Conversational Non-Cooperation: An Exploration of Disattended Complaints

Jenny Mandelbaum
Rutgers University

In response to the actions of others interlocutors have a wide variety of options. For instance, they may disaffiliate with the action, decline to respond to it, disattend it, appreciate it, affiliate with it, or escalate it (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1977, pp. 160-163). This paper considers the phenomenon of disattending the apparent action of another. Specifically, I explore through case studies the methods for disattending, or not taking up, another’s apparent complaint. Prior studies have suggested that “passing” is one available response to a complaint (Alberts, 1988; McLaughlin et al., 1983). However the nature of this “passing” in naturally occurring conversations — its context, how it is accomplished, its repercussions, etc. — has not been examined in detail. I show how disattending a complaint can occur when the complaint is attempted by providing a complaint “frame” (Goffman, 1973) for the co-participant, and leaving the co-participant to infer how the complaint is instantiated in subsequent talk. In such

Early versions of this paper were presented at the Temple Discourse Conference on “Multiple Goals in Interpersonal Interaction,” Temple University, Philadelphia, March 25, 1988, and at the Speech Communication Association convention, San Francisco, CA, November 1990. The author is grateful to two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their suggestions in developing this paper.
cases the co-participants may take up some other aspect of subsequent talk, thus disattending the complaint. Their disattending may be sustained even when the complaint is reasserted. Generally we cooperate with others by helping them to develop their conversational enterprises (Grice, 1975). Here co-participants do not cooperate. After describing methods for disattending complaints I explore ways of studying in a grounded fashion how interpersonal or relational considerations might motivate or explain disattending an interlocutor's apparent complaint.

**DISATTENDING ANOTHER'S COMPLAINT**

Disattending another's action may be blatant or subtle, and may or may not be provided for by the disattended party. The focus of this paper is "subtle" disattending. A contrast with "blatant" disattending, and "provided-for" disattending, helps us to understand "subtle" disattending.

**Blatant Disattending**

In the following fragments of conversation a speaker blatantly disattends the action of another at the line marked with an arrow:

\[ \begin{align*}
61 & \quad \text{can't make me, } > \text{you can't make me} \\
62 & \quad \text{you can't make me} \\
\Rightarrow & \quad 63 \quad \text{M:} \\
64 & \quad \text{eh There's a little or age marmalade in there. } ^{4} \text{Okay. } (.) I: \text{just thought maybe you might like to. He's very intelligent and } \\
65 & \quad \text{he's been in Congress for a long time.}
\end{align*} \]

In the next fragment a different Mother and her Son are engaged in an argument while in the kitchen.

\[ \begin{align*}
(2) & \quad \text{MSA p. 3} \\
\text{Mother:} & \quad \text{Well that's the whole thing, 'n that's the whole thing that I'm talking about.} \\
(1.0) & \quad \text{Mother:} \quad \text{isa fact th't you:} \\
(0.6) & \quad \text{((clank))} \\
\text{Mother:} & \quad \text{seem to feel th't you c'n j'st go blithely o'c'n,} \\
(1.0) & \quad \text{Son:} \quad \text{Where's my towel.} \\
(1.0) & \quad \text{Mother: Your what?} \\
\text{Son:} & \quad \text{My towel.}
\end{align*} \]

In fragment (1) a heated discussion is going on between Mother and Daughter. Mother is trying to persuade Daughter to help her assist a political candidate. In lines 57-62 Daughter makes a declaration of adulthood and independence as a way of refusing her mother's request: "'I am ()' hh twenty-three years old an' I c'n vote () for who I want to now. You can't make me, > you can't make me you can't make me." In her immediately next turn, where some response to this refusal is relevant, Mother initially disattends Daughter's turn,
saying (apparently to someone offline): "eh There's a little or:ange marmalade in the're".

In fragment (2) Mother formulates a complaint against her Son ("...you: seem to feel th't you c'n j'st go b:thely o: n"). In the next turn, after a gap, Son disattends this complaint by asking a question relevant to the non-argument activities (setting the table), but not relevant to the complaint: "'Where's my towel.' Mother's disorientation is evident in her in next turn, where she seeks repetition of what it is he has asked for: "'Your what?'"

In these instances blatant disattending occurs. The next turn is clearly not relevant to the immediately prior turn. For each of them, we can use their placement to speculate that disattending may be a way of postponing engaging in disagreement (Sacks, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984). For instance in fragment (1) Mother's disattending turn may be a way for her to postpone dealing with her daughter's refusal and/or her claims to independence. In fragment (2) we can infer that Son's tangential question is a way of postponing dealing with his Mother's accusations, and engaging in disagreeing actions. The placement of each of these actions during an argument may be significant: Further research may demonstrate that blatant disattending of the action of the arguing interlocutor is a common activity. Additional study of this phenomenon and these instances might also provide us with more plausible explanations (i.e., ones which are more solidly grounded in the details of the interaction) for why disattending of this kind may occur at particular places during arguments.

These instances of disattending are blatant and accountable. That is to say, as Mother's reaction in fragment (2) suggests, an interlocutor may show disorientation after a response which blatantly disattends the prior utterance. These instances suggest that, as Drew (1987) has claimed with respect to po-faced receipts of teases, it is possible to disattend another's action even when it is quite clearly available. While sometimes disattending may be blatant and clearly not provided for, on other occasions a speaker may provide for their available action to be disattended.

"Provided-for" Disattending

"Provided-for" disattending of an apparent or possible action is widely used, and provided for, as a method for managing bipartite or complicit action, and thereby perhaps avoiding disagreement. For instance, speakers manage talk about troubles (Jefferson, 1980a, 1980b, 1988), and offering and turning down invitations (Drew, 1984) in a bipartite manner by making available a report which their interlocutor can legitimately disattend. I discuss the management of troubles talk and invitations in turn in order to show how legitimate disattending may occur.

