior during the temporary employment interview. To conform to ACC, the applicant must engage in conversation according to social norms for the temporary job interview,
which include answering open-ended questions with medium to long utterances rather than short answers, responding to questions with pertinent, polite answers, expressing positive aspects of identity, and disclosing negative aspects of identity which are relevant to the recruiting process. The applicant should also use the four interactional strategies—tell personal narratives which display competence, highlight commonalities shared with the interviewer, respond to or initiate small talk or humor appropriately about non-serious topics, and use euphemisms to downplay negative features of identity—to establish co-membership, build rapport, and make a positive, memorable impression, and the applicant should refrain from negative utterances and responses which make a negative impression, which include face threats to the interviewer, negative remarks about past employers, laughing inappropriately about serious topics, and highlighting the issue of unemployment, especially long periods of unemployment.

**Reflection on Findings**

As a researcher, my interest in communicative job interview research is based on personal experience, because during my career, I have sat in both the interviewer’s chair and the applicant’s chair. As an interviewer, I asked questions and evaluated verbal performances in accordance with my “hidden agenda” (Birkner & Kern, 2000; Komter, 1991). Confirming Kerekes’ (2005) findings, my personal feelings about liking or not liking the applicant definitely influenced my evaluation of the applicant and my hiring decision, and those feelings were based on our social interaction during the job interview. Conversely, as an applicant, I conformed to the strict rules for this social interaction and strived to present myself as “a good fit.” Therefore, prior to beginning this research study, I had experienced the social realities of both the interviewer and the applicant in the job interview.
Now that I am sitting in the researcher’s chair, I chose this topic because I wanted to fill a scholarly void in communication research about social interaction during the job interview and produce findings which would be of practical value in helping unemployed individuals in society. Researching this topic has accomplished those objectives, because it has furthered knowledge in communication research and enhanced practical understanding of social interaction in the job interview. In addition, it also has provided insight into how culture reproduces itself in daily social interaction through ritualistic collective practices in society, because: (a) I found some of the same communicative patterns and problems in the Denver employment agency which Kerekes found in a San Francisco employment agency 10 years ago; and (b) the basis for the disclosure requirement for ACC is the “open” communication culture in the United States, the “rules for speaking” which expect the “individual” to present the “self” communicatively “with statements of personal experiences, thoughts and feelings” (Carbaugh, 2009, p. 68). From an ethical standpoint, the foundations of ACC are social and cultural norms which are based on beliefs, principles and ideals in society such as trustworthiness and a strong work ethic, and differences in identity and periods of unemployment—especially a combination of the two factors—evaluated within the strict rules for ACC can result in a negative impression of the applicant which prevents the applicant from being hired. Regarding the assumed link between disclosure and trustworthiness, the temporary employment interviewer assumes that if an applicant discloses identity in social interaction, she can trust him, and if an applicant does not, she cannot trust him, but the Hispanic applicant in this study who was not hired because his communicative behavior was not “open” and made the interviewer feel “uneasy” may have acted nervously because it was a job interview, and his short answers may have been due to the fact that he speaks English as a second language. Concerning the strong work ethic norm, the
personal narratives which several applicants told during the job interviews in this study revealed that although some people quit their previous job, many people are unemployed because their jobs have been eliminated due to organizational budget cuts, changes in management where they work, or other factors beyond their control such as the company they work for going out of business, and they presently cannot find work due to the economic recession and tough job market; therefore, in some cases unemployment is not due to a lack of a strong work ethic, so those applicants should not be evaluated negatively based on their unemployed status, because contrary to societal beliefs (Komter, 1991), they were not partially responsible for their unfortunate circumstances. Furthermore, the disclosure requirement for ACC creates a dilemma for the applicant who has had negative experiences during past employment, because the interviewer’s expectations that the applicant disclose those negative experiences violates the norm for ACC that one should never say anything negative about a past employer. Therefore, the standards for ACC cause communicative problems for many applicants because they cannot conform to the strict rules for social interaction during the temporary job interview.

**Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

Although this study produced practical results, the small number of participants and unforeseen circumstances limited the scope of the data which could be analyzed. First, my audio recordings included only 20 job interviews, whereas Komter (1991) recorded 35 job interviews and Kerekes (2005) recorded 48 job interviews. Second, Staffing Manager A resigned from the employment agency during the beginning of the study, and even though Staffing Manager B volunteered to record the rest of the 20 job interviews, the results were 2 versus 18 instead of 10 job interviews each. Third, only four applicants were not hired, and one of them had to be
eliminated from the descriptive statistics because he was ineligible for employment at this agency due to his criminal record, so the descriptive statistics are based on only three applicants who were not hired. Therefore, due to the small sample size and the fact that the majority of the job interviews were conducted by one interviewer, this interpretation cannot be generalized to all applicants in temporary employment agencies.

In addition, questions remain regarding non-verbal communication, applicant evaluations of their own communicative competence, and the criteria for ACC in different job interview settings. Komter (1991) obtained access to observe actual job interviews in her research study in Amsterdam, and observing non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and hand gestures would have increased the depth of my analysis. How would observational data during these job interviews have influenced my results? Komter’s (1991) study did not analyze non-verbal communication as indicators of outcomes; would types of non-verbal communication have been indicators of outcomes in my study? In addition, my debriefing interviews with the interviewers were so fruitful that I wished I had been given an opportunity to interview the applicants, too, after the job interviews, because their impressions of their own communicative competence could have been revealing. Did the applicants who were evaluated negatively realize that their communicative behavior made a negative impression on the interviewer? In reflecting on my findings, I also wondered: how would these findings compare with communicative practices in traditional job interviews which are conducted in the human resources department of a hiring organization? Is the criteria for ACC the same, or does it differ for each organization? These concerns and questions are seeds for future job interview research which I sincerely hope will be planted and grown to fruition.
References


Communication Theory, 5, 248-272.


Appendix A: Map of the Employment Agency

MAP of Research Site - Employment Agency Office
Nancie Hudson
Communication in Job Interviews Research Study
Appendix B: Sample Debriefing Interview

Debriefing Telephone Interviews with Interviewers After They have Recorded Job Interviews

Date: 2-7-2012

Staffing Manager: B

Applicant Number: 9
Gender: Female
Race: African American
Job Category: Office Clerical

1. What was your overall impression of applicant number 9?
   “I really liked her. She was interesting to listen to. She’s had a lot of experiences. The only thing that was a red flag was how long it took her to do everything. The interview took 30 minutes, and she was here for a total of 2 hours, and that’s a long time; most people are here for an hour or less. She was filling out paperwork, and we also had an issue with her online application, so she had to fill out a paper application.”

2. What type of work did the applicant want to do?
   “She’s pretty open, office clerical and hospitality.”

3. Was the applicant qualified to do that type of work? “Yes.”

4. How well did the applicant communicate with you during the employment interview?
   “I think she did a really good job, she was connecting with me. She was sarcastic and made a few comments that took me by surprise a couple of times, but it was funny. For example, after the interview, I was explaining that I needed her to call in every couple of days, and she said, ‘I won’t be working every day?’ And when I said no, she said, ‘Well, I guess I’ll have to head up Colfax, then.’ (Colfax Avenue is a main street in downtown Denver, and the interviewer explained that Applicant #9 joked about having to become a prostitute to pay her bills.) She was a little casual, but that’s okay.”

5. Did you hire the applicant for a temporary work assignment?
   “Yes. Office clerical is what she’ll end up doing, but she also may do some security work for us for some events as well.”

6. Why?
   “Because she has the experience that we’re looking for and she has a good personality.”
Appendix C: Sample Job Interview Transcript

Interviewer: I
Applicant: A9
(Job Interviews Research Study)

1 I: Applicant number 9. Alright, so to start out, why don’t you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

2 A9: Ok, do more personal-

3 I: Yeah!

4 A9: Or professional?

5 I: Let’s do both.

6 A9: Okay. Well, my name’s (applicant name). You know that already.

7 I: ((laughs))

8 A9: I am 35 years old, going on 20.

9 I: Of course. ((both laugh))

10 A9: I have two wonderful children, and um the reason why I’m in here today is cuz- you know I explained to you maybe before in the e-mail, I’m just kinda lookin for um a career not a job, there’s a difference.

11 I: Right, Mmm.

12 A9: And um, this- I heard about the reputation of this company.

13 I: Oh, great!

14 A9: And they seem to be a very um established company that’s lookin for more-

15 I: Right.

16 A9: qualified candidates to look for a really good career set.

17 I: Mmm.

18 A9: So that’s why I’m basically here.

19 I: Perfect, okay.

20 A9: Yeah.

21 I: Let me grab your resume really quickly, it’s at the other desk, so I will be right back, I forgot I moved it.

22 A9: Okay.

23 I: Um, I know that you probably uploaded your resume 10 times into that
online application.

Yeah, I kept-

Um, but I will eventually e-mail and just have you send your resume to me.

Okay.

So we can just go from there, I’ll just have to remember, um and then you’ve worked in property management, um is that primarily where you’ve worked before?

No, I’ve done a lot of things.

Okay. Tell me a little bit about what you’ve done in your uh working past.

Okay, well I first started out um, my parents were chefs for 40 years, so I started- I think probably at 7, they had us in the kitchen, so-

Oh wow!

Um, I started doing restaurants- since I was 7, I kinda, to be honest with you, forged my birth certificate when I was young ((laughs)) cuz they wanted us to work.

((laughs))

So I wanted to help my parents out financially, so I started working at 14, um at Taco Bell.

Okay.

And I was a manager by 15.

Oh my goodness.

Um-

How old did they think you were? 18?

They probably thought I was 17.

17, that’s funny.

I finally told em, so they forgave me, and I started doin the real process and doin it the right way. Um, but I- uh yeah, I was a manager at 15, um I did that for about six years.

Uh huh.

And then I moved to um different avenues of management, but still in food, so I did-

Oh okay.
I did food management for about 15 years, um but I was doin other avenues as well, so-

Right.

I had two jobs at a time, also I went to school at Arapahoe Community College and I uh got certified as a CNA, Certified Nurse’s Aide, so I did- started doin medical as well.

Okay, I kinda remembered that from your resume. Okay.

Right, so I did that too, um I worked at Denny’s for about six or seven years as a manager as well. Um, I- I was like three months away from getting my B.A. for healthcare administration and medical specialty-

Oh wow!

Um, but they changed some online stuff, so I couldn’t finish that.

Oh, that’s too bad.

Yeah, that was kinda-

Bummer.

Yeah, it was a bummer. But um I did that, and then I started doin security, cuz I always wanted to be a police officer.

Oh, okay. Gotcha.

So I did about eight years of security as well.

Okay.

Um, I tried to be a police officer twice, but I- I fell and hurt my knee-

Mmhmm.

I had two surgeries on my knee.

Oh man!

I passed everything, but they wouldn’t let me join the Academy. So I did security, a lot of- became a sergeant at um-

Wow!

at a hospital doin security.

Are you- do you have your license?

Um, no I had a- you know a merchant guard, so-

Okay. Well the reason I asked about that is because we um have security for some of the events that we staff, and all that’s required is a merchant’s
Yeah, I love security. So yeah, I did have my merchant guard, but it expires.

You sent that uh those things to me yesterday.

Right.

Okay. Um so you did have your merchant guard and it’s expired?

It is expired.

Okay.

So I know you can go to (building name?) building and get that-

Yeah, most definitely.

So I- I can do that too, but I know I do have a couple restrictions when it comes to standing and stairs.

Okay.

So as long as it’s not long and it’s standing-

How long is long to you?

All day.

All day? Okay, cuz some of the shifts last up to 12 hours, but I think you have to be able to stand for four hours at a time. I don’t really know much about the conventions to be perfectly honest-

Right.

but the girl that does know would be able to give you the entire scoop on that. So if you’re interested in doing hospitality, I’d be more than happy to give your name to her, she can give you the whole rundown of what we do.

Okay.

If you want.

Just different avenues-

Okay.

Um, just more of-

It’s not really a career path, but it might help fill in the gaps until you get to that point.

Right, I’m all for-
Okay, perfect!

working. And yeah.

Perfect. Um, tell me about- you worked at (company name) apartments and townhomes. Tell me about that.

Um, I loved it at first, but- um I was basically the customer care specialist [risk management type of-

[Yeah. Okay.

I was doin all the care there, so basically kinda solving problems.

Mmhmm.

um with the um person that I was checkin on after they moved into the apartment, if they liked it, [if it was okay, but it became more of a security thing was the problem.