Troubles talk

The telling of troubles is managed as a somewhat delicate matter (Jefferson, 1980a, 1980b, 1988). In telling someone else our troubles, we impose on them to the extent that they may feel obligated to offer sympathy, or advice, or in some other way to take a position regarding the reported troubles. Jefferson (1980a, p. 163) suggests that this may explain why troubles tellers generally enact a sequence in which troubles are interactively brought to the floor. With the following instance she shows how announcing one's troubles "'cold'" may be met with resistance from interlocutors:

(3) Jefferson, 1980a, p. 163, instance (9)
Marge: Hello.
Jean: Hello Marge?
Marge: Yes.
Jean: How are you feeling?
⇒ Marge: Oh terrible I I feel so badly that I just really can' imagine what's wrong with me.
⇒ Jean: You what?
Marge: I feel so badly I can’t understand (it) what it is that’s wrong with me.

In response to an outright announcement of troubles Jean indicates a problem with what Marge has said, “You what?” Instead of announcing our troubles outright we more usually premonitor them, for instance by offering a downgraded response to “how are you”, such as “Oh:) pretty good I guess:mm;” (Jefferson, 1980a, p. 153, instance (1)). The downgraded response makes available to the interlocutor that there may be a problem, without announcing the problem. This puts the interlocutor in the position of taking the next step, and so provides them with a choice between attending to the possible trouble (e.g., by eliciting further talk about it), or disattending it by treating the response as normal, and simply continuing. Thus disattending is provided for by the troubles teller. In the following example the downgraded response to inquiry is taken up:

(4) Jefferson, 1980a, p. 153, instance (1)
Bob: How are you feeling now.
⇒ Jayne: Oh:) pretty good I guess:mm; Not so hot?
Bob: Hm:mm.

In the next instance, it is disattended:

(5) Jefferson, 1980a, p. 155, instance (3)
Pete: How’re you:
Marvin: I’m great.
Pete: Good.
Marvin: How’re you.
⇒ Pete: Pretty good?
⇒ Marvin: Hey we’re having a meeting Tuesday night,

Thus bringing bad news to the floor is a collaborative effort of news bearer and news receiver. Faced with an indication of possible upcoming bad news the potential recipient of bad news is given the opportunity to disattend the indication by treating “Pretty good?” (in this instance) as a normal, non-trouble-premonitory response to “How are you.” Thus disattending is provided for as part of this bipartite method for the cooperative development of lines of action.

Offering and rejecting invitations

Provided-for disattending is also part of methods for offering and rejecting invitations. A method we have for attempting to invite another is to report a pre-established social event. This gives the invitee the options of (a) formulating an invitation as the “upshot” of the reporting by taking up the invitation or alternatively (b) simply disattending that possible upshot by treating the report as news. Similarly one may turn down an invitation simply by reporting some circumstances, relying on the inviter to draw the conclusion that these circumstances prevent you from accepting the invitation. The inviter’s alternative is to disattend the invitation-refusal implications of the report, for instance by simply treating it as news.

Both of these practices of taking up the “news” instead of the invitation or refusal are ways to avoid making disagreement the overt business of talk (Drew, 1984, p. 146). These methods demonstrate that we may make an action available to others, but provide them with a legitimate “out” via this form of disattending. In this way interlocutors are not constrained to assist in carrying out another’s enterprise. Such potential impositions as troubles-telling, or the coordination of participants via invitations, can be managed in a way which relies on cooperation and complicity. Thus disattending another’s action is provided for as a method for managing difficult activities in a bipartite fashion.

An activity which is dependent on co-participant complicity is complaining. Usually complaints are treated as first pair parts requir-
ing a certain response (cf. Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). If a complaint is
disattended, the negative assessment that the complainer makes in the
complaint remains unratified. The remainder of the paper considers
the phenomenon of "subtle" disattending of complaints. I show how
the action of complaining can be carried out in such a way as to make
available to a co-participant the opportunity to join in with the
complaint. The analysis indicates subtle methods complaint-recipients
have for disattending the complaint, and investigates the extent to
which it is possible to explain the disattending.

Given that we usually cooperate with others, assisting them in
developing their lines of action, the question of why we sometimes
disattend another's apparent action may be puzzling. With respect to
po-faced responses to teases, basing his argument in details of the
interaction to which participants in it are clearly oriented, Drew
suggests that by setting the record straight with a serious response
instead of (or as well as) laughing at the tease speakers may be trying
to avoid the element of social control implicit in a tease, which
sanctions some (usually mildly) inappropriate behavior (Drew, 1987).
Below I explore whether some possible motivations for disattending
complaints which are oriented-to by the participants are inferrable
from the data examined.

Using the methods of conversation analysis I show (1) speakers’
methods for making apparent what it is they are trying to do, (2)
interlocutors’ methods for disattending that action, and (3) possible
motivations that can be mooted to explain why disattending occurs. I
explain the procedures used for this study before describing how
participants may subtly disattend complaints.

Procedures

Conversation analysis is a descriptive method for examining
everyday interaction. It is particularly well-suited for the present study
since a major conversation analytic focus is on "how participants
themselves produce and interpret each other’s actions" (Pomerantz,
1988; Pomerantz & Atkinson, 1984). For the present study detailed
transcriptions of tape-recorded naturally occurring conversations
were used. These were transcribed using the transcription system
recorded interaction was then analyzed in detail using transcriptions
as a guide to the talk. (See Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Hopper, Koch,
& Mandelbaum, 1986; and Hopper, 1989 for further details.) A
collection of conversations in which disattending was exhibited was
assessed. The study then proceeded on a case study basis. Each case
was analyzed in detail. Exhaustive comparisons were made of the
methods for building, disattending, and reasserting the complaints.
The goal was to be able to formulate a method sufficiently particular
to both adequately describe the phenomenon as it is exhibited in the
collection of relevant data fragments, and sufficiently general to
account for subsequent instances that researchers may come upon. The
end product of the study, then, is to offer general methods for (a)
exhibiting that complaining is under way and (b) disattending the
complaining. The present account limits itself to case studies.