[Gotcha.

So it was more like breaking fights at pools, and-

Oh my goodness.

Breaking food fights, and-

Oh my goodness!

Cuz they knew I had security background.

Right.

Cuz my manager there was my same manager from a couple other properties.

Oh, I see.

So he knew my security background, so it more became a problem.

Okay.

But the um position was eliminated. It was just a trial period, so-

Right.

I didn’t know that.

You never do. Um, do you enjoy working in property management?

I actually love it.

Good!

I can sell anything.
I: Awesome! Well that’s good.

A9: Yeah, so I do love that.

I: Perfect, okay.

A9: I love security too.

I: Right, okay great. Uh so you just have a really wide range of experience, so that’s really good.

A9: Right. See and I love cooking too.

I: Perfect.

A9: I love food!

I: We have a banquet-type thing which you might be the perfect person for that. Okay, perfect. Um, let’s see it looks like you have some volunteer experience, tell me about that.

A9: I was a executive assistant for (association name), um-

I: Mmhmm?

A9: We actually brought down from Texas the biggest smoker in the world, and-

I: Wow!

A9: Yeah, downtown, and we fed over about- it was about 900 people.

I: Oh my goodness!

A9: Yeah. So I volunteered for many-

I: That’s awesome!

A9: For- yeah, free, it was awesome, it was a non-profit organization, we also opened a school for the homeless, and we um took kids off the streets, and so I homed a lot of uh teenagers, homeless women, put em in shelters, put em in homes, and things like that.

I: You’ve got a great background, this is really exciting! ((laughs))

A9: It was amazing, I loved it.

I: I bet, oh my goodness I bet. Okay, perfect. Let’s see.

A9: And we worked for uh- I was the- um the assistant for a- a deacon.

I: Mmhmm?

A9: And a bishop, so I worked with a lot of people from the church.

I: Yeah, I bet. Okay. So what would your ideal job be? Dream job time, what
would that be?

A9: CEO of a company.

I: Okay. Any type of company, or just any company?

A9: No, just um-I’m not sure, it’s-I love doin so many different things.

I: Yeah.

A9: Um, I’m not sure to be honest with you, just to be honest.

I: Yeah, no problem, that’s- that’s a tough question. I just ask it to try to get an idea what people want to do, but-

A9: Yeah.

I: No one ever knows.

A9: No, and I-I should know by now, at my age, I should know what I really want to do, I mean I really wanted to be a police officer to be honest.

I: Right.

A9: But then at the same time that’s a risky situation when you’re a mother.

I: Yeah. That’s true, that is a risky line of work.

A9: Right, so I thought with my knee-

I: Mmhmm.

A9: Maybe that was a sign that maybe you shouldn’t do that, cuz you have two children.

I: That’s true.

A9: So, but I love being in an office setting, because I’m good with people.

I: Mmhmm. I can tell that, even from just communicating with you.

A9: Oh, thank you. But then I was great at doin security, cuz I’m a risk taker, so I was the only female security bouncer, cuz I also worked at a club, so I was a bouncer there. So I was handcuffing people, and-

I: Oh my goodness.

A9: [((laughs))) So-

I: [((laughs))) You’ve led a very exciting life for sure.

A9: Yeah!

I: So far! I mean you’re still really young for all the experiences that you’ve had.
A9: Yeah, I started pretty early.
I: Yeah, that’s true.
A9: So I mean my boyfriend does not want me doin security, but it’s not- it’s about what pays the bills-
I: Right.
A9: But he knows like I said I want a career, I don’t want a job, there’s a big difference.
I: Mmhmm.
A9: And I wanna be a huge asset to a company.
I: Okay.
A9: I wanna be at a company, and stay there for the next 20 years, and grow and grow and- just be there, you know what I mean?
I: Right.
A9: And help that company grow and make them lots of money, make me lots of money, and-
I: Yeah. Definitely. Um, as far as the security goes, ours uh is usually pretty low-key, you don’t carry a gun, I mean-
A9: Yeah, I don’t do that.
I: You’re just like walkin around basically making sure that everything-
A9: ((inaudible))
I: Right, right, it’s just really low-key security, I don’t- I think the biggest incident is once uh someone was knitting, and that’s really not too bad-
A9: ((laughs)) Sure, it’s knitting, I crochet, so-
I: Yeah, so it’s really not that big of a deal, um so it’s really low-key security for sure. So. Um let’s see, I’m gonna ask you a few quick- more- well I guess I’ve already asked you questions, but specific to what I have put in here.
A9: Okay.
I: Um, the first one is what kind of work are you looking for, I know you filled this out, so um you’ve worked as an administrative assistant before.
A9: Right.
I: Um, is that something you’d like to do again? I know you mentioned you’d like to do office work again. And you’d like to stick in that field?
Well yeah I mean, I think I was more veering towards apartment management, and I was even thinking of getting into real estate.

Okay.

Um, because- just cuz of the knee issue.

Right.

You know, to be honest with you, but- I mean I love doing that work too, but also sitting at a desk all day, that's not me. So I'm more of a hands-on person, um with people.

Okay.

And tryin to- you know, help people out. So-

Gotcha. Um, tell me a little bit about your work as dispatcher. What did that entail?

Um, I dispatched a little bit at the school when I was you know, helping the homeless. So I was handling about- it was- it wasn’t that many lines, it was about four or five.

Okay.

Six lines at a time or something like that. And that was just tryin to handle the um whole um- (interviewer’s desk phone rings)) oh I’m sorry.

No no no, I don’t like to- [cuz they wouldn’t give me the phone call, cuz I don’t want it.

[Oh, okay.

((laughs)) Anyway.

Handling the whole Thanksgiving thing, you know I was- cuz I ran it, I had to deal with the- the news channels, and-

Mmhmm.

you know, the people, so that was basically it. But I had also applied for a 911 dispatcher, cuz you have to type so many words a minute.

Oh, gotcha.

So that’s really what that was.

Okay. And then weekend food demonstrator. What have you done that’s weekend food demonstrating- or food demonstrator position?

Um it’s more of um working with my dad.

Okay.
A9: And- and banquets and stuff.

I: Okay.

A9: So-

I: So banquets for sure.

A9: Yeah.

I: If we had something like that would you wanna do it again? I know-

A9: No.

I: You don’t wanna do that? Okay.

A9: No, probably not.

I: How bout um special event staff, I know we talked about security for our events, what about working as like a registration person for those events, would you be interested in doing that? Again this is just temporary till we find you your career.

A9: I mean probably yes.

I: Okay.

A9: I mean I’m all for it, but to be honest with you it’s- it’s more of a just to make sure my pay is making- you know- you know what I mean?

I: Yes.

A9: Just the pay my- cuz I’m in- a- a situation.

I: Sure, I know.

A9: I can talk to you about that off-

I: Yeah, don’t worry about that. Um, let’s see.

A9: But yeah, I’m- I’m up for that too, and I’m up for definitely security-

I: Okay.

A9: Um.

I: Perfect. Alright. Let’s see here. Um, and- I’ll just go through this, okay. So let me just jot down a couple of things that we just talked about.

A9: Okay. Hope I didn’t talk too much.

I: No, not at all. Okay. So how long have you been looking for a position?

A9: Honestly, it’s been awhile.

I: Mmm.
A9: You know, because I mean I left there in November, and then I was dealing with this knee issue-

I: Mmhmm

A9: So I took some time off-

I: Okay.

A9: It- it’s been a couple months.

I: A couple months? Okay, that’s not too bad. And then what made you decide to go through a staffing agency? Since you were referred?

A9: No, I saw it on the internet, but I’ve been through a staffing agency before [where it was strictly just apartment- um, what was it called again? (agency name)]

I: [Okay. Oh, okay.

I: Okay perfect, so you have worked with a temp agency, and you worked- what kind of position was it?

A9: It was leasing.

I: Leasing apartments?

A9: Mmhmm. Yeah, they’re called (agency name).

I: Okay, do you remember what the place where you worked at was called?

A9: From the staffing agency?

I: Yeah.

A9: That’s how I got the equity-

I: Equity, okay.

A9: Um equity- it was (company name).

I: Okay. The reason I ask that is because uh we have a program where I can put in the name of an apartment or of any business, it’ll kick back links to similar businesses so then I can call them and say hey, do you have an opening, I’ve got a great candidate. So it helps to have those names so I can enter em in there and see if they are hiring. Uh, so you are interested in temporary assignments then?