As the above discussion indicates, and as the following analysis
shows, reports of past actions or experiences provide a prime locus for
us to proffer the first step in a line of action. They make it possible for
an interlocutor to co-participate in developing that possible line of
action since the interlocutor may formulate the upshot or implications
of the report. The following discussion describes how this same
opportunity for co-participation also makes a subtle kind of disattending
an available option.

Subtle Disattending of Complaints

I explore the phenomenon of disattending another's complaint
through two case studies. In the first instance a speaker complains about
how she is feeling, that she is tired. Her recipient disattends this
complaint, and instead elicits talk about the event which caused the tired-
ness. In the second a speaker complains about another person, her
husband. Her recipient disattends this complaint. In both of these instances in which the complaint is disattended it is made available through a “frame” for a projected upcoming report. The frame encapsulates the “bad news” of the report. The events are then told neutrally. This leaves the recipient of the report to formulate the upshot of what she is being told (Drew, 1984, p. 133 ff.), by showing how she understands the events to instantiate the complaint indicated in the frame. Examination of disattending complaints (a) about how one feels, and (b) about another person indicates that the same method may be used for disattending these related but distinct complaining activities.

The following fragment is excerpted from a telephone conversation between two college students, Ava and Bee. In line 47 Ava announces a piece of news, clearly prefiguring it with a complaint about how she feels. The complaint provides a “frame,” making available to Bee the possibility of monitoring what follows for its complaint-worthy character. Bee elicits more news from Ava in lines 49-50, but shows no orientation to the complaint “frame,” despite the fact that it is asserted at the beginning of Ava’s storytelling, and reasserted at the end of it.

Notice that Ava’s complaint of tiredness in line 47 comes in the context of previous complaints: It is the third complaint after complaints in lines 35 and 38. Despite this context, rather than showing orientation to the tiredness complaint, Bee treats the news of the basketball game as what Ava is reporting. Bee elicits further talk with respect to the basketball game at the points marked by arrows. It is through these turns that she directs talk toward the basketball game, and away from Ava’s complaint. At lines 49-50, 53, and 55 Bee elicits a storytelling about basketball, while the “tiredness” theme is proposed in line 47, and possibly lines 51-51a:

32 Bee: "'n how’s school going.
33 Ava: Oh same old shit.
34 Bee: Shhh! ! hh
35 Ava: I have a lot of tough courses.
36 Bee: Uh really?
37 Bee: Oh I can imagine.=<what you told me whatchu takin.
37a Ava: Oh God I have so much work.
39 Bee: Tch!
(0.4)
40 Bee: Mmm,
(0.5)
43 Ava: "But ask de from that it’s all right.
44 Bee: So what.
(0.4)
46 Bee: What?.
⇒ 47 Ava: I’m so: ti:red. I just played ba:sketball
today since the first time since I was a
freshman in high sch oo l.
48a Bee: sk(h)et= Ba:
49 Bee: =b(h)(h)ll? (h) ("Whe(h)re.
50 ⇒ 51 Ava: Yeah for like an hour
and a ha; If.
51a Bee: hh
52 Bee: Where did you play ba:sk etball.
(Th) e gy m. (hh)
54 Ava: Yeah, Like gr oup therapy.
55 Bee: In the gy m? (hh)
56 Ava: You know half the group that we had=
57 Bee: Oh::: hh
58 59 Ava: :la:s’ term was there en we just playing
around.
59a

In the turns before the storytelling about the basketball game in a subtle way Ava resists Bee’s attempt to develop the topic of “school.” She does this by offering minimal turns when the opportunity to talk further is presented. In these minimal turns, however, she offers
complaints. A brief account of this exchange illustrates some non-cooperation between Ava and Bee, and shows how Ava begins to introduce complaints.

In line 32, "'n how's school going?" Bee could be trying to proffer a topic, offering Ava the opportunity to characterize or report on "school." In ensuing talk she provides multiple opportunities in various ways for Ava to pursue talk about school. Ava offers responses which only minimally take up the topic, and do not develop it. In her first response ("Oh s:ame old shit") Ava indicates "nothing new." By referring to school as "s:ame" and "old" she suggests there is nothing new to tell, while "shit" characterizes it in a negative way. Suggesting that there is nothing new may be a way for Ava not to take up this topic: Nothing new suggests nothing to talk about with respect to it. Thus she resists talking about it further by indicating that there is nothing new to tell.

Bee's response in line 34, "Shh! t! hh!", a soft laugh-like sound, offers a minimal reaction to Ava's turn. Taking a minimal turn may be a way in which Bee provides for Ava to continue with her turn, or say more with respect to the proffered topic. Her orientation to the possibility that Ava could or should continue is shown in her "Uh really?" in line 36. This questioning turn calls for further talk from Ava. A response could involve further talk about the "s:ame old shit" referred to in line 33.

In line 35 Ava tells some news: "I have a lot of tough courses." This may be a way of expanding on "s:ame old shit," explaining what some of the bad stuff is. In that it reports a hardship it could also be heard as a complaint. In line 37 Bee sympathizes in a way which suggests that she has some prior knowledge of what Ava is reporting: "Oh I can imagine. =< what you told me whatchu taking." She suggests the legitimacy of Ava's complaint — that the courses she knows Ava to be taking are to be expected to be tough. Affiliating in this way could also be a method for encouraging Ava to speak further about these courses. In line 38, "Oh God! I have so much work," Ava continues to build her complaint with an exclamation followed by another report. Again she does not offer further details about the classes. In line 39 Bee's minimal turn, "Tch!" could permit Ava to elaborate. Ava does not say anything further. At line 40 there is a gap, and in line 41 Bee takes another minimal turn, "Mm." Again, Ava could continue her turn with respect to "so much work." In line 43, however, she offers an assessment, "'But aside from that it's all right. '" "But aside from that" builds in her previous complaints as exceptions to its being "alright." Thus the force of the complaints is sustained, while the possible closure of the topic is offered through the closure-implicative assessment (cf. Jefferson, 1983).

In the foregoing turns then Bee has proffered the topic of how school is going for Ava, and provided multiple opportunities for Ava to develop talk with respect to it. Ava has responded with complaining turns, and has not taken up opportunities to expand on them. Two concurrent activities are under way at this point. First, some non-cooperation: Ava has not developed Bee's proffered topic. Second, Ava has built a series of complaining turns.