A9: Um, yeah well-

I: Okay.

A9: I sure am.

I: Okay. Um and again it’s just on your path to that actual job.
I: So temp-to-hire then, and career placement I’m assuming?
A9: Yes.
I: Okay. So let me double-check something really quick here-
A9: Okay.
I: Cuz I know you’ve already answered this question. Okay um you don’t have career placement on here, are you still interested in it, career placement’s just direct hire basically, so instead of being on our payroll for a certain amount of time, the company hires you to start with them from day one. There’s really no loss to you.
A9: Yeah I am interested in that, but I would like- I was a little confused about it was saying something like $50 a month-
I: Okay, so we have two different payroll or uh career placement options, the first one is employer pay, so they pay all the fees, the second one uh is employee pay, honestly that never really comes up, we’ve only had that come up a couple of times when the company just does not want to pay the fee. We don’t wanna hurt you, because you are getting those benefits from day one, as opposed to waiting five months or whatever the conversion time is, before you start accumulating them. So we developed the applicant-paid fee, which is if we find you a position, um, review it, you accept it, you start working, then we charge the $50 a month for 10 months. Completely optional, you don’t have to do it, you can change your mind down the road, but that is option number two, so are you interested in just employer-paid?
A9: Employer-paid.
I: Okay. Not to worry, that’s pretty common.
A9: Okay.
I: Uh, what are your strengths as an employee?
A9: I am driven, very hard working, um I have a list of strengths, you probably can’t pull- I won’t stop my work until it’s done, so-
I: Okay.
A9: That might not be a strength? If I take too long ((both laugh))
I: Willing to stay until I guess the job gets done.
A9: Mmhmm.
I: Okay.
Um-
You can put that if you want, but you don’t have to.
And very customer service-savvy.
Okay.
Great with people.
I can’t tell if there’s t v’s or one in savvy.
I think there’s-
Is there two or one?
Maybe two.
Well it’s got one in this case, and I’ll go back and double-check it.
((laughs)) Okay, so what are your short-term career needs then?
Short-term?
Why do you need a job right now?
Right now it’s more financial.
Sure. That’s why everyone needs a job. ((laughs))
Right.
Okay, and how bout your long-term career goals?
Um, security.
Okay. And then move up through the company?
Yes, definitely.
Okay. Alright, and what are three things you liked about your last job?
Let’s see. Um, I would say everybody in the office got along really well.
Okay. Okay?
Let’s see another thing– usually people don’t get along, but we all got along.
That is rare I would say.
Yes.
You are lucky.
Um another good thing– I liked uh– hmm– I always had morning– good communication.
I: Okay.

A9: We did have great communication.

I: Alright, one more thing?

A9: ((laughs)) I don’t know, I-

I: Did you like the pay, the location, did you like the actual work?

A9: You know I did like that pay-

I: Okay.

A9: That pay was pretty good.

I: Gotcha. Alright, and what didn’t you like about your last company? Just one thing, it’s a little easier.

A9: I felt taken advantage of.

I: Okay.

A9: Sometimes people take my pens for a week ((laughs))

I: Yeah, I have the same problem, so I 100% know exactly what you’re talking about. Okay. So, I’m just gonna write these really quickly.

A9: Okay.

I: Alright, and then do you- let’s see here. Do you understand that (agency name) is your employer, and that any and all issues regarding an assignment need to be brought to the attention of the (agency name) staff?

A9: Yes.

I: Perfect. Is there any reason you would not be able to be at work every day and on time?

A9: Is there any reason? No.

I: Okay.

A9: I mean I- I’m having a little bit of a- you know, problem with transportation, but we’re working on that right now.

I: Sure, not to worry!

A9: That’s another reason why I’m working, is to get my car fixed.

I: Okay, yeah.

A9: But me and-

I: Those are expensive.
A9: Yeah, he’s- he’s my boyfriend, and he’s awesome, so we’re-
I: Good.
A9: He’s like I’ll take you to campus, I don’t care! ((laughs))
I: Aw, that’s sweet.
A9: He’s wonderful.
I: Well good, good. Everyone needs someone like that in their lives, so I’m
glad that you have that too.
A9: He’s so awesome.
I: Yeah, do you use public transportation at all?
A9: Um, no.
I: Okay. Okay, I just wanted to make sure, I have to ask that question in a
minute anyway.
A9: No, he’s been gettin me there.
I: There ya go! ((laughs)) Um, are you aware that tardiness and absences
from any assignment, temp or temp-to-hire, may result in termination?
A9: Yes, I won’t stand for it, so I’d be darned-
I: Perfect, I like to hear that. Okay-
A9: ((inaudible)) I’m like no! ((both laugh))
I: Okay. So, let’s see here as far as your salary goes, um your minimum
salary you have down is $13.75 an hour. Is that-
A9: I know it’s a little steepish I’m sure.
I: It’s a little high than- higher than what we typically see, are you willing
to work for less, um if it’s the right fit, or what would be- what do you
actually need to make to- to um make ends meet?
A9: $30 an hour. ((laughs))
I: $30 an hour, well that is exactly what my answer is too. ((laughs)) Okay,
so we will go find ourselves a $30 job.
A9: That’d be great!
I: Yeah.
A9: Go and have some-
I: Yeah, definitely.
((both laugh))
Um, I mean I- you tell me, cuz I was just-

It’s hard to know.

It’s so hard.

I would say, um-

I know jobs for like $14.50-

Right.

$15- and I know this is a staffing agency, so I can work- I can definitely work with it, cuz-

Right.

If you want more money, you work more hours.

Exactly.

You know, you get overtime.

Right, exactly. Um, I would say that we typically see between $10 and $12 for temp, $10 and $13 for temp-to-hire. So um that’s kind of- [((someone enters))] Hey, how’s it goin? We’ll be just a quick sec, or you can grab it, you know what you’re doin, so go ahead and grab what you need. Um-

Cuz I- I had saw on there that temp-to-hire was- I think it said $12.

I think it says $10 to $15, $15 is the upper end, we just don’t get a lot of it.

Oh.

So, that’s why I ask, um what you would be comfortable with. But- um, we can go back to that too.

Okay.

Um, let’s see. Let me just ask you a couple other quick questions here.

Okay, so I have your- oops, I guess I don’t have your availability, cuz I had to enter this manually so what kind of availability do you have? Are you 100% available, just the first shift, first and second shift-

Probably first and third.

First and third shift? Okay. I wonder if I can do that. I can, okay great.

Monday through Friday, Monday through Sunday?

Um, Monday through Friday is first and third, weekends any.

Any weekends, okay perfect.

Cuz that second shift is like 2 to 10, and that’s when my kids are home-
I: Exactly.

A9: Get dinner, do homework-

I: Yeah, I hear ya. Okay, and then let’s see here. Do you have any upcoming vacations, anything like that, or are you start- ready to start work as soon as we get somethin for you?

A9: Yeah, I’m ready.

I: Okay. Um, how many hours a week would you prefer to have?

A9: 100%.

I: Okay, so I’ll put 40. Uh, how bout how many miles are you willing to travel one-way?

A9: Oh, one-way?

I: Mmhmm.

A9: Mm, I mean what do you think, is-

I: Um, I would say people typically say between 15 and 20, and um-

A9: That’s one-way?

I: Yeah, that’s one way it just kinda depends too, uh you did mark the areas that you’re also willing to work so let me take a peek at that. Um, so you’re interested- I mean you have a- quite a range here

A9: Right. Littleton’s pushing it-

I: Okay.

A9: Um, I would prefer not to be in Littleton, but I was trying to range-

I: Sure, so should I put like 15, um you can always decline an assignment if it’s just too far, that’s okay.

A9: It’s okay to do that?

I: That’s okay to do, you don’t have to take everything I give you by any means.

A9: That really sucks to not take something.

I: Right.

A9: It’s like how dare you?

I: ((laughs)) Well let’s see, where- where around Denver do you live?