Ava's turn at lines 47-48a should be heard in the context of this series of complaints and Ava's non-cooperation with Bee. In this turn Ava begins to tell Bee how she became tired by engaging in a basketball game. This could be heard as a news announcement and a complaint, for the news of the basketball game is introduced or framed by the complaint. Bee treats the preliminary report of the game as making relevant further talk about the basketball game, rather than taking up the complaint of tiredness. Below I show how Ava makes available for Bee's collaboration the complaining character of her report, both at the beginning and ending of her storytelling. Bee, however, takes up other available "threads" in Ava's initial report of tiredness, and calls for further talk with respect to these. Thus while Ava's report of her tiredness is available to both recipient and analysts of her talk, talk about it does not come to the fore: Bee develops other "angles." Ava's account is treated as a report of a "fun" basketball game, rather than as a complaint about being tired.

In this segment of talk, then, Bee disattends the complaint which frames the news.
Ava: "But asi]] de from that it's all right.

Bee: So what-

(0.4)

Bee: What?!

Ava: I'm so:: ti:red. I just played ba:sketball

today since the first time since I was a

freshman in high school:: ool.

Bee: Ba:: sk(h)et::

=b(h)(b)all? (h) ("Whe(h)re.

Ava: Yeah for like an hour

and a half.

Bee: hh

Bee: Where did you play ba:sketball.

Ava: (The gy) mn.

Bee: In the gym? (hh)

Ava: Yeah. Like grouch(h)ip therapy.

You know half the group that we had=

Bee: Oh::: hh

Ava: =la::x: term was there en we just playing around.

Bee: hh

Bee: Uh-fol:ing around.

Ava: hh

Ava: Eh-yeh so, some of the guys who were better

y'know went off by themselves so it was two

girls against this one guy and he's tall.

Ava: Y'know? hh

Bee: Mm hh?

Ava: En, I had. I was. I couldn't stop laughing it was

the funniest thing but y'know you get all

sweaty up' en everything we didn't thing we

were gonna pla:y. hh en oh I'm knocked out.

Bee: Nhhhhhh! hh

Ava: Ripped about four nails, 'n okhh!

Bee: Fantastic.

Ava: But it was fun- you sound very far away.

The preceding description has shown how the complaint context

is set up. An account of the details of conversation shows how subtle

dissattenuating of the complaint is accomplished here. The storytelling

comes to the floor in the following way. Bee's "What?," in line 46

makes relevant a repeat of the previous turn (cf. Schegloff, Jefferson,

& Sacks, 1977). However since it does not offer any understanding of

the "problem" turn it targets (Bee's hearing of the turn may have been

impaired by the overlap in line 43) Ava is not constrained to repeat

word for word what she said.

In lines 47-48a Ava produces an announcement which could be

heard as another complaint ("I'm so:: ti:red.") with an explanation for

the complaint ("I just played ba:sketball today since the first time

since I was a freshman in high school."). She reports her current

physical state as one which is usually taken to be negative: "Tired".

She intensifies the report with "s:::" Given the preceding three

complaints, "I'm so:: tired" could be heard as another in this series.

"I just played ba:sketball today since the first time since I was a

freshman in high school." could be heard as explaining this. At the

same time, though, it might also be a way for Ava to project a

storytelling. That is, the complaint may provide a "frame" for intro-
ducing this piece of news and indicating its character to her recipient.

The following aspects of Ava's turn make it hearable as offering

"news."

The basketball game is built up, cast as "historic." Ava presents

it as an anniversary — today was "the first time since I was a freshman

in high school." It is not merely historic, however. It has its place in

a particular kind of history: It is dated with reference to "high school,"

and not simply high school, but the "freshman" year. The activity is

thus cast as one of a particular kind: The kind engaged in by high
school freshmen. This makes available to Bee a characterisation of the
kind of event today's basketball game was for Ava (a college student)
— certainly unusual (this is the "first time" since high school), and
one which is suited for high school freshmen. Its quality as "news"
is also offered in the recency of the event: she just played basketball
today. Both "just" and "today" emphasize the event's recency. Thus
a piece of news is introduced by way of a complaint about tiredness.
The historic quality of the game, and its recency, may make this
utterance bearable as proposing exciting "news to tell" about the
basketball game, rather than, or as well as, a report of "how I became
tired." Thus there are two elements present in this utterance which
Bee may treat as "what speaker is getting done": a complaint via a
report of tiredness, and the possible proposed telling about the "his-
toric" basketball game.

It is in this way that Bee is presented with two available "options"as to what she may take to be Ava's enterprise. Given the previous
environment of complaints, further talk (perhaps sympathy or advice)
with respect to "tiredness" could be relevant and appropriate in next
turn. While "how I became tired" may simply be a way for Ava to
introduce talk about the basketball game, it is notable that Ava sustains
the tiredness theme throughout telling about the event, and initially
resists taking an extended turn to talk about the game. In this way the
complaint frame for the storytelling makes available to Bee the possi-
bility of understanding the events as complaint-relevant. However
given the previous inquiries about "school," and the news-bearing
quality of Ava's turn, Bee can choose to follow up on talk about the
basketball game, perhaps with special attention to how the game made
Ava so tired.

The immediate conversational environment of Ava's turn, as well as its features, provide Bee with resources for judging what Ava
may be trying to do in her turn, and what she can allowably take her
to be doing. In the ensuing turns Bee attempts to develop the news
about the game, while Ava resists talking about the game and reasserts
the theme of her tiredness. Thus participants each disattend what
the other may be trying to do. Bee shows herself to be attuned to the news
report itself, rather than its complainable upshot or implications for
the reporter. This is most striking when she elicits the storytelling from
Ava, and when they assess the events at the end of the storytelling. I
discuss each of these occurrences in turn.

First, Bee takes up the "basketball" theme through her repetition
of "Ba:sk(h)et(h)a(h)ll?" in lines 49-50. In simply repeating "bas-
sketball," she makes relevant further talk about "basketball," or at
least calls for confirmation of her hearing. The laughter tokens in her
repeat may suggest that she finds Ava's report amusing. However she
does not call for anything specific with respect to "basketball." In
response, then, Ava can confirm Bee's hearing, and may (although
she is not constrained to) offer further talk with respect to basketball.
(Not that Bee's "("(Where?)") in line 50 would call for more specific
talk about "basketball," but is overlapped by the beginning of Ava's
turn and is not taken up here.)

In the next turn Ava confirms Bee's hearing ("Yeah"). Her
continuing turn has relevance to the basketball game, but takes it up
in such a way as to reassert the "tiredness" theme. What she reports
here about the basketball game is its duration, making it sound like
a long time: "for like an hour and a ha:If." By choosing to report the
duration of the game here, the "tiredness" theme is sustained,
again making available to recipient the complaint quality of the
report. Presumably the longer the game, the more tired a participant
is likely to be. Nevertheless, the theme of "basketball" is still present
and relevant, and it is this that Bee takes up in next turn. In line 53
Bee asks Ava a question which makes relevant further talk about
the game: "Where did you play basketball." By asking for a specific
detail of the game with the "wh" question "where," Bee constrains
Ava to talk about the game, and does not develop the "tiredness"
complaint.

By responding in a minimal way in line 54, "(The) gy:m," Ava
may indicate some resistance to pursuing further talk about the game.
For here, as in line 51a, she is afforded the opportunity to produce an
extended turn with respect to the game — to tell about it more fully.
However she does not treat this as such an opportunity. Bee's repeat
of Ava's response ("In the gy:m?" in line 55) like line 50 makes
relevant confirmation, and may also be taken as calling for further talk
with respect to the game. In line 56 Ava begins a more extended turn, giving further details of the game.

Through this series of questioning turns, focusing on the basketball game, which make relevant certain responses from Ava, Bee forwards talk with respect to "basketball," and disattends the available "tiredness" complaint.

Not only is a storytelling brought to the floor by the recipient’s questioning turns, in the exchanges in lines 47-59 Ava and Bee "work up" what Ava can be understood to be talking about. Are they concerned with Ava’s tiredness, or the basketball game? Each of these elements is available in Ava’s initial turn in lines 47-48a. The theme of "complaint" has been developed in preceding talk, as has Bee’s attempt to elicit news from Ava. Despite an initial possible orientation to "tiredness" as the theme of the report in lines 47-48a, a series of three recipient turns honing in on the theme of basketball is followed by the beginning of a telling about "the game." Through Bee’s eliciting turns, and Ava’s responses, then, interactants "work up" what talk is to be about; a possible complaint of tiredness is, with some resistance, replaced by the theme of "basketball." This is achieved through Bee’s attention to the news "picture" rather than the complaint "frame" of Ava’s initial announcement. Bee disattends Ava’s complaints, and elicits talk about the basketball game. The disjunction in their enterprises is made strikingly apparent at the close of the storytelling.

The end of a storytelling is usually an important place with respect to working out what the storytelling comes to have been about (Sacks, 1974; Schegloff, 1981, 1984; Jefferson, 1983), conventionally where the teller provides an indication of this for recipient. While initially Ava presents her own reaction as laughter, she proposes the end of the storytelling by returning to the theme with which it began — her tiredness. By reasserting the "tiredness" complaint noted at the beginning of the telling she proposes the relevance of a negative or sympathetic assessment of the events of the storytelling in line 68a.

Bee’s resistance to what Ava may be trying to do is manifested in two ways. She does not take up the possible completion of the telling; nor does she react to the possible complaint. When Ava reinforces the complaint in line 70, Bec’s response takes up closure, but offers a strongly positive assessment. In response to Bec’s positive assessment, Ava then changes her own assessment of the event to a (slightly downgraded) positive one, and then immediately and radically shifts topic. Again, interational asynchrony is demonstrated by disattending both the closure proposal and the complaining elements of Ava’s turn:

(8) 66 Ava: En, I had- I was- I couldn’t stop laughing it was
67 the funniest thing but y’know you get all
68 sweaty up' en everything we didn’ thing we
68a were gonna play. hh en oh I’m knocked out.
69 Bec: Nhhhhhh! hhhhh
70 Ava: Ripped about four nails, ’n okhh!
71 Bec: Fantastic.
72 Ava: But it was fun- You sound very far away.

First, at the very end of the storytelling, the "tiredness" complaint is strongly reasserted. This is achieved in lines 67-68a through the three-part list offered in contrast to "it was the funniest thing": "But y’know you get all sweaty up’ en everything we didn’ thing we were gonna play. hh en oh I’m knocked out." "But" proposes that what comes next be heard as a contrast to "it was the funniest thing." Thus getting sweaty, the unexpectedness of the event, and Ava’s being "knocked out" appear to be presented as the complainable elements which are a specific consequence of the game. This could make relevant sympathy of some kind.

Telling the consequence of the game, and coming full circle to the "tiredness" theme with which the telling began could be hearable as a way in which Ava is proposing the end of the storytelling. Bec’s "Nhhhhh!!" in line 69 is a response which provides little indication of how the telling has been taken, or indeed whether the prior utterance is taken to be the possible ending of the telling. At this point then Bec shows no uptake of the possible ending of the storytelling, nor of the complaint. Ava then continues. She adds another "negative" element,
and an exclamation: "Ripped about four nail:ls, 'n okhh!" In so doing she reproposes the possible end of the storytelling, again making available to her recipient a place to show the understanding that the storytelling may be over and that the event can be heard to have a complainable character.

Despite the "negative" connotations of being sweaty, "knocked out," and ripping "about four nail:ls," Bee's assessment of the event is a strongly positive one: "Fantastic." This assessment does not affiliate with or show any orientation to the characterization of the event available at this point. That Ava's orientation to Bee's assessment is in contradiction to her own is indicated by her assessment of the event in her next turn: "But it wz fun..." The "But" with which the turn begins suggests that this is a modification of Ava's assessment of the event; in spite of what she has just reported, it was fun. Thus the interactional asynchrony which has been displayed throughout the storytelling — Ava's offering it as an event which made her tired, and ripped her nails, a complainable event, or Bee's orientation to it as an enjoyable event, one which is to be characterized as fantastic, or at least fun, is resolved at the end through Ava's partial accommodation to what Bee has shown herself to be making of it before immediately and sharply shifting topic.

This instance illustrates a method for making a complaint available, and shows how the complaint may be disattended. Here this is achieved by framing a report with a complaint that could then be heard to be relevant to the subsequent reported details. The recipient can disattend the complaint frame by picking up on other available elements and developing them. In response to a recipient's disattending, the complainer can reassert the complaint.

In the following instance an apparent complaint about another is disattended. A method similar to that described above is used: A complaint frame for a storytelling is followed by a neutral account, leaving the recipient to infer how the account instantes the complaint, and to show their inference in their response to the storytelling. Again, the complaint-recipient initially avoids taking up the complaint against another by offering a response which takes up the thrust of the storytelling without engaging the complaint.

Disattending a Complaint About Another

In the next fragment of conversation an apparent complaint is also disattended. Here another person, the teller's husband Larry, is the object of the complaint. Again a "negative" frame proposes the neutral events to be instances of a complainable circumstance. In this frame the teller, Marilyn, indicates how the subsequently reported events can be understood as the result of her husband's incompetence. She then leaves it to the recipient, Ronya, to infer from the reported events how they fit the frame she has provided i.e., how they are to be heard as complainable. Ronya disattends the complaint. She ultimately redirects conversation by offering an account of her afternoon in such a way as to suggest that hers is a reciprocal account, and that, by implication, Marilyn has been telling her about her afternoon, rather than complaining about her husband.3

Marilyn projects in fragment (9) that there is something to tell by her unusual response to "How are you": She says, "I fee: a bi:ssel verschickert." (a little drunk/tipsy/off-balance) (line 107). Ronya forwards her telling by asking, "Why's 'at?" Marilyn then begins to explain to her sister-in-law how she came to be feeling "a bi:ssel verschickert." After explaining the background of the events (lines 118-133), she formulates a general negative characteristic of her husband Larry in lines 135-138 before continuing with the account. This negative characterization of Larry provides a frame for Ronya in understanding the neutrally reported events, putting her in the position of inferring how the events fit the frame.

(9) 103 Marilyn: =Hi-=Ronya
104 Ronya: Hi: Marilyn. How are Y
105 Marilyn:
106 Ronya: Oh: uh huh: =
108 (0.2)
109 Ronya: Why's 'at?,
Ronya: a you've had sumpen' t' drink?=
Marilyn: =I had su mmin' t' drink. =
(Larry):
Ronya: = Uh huh.
Marilyn: (Joe). Hang gup please.
(clink clink clink clink — hanging-up sound))
Ronya: Uh huh ...
Marilyn: We at {1- We went t' the city.
Ronya: 
Marilyn: Took the boat ride.
Ronya: You went in a ...
Marilyn: this bad weather?
Ronya: 
Marilyn: It n't raining while we were on the boat.
Ronya: You know ' was cold as he'll there.
Marilyn: iyuh.
Ronya: 
Marilyn: An' then: we got off the boat 'n' starts to
Ronya: drizzle 'n' I said to Le:es'ley'. (0.2) Let's get
Marilyn: back 'n' the car before it starts t' pour.'n'
Ronya: go for home.
Marilyn: 'n'he:
Ronya: 
Marilyn: R'ally doesn't know where 'e is. 'E always gets
Marilyn: mixed up.
Ronya: 
Marilyn: 'E starts t' leave.=Fishman's Wharf area.=n' 'e's
Ronya: heading t'wands the Golden Gate Bridge. He's ready on
Marilyn: the bridge (tu m)
Ronya: Hmm
Marilyn: (Cut a goes) on Nineteenth Avenue, h hhh
Ronya: going the wrong direction tyeah.:h.
Marilyn: an' 'e goes ou t= Nineteenth Avenue?an' 'e drives a' ll the way t' the P's- (tape noise)
Ronya: t' the ocean.
Marilyn: (0.5)
Marilyn: t' Forty Eighth Avenue.
Marilyn: [hhh
Marilyn: (0.4)
Ronya: We'll?: listen, as long as
Marilyn: All right. Then it starts t'
Ronya: really rain. hh (h time) was 'is.
Marilyn: (0.6)
Ronya: Wh a t time was 'is.
Marilyn: Oh: I guess i' wz a'ready: three:
Ronya: thre- four. Cuz at wz
Ronya: Co-d'you know we went to the
Marilyn: movies. =We went to uh m. the to the m- uh. What's
Marilyn: the name of ( ) (to someone off-line)
Ronya: (0.8)
Marilyn: (Sh'beau)?
Ronya: (oo cooy) (Mowbray) ((off line)) Mowbray which
Ronya: is over past (Delingay).
Marilyn: Yeah th at's n' far away.
Ronya: (and -)
Ronya: That's far away. And there were two good movies playing. One was uh... the... Trip to Bountiful.

Marilyn: "The... The..." wh u:(t) Trip to Bountiful.

Ronya: The Trip to Bountiful.

Marilyn: Bountiful.

Ronya: It was Geraldine Page 'n she's nominated for an Oscar (wince) She did a wonderful job. Just an excellent performance.

Marilyn: N, yes.

In lines 130-133 Marilyn shifts from setting the background to recounting the main events of the story. She introduces Larry as the main protagonist of the event in the following way. In line 131 she formulates herself as making a suggestion after a new weather condition occurs: "starts to drizzle." "I said to Lesley. Let's get back 'n the car before it starts to pour. = 'n go for home." She has reported a first pair part (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) of hers, a suggestion, and so we can project that at least she will tell us the response to that suggestion. In reporting that she made this suggestion to Larry, we can project that the next turn in the story will involve him.

In her next unit of talk however, rather than reporting something Larry said or did, she offers a characterization of Larry: "n he: () r'eally doesn' know where 'e is. He always gets mixed up." The first unit of this turn, "n he: () r'eally doesn' know where 'e is" may be heard as relevant to this particular situation — as a description of his current state. This is achieved by the use of the present tense, and the conjunction "'n", connecting this to the previously reported event. However the second unit, "He always gets mixed up" claims that this state is general, not just particular to this situation. It is a recurrent aspect of Larry's behavior. In light of the second unit of talk in this turn, Ronya may recast the first unit as a general characterization of Larry, as well as applying it to the current circumstance. The characterization that Marilyn offers of Larry is a negative one. It formulates an incompetence of Larry's; first that he does not know where he is, and second that he recurrently gets confused. These are characteristics we do not generally expect of competent adults.

Offering this formulation of a negative, recurrent characteristic of Larry at the point where a second pair part from Larry could be heard to be the appropriate next-reported action provides a frame for hearing any subsequent action of Larry's that Marilyn reports. That is, after this general assessment of Larry a recipient can examine any next reported action to see the way in which it is a specific instance of the general phenomenon of Larry getting mixed up. This general characterization of Larry here provides a "frame" with which Ronya can understand the subsequent events that Marilyn reports.

An adjunct feature of this assessment of Larry, even though it is offered in reference to the ongoing storytelling, is that it could be heard by Ronya as making relevant a second assessment (Pomerantz, 1984). Pomerantz explains that in responding to an assessment we usually offer a second assessment. This second assessment will be heard to stand in some relation to the first. It may agree or disagree with the first assessment. An agreeing second assessment can be an upgrade on the first:

(10) Pomerantz, 1984, Fragment (18), p. 65
A: Isn't he cute
B: Oh he's cute

Offering the same evaluation may also be a way of providing an agreeing second assessment:

(11) Pomerantz, 1984, Fragment (19), p. 67
C: ... She was a nice lady — I liked her
G: I liked her too.

Third, a recipient of an assessment may produce a downgraded second assessment:
In line 149 there is a further gap, again suggesting that Marilyn may be awaiting a response from Ronya. Like the earlier gap Marilyn could take this to indicate that Ronya’s next turn may be a disagreeing one. This is further indicated by the beginning of Ronya’s turn in line 150: “We:II:?” Disagreeing or dispreferred responses are recurrently postponed, often by gaps and such items as “Well” (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987). In “We:II:?, listen, as long as” Ronya begins a turn which suggests that her response to what Marilyn has told so far will in some way counterbalance what Marilyn has reported. Marilyn might project that Ronya will continue her turn by proposing some kind of available “happy” ending, such as “as long as you got home safe and sound.” She might be able to hear that Ronya is about to offer something which neutralizes the unhappy character of the event Marilyn has recounted thus far. It is clear that the initial frame in lines 137-138, setting up Larry’s incompetence, and then the neutral report of the facts of the occasion, make available to Ronya the option of formulating the negative upshot of the neutrally reported facts: That this report details specifics of an event in which Larry was incompetent. Further, given the initial report that Marilyn feels “a bissel verschicket,” Ronya could draw the conclusion that Larry had literally driven Marilyn to drink. In contrast she begins a response which quite clearly resists drawing negative implications from what she has been told.

Ronya’s turn in line 150 is incomplete, and so my account is somewhat speculative, but it seems that Marilyn gets the sense that Ronya’s turn contradicts the thrust of what she has reported so far. In line 151 Marilyn shows some orientation to Ronya’s apparent attempt to respond without taking up the blaming implications of Marilyn’s account. This orientation is suggested by her “All right” and apparent continuation of the account with a report of the worsening of the rain. This turn begins in overlap with Ronya’s turn, at a point where Marilyn can project that what Ronya is saying does not affiliate with the line she initiated with the frame in lines 137-138 (cf. Goffman, 1967, p. 5, re: “line” as “a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which [an actor] expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants”). The placement of Marilyn’s overlap sug-
gests that Marilyn is reacting to Ronya’s apparent lack of affiliation with her line.

The next occurrence that Marilyn then reports is a worsening of the weather conditions: “Then it starts t’ really rain. hhh.” Ronya might be able to project on the basis of this that Marilyn will continue with the consequence for the protagonists of the weather getting worse. She can project that what will follow may be similar in character to the foregoing account of Larry’s driving. At the hearable possible completion of the next unit of talk Ronya asks Marilyn a question which initiates a shift to her own telling, which she builds as a reciprocal one:

150 Ronya: We:Hi?:, listen, as long
151 Marilyn: All right. Then it starts t’
152 really rain. hh (__________)
153 Ronya: Whaat time was ‘is.
154 (0.6)
155 Marilyn: Oh: I guess i’ wz a’ready; three:
156 thre- four: Cuz ut wz
157 Ronya: (Co-d’y) know we went to the
158 movies. =Wewent to: uh:m. the to the m- uh- What’s
159 “the name of ( )” ((to someone off-line))
160 (0.8)
161 Marilyn: (Sh’beau)?
162 Ronya: (∞ ) (Mowbray) ((off line)) Mowbray which
163 is over past (Delingay).
164 (0.2)
165 Marilyn: Yeah th at’s ‘n far away.
166 Ronya: (and-) 
167 Ronya: That’s far away. and- There were two good
168 movies playing. =One was: u:hm. the- Trip to Bountiful.

In line 153 Ronya asks Marilyn a question which is apparently pertinent to Marilyn’s ongoing account: “‘What time was ‘is.’” In using the indexical “‘‘is’” (this), Ronya shows that she is referring to what Marilyn has just mentioned — the worsening of the rain. While it is not immediately apparent why Ronya might want to know what time this happened, Marilyn might understand Ronya to be showing some interest or engagement in the account by asking for further details. The question leaves Marilyn in the position of attempting to understand why Ronya would be interested in the exact time of the worsening weather conditions. There follows a gap of 0.6 seconds, and Marilyn’s turn is prefixed with an “Oh:.” With the gap and indication of surprise Marilyn may be attempting to show that this question of Ronya’s is unexpected or out of place. That is, by delaying her turn and indicating surprise, she may be “‘doing’” being surprised at Ronya’s question.

In line 155 Marilyn offers an approximation of the time. She shows that this is an approximation by saying “‘I guess,’” and also by offering two possibilities: “‘Three: the- four:’” She begins a second unit of talk after this. “Cuz ut wz” suggests that she may be going on to offer the resource she is drawing on in making this approximation. However in line 157, at a point where Ronya can hear that Marilyn is about the continue her turn at talk Ronya takes a turn in which she begins to tell what she did. She continues with a multi-unit turn in which she does what is effectively a reciprocal telling — telling what
she did during the time period of the events Marilyn has reported. In
offering a report of her pleasant afternoon as a "reciprocal" account,
Ronya tacitly or implicitly proposes that she takes Marilyn's account
to be of the same order.

The question about the time of the next occurrence in Marilyn's
story is thus used by Ronya as a pivot into an account of her own
activities. It occurs after Marilyn has reported one thing that Larry did
wrong — driving all the way to the ocean, forty-eighth avenue — and
at the point where Marilyn has indicated that she will continue her
telling. It is here that Ronya produces a question whose answer allows
her to offer some reciprocal information. In this way, despite strong
indications to the contrary, she treats Marilyn's storytelling as com-
plete.

This account shows quite clearly that both at the first opportunity
to collaborate with the negative assessment of Larry by offering a
second assessment at line 139, and at the possible end of the section
of the account at lines 147 and 149, Ronya disattends Marilyn's
apparent action of complaining about Larry, blaming him for the
events, and formulating him as incompetent.

Ronya manages this first by offering a characterization of the
facts ("going the wrong direction" in line 143) which avoids making
any characterization of Larry's capabilities. This suggests that Ronya
is appreciating the facts of the storytelling in accordance with the
frame that Marilyn provided with "He doesn't know where he is, he
always gets mixed up" while not overtly cooperating in criticizing
him. The possible end of the section of the storytelling, as was noted
above, is produced by way of bringing events to a point of possible
completion — the ocean.

Ronya's incipient response might attempt to avoid Marilyn's
complaint by suggesting how what Larry did is in fact not so bad.
When this does not come to completion in line 150, Marilyn begins to
continue. Ronya's questioning turn occurs at the point where it be-
comes apparent that Marilyn is about to tell the next event. That is,
Ronya can infer that she may be about to be put back in the position
of having to make a response which implies as assessment of Larry.

THE QUESTION OF MOTIVATION
FOR DISATTENDING

These instances of subtle yet clear disattending, where a partici-

pant takes up some other available aspect of the complaining turn,
rather than orienting to the available complaint, raise the question of
what we can say about the possible interpersonal motivations for and
consequences of disattending. Answers to "why" questions are not
normally within the canon of conversation analysis (which usually
focuses on "how" questions). However the present instances offer an
opportunity to explore in a grounded fashion some of the relational
concerns that might influence social action here (cf. Mandelbaum &
Pomerantz, 1991, for a discussion of conversation analysis's ability to
deal with questions of interactants' "goals").

In the first instance, further details of how the fragment discussed
above fits into its larger conversational surroundings enable us to
propose that Bee's disattending of Ava's complaint could be explained
as a next step in a series of asynchronous actions that begins earlier in
the conversation. Specifically, immediately prior to Bee's disattend-
ing Ava's apparent complaint, Ava has disattended a possible indica-
tion of "trouble to tell" by Bee.

Bee's "'n how's school going" comes immediately after Ava
has disattended a trouble-premonitory response to inquiry (Jefferson,
1980a) by Bee. As was noted above, conventionally in response to the
inquiry, "How are you" to say "pretty good" can project that its
speaker has a trouble that he will proceed to report," while "Fine"
appears to project that a speaker will not proceed to deliver a report"
(Jefferson, 1980a, p. 156; also see Schegloff, 1986). While "Pretty
good" is only subtly different from "Fine," as I discussed above
Jefferson shows that speakers can orient to it as possible projecting a
troubles telling. In the fragment of conversation which immediately
precedes Ava's storytelling about the basketball game, Bee's response
to "How've you bee:n" could be understood to have negative import,
and possibly to project further talk about the trouble. However in line
28 Ava disattends this.
In "‘hh Oh:: surviving I guess, hhh!’” (line 27) Bee delays her response with an inbreath and "‘Oh::’", offering a sense of doubtfulness, and characterizes herself as "‘surviving,’" although even this characterization is cast as somewhat doubtful by "‘I guess.’" This response quite strongly suggests that things are less than "‘fine.’" "‘Surviving’ carries a sense of "‘making it through adversity’” — that there has been something that she has had to work to survive, or is now working to survive. In this way it could be heard to project the possibility of troubles to tell, perhaps in the form of a report of what it is she has "‘survived,’” or is surviving. However in the next turn Ava shows no explicit orientation to this potential negative response.

By responding with "‘That’s good’" she suggests that she hears "‘hh Oh:: surviving I guess, hhh!’” to be a turn which does not suggest troubles. "‘That’s good’” is an assessment which is closure implicative (Jefferson, 1980a). That is, by assessing Bee’s statement, Ava suggests that she takes it that there is no more to tell. Further, the assessment is a positive one. If Ava were unsure whether or not trouble was being projected here, one possible way of avoiding making a judgement would be to respond in a neutral way, such as "‘Mm hm’", which in addition to being neutral might show an orientation to the possibility that Bee may have more to say. A positive assessment, then, specifically disattends Bee’s possible indication of trouble. It could perhaps suggest that Ava hears Bee to be reporting a success: Bee is succeeding in surviving.

"‘hh Oh:: surviving I guess, hhh!’” may be amenable to this dual hearing. It could perhaps be heard to suggest that the news is that Bee is overcoming adversity. A response to the turn can focus on the overcoming or on the adversity; it can be heard as reporting, "‘Things are as they should be — I am surviving.’” or as reporting "‘