A9: I really don’t live in Denver-

I: Okay.
A9: I just took my- my P.O. Box, but we really need to move, we’re in a situation-
I: Okay. Okay.
A9: with the landlord.
I: Sure, not to worry. What general area is that in, just so I have an idea?
I: Westminster, okay. So uh from Westminster, I would say like 10 miles won’t get you down to the Tech Center probably.
A9: No.
I: Um, that’s why I typically say 15-
A9: Like my boyfriend, he- he works in west- he works like six minutes from here.
I: Oh.
A9: So he knows. And then my kids go to school in Green Valley.
I: Okay.
A9: By the airport.
I: Yeah.
A9: So we have a range-
I: Mmmmm.
A9: We’re gonna be driving a lot anyways.
I: Okay.
A9: So-
I: Well I would say- I would think 15 miles is probably gonna get you pretty much anywhere in the- the metro area.
A9: Yeah.
I: So okay, I’ll put that in. Oops. Okay, so we did about transportation, so you are available as far as transportation?
A9: Mmmmm.
I: Okay. And then um you asked for one-day notice for any type of assignment? We can- we can do that, um but it gets- if we’re in a jam, we need someone and we need em now, and kind of our original people or all of our- our uh same-day people, we will branch out to those one-day
people.

A9: Right.

I: Again, you’re welcome to turn it down. Especially since said you needed one-day notice, and if we give you 10 minutes’ notice, we’re- we’re going against what you asked for anyway. So that’s okay.

A9: Right. Yeah, if it’s 10 minutes I probably won’t be able to get there in 10 minutes.

I: That’s an exaggeration but ((laughs)).

A9: Right, but if it’s- yeah, I would-

I: Okay.

A9: It would be great to call me, just in case.

I: Yeah, definitely. Okay, as far as assignment duration, are you looking for long-term, short-term, or both?

A9: What do you mean assignment duration, like-

I: Um, like a short-term assignment is classified as two weeks or under, and then a long-term is two weeks and above.

A9: Yeah, both.

I: Okay, perfect. Where is that? Long- and short-term, okay. Alright. So, um as far as that wage or salary required, I wanted to wait till you got outta here before I ask you that, cuz it’s really nobody’s business.

A9: Right.

I: Um, what- I have to put a number in, what number would you like me to put in?

A9: Well- you know, you’re the boss here, so you tell me what is feasible to where people won’t be like huh, yeah right! I’m not calling her-

I: Um-

A9: you know what I mean?

I: Yeah, I would say probably $12 is a- is a good mid-line temp-to-hire range. Is that too low? If that’s too low that’s okay, I just need to know.

A9: Okay well, like I said, you- you know.

I: Mmhmm.

A9: You know what I mean?

I: Yeah.
A9: So- yeah that’s low to me, but I mean, they’re gonna see this right?

I: Actually the only people that see this stuff is internal people. But if I have an opportunity that comes up and you only want $15 an hour but their pay is $12.50 an hour I won’t even call you, cuz that’s way lower than what you’re looking for. So that’s why I can’t set the number for you, because I don’t know, um but I wouldn’t- I would say most of our temp-to-hire probably lies between the $10 and $13, maybe $14, and sometimes we do get stuff for $15. It’s just a little more rare.

A9: So if you get something for $15 you’ll call me?

I: Oh yeah.

A9: If it’s $14 you’ll call me, if it’s $13 you’ll call me-

I: If you put in $13 and I get something for $10, I won’t call you.

A9: So if you get something- if I put in $13, if you get one for $12.50 you won’t call me?

I: I will call you for that one probably. Whatever your bottom dollar is, that’s what I wanna put in here, like would you work for $10?

A9: No.

I: Would you work for $11? That’s okay, that’s okay! You have a lot of qualifications, you don’t have to work for $10. Would you work for $11?

A9: ((laughs)) I should say yes though because-

I: But what do you need?

A9: Ah-

I: Cuz ultimately I don’t want you taking a job just cuz it’s what I gave you, if it’s not gonna be what you need.

A9: $12.50?

I: $12.50 works, I’ll put $12.50. Now a bit more exciting number is what would you like to make based on your experiences and your skill set?

A9: ((inaudible))

I: Okay, is there a more reasonable number you’d like-

A9: $15?

I: That’s reasonable, completely reasonable.

A9: Okay.

I: Okay, so that is all of my questions I have for you, I’m gonna get you set
640 up with some paperwork, did you bring your identification for the I-9, I
641 probably shoulda got that a while ago.
642 A9: Yeah.
643 I: Okay. I’m gonna stop this-
644
645 --end interview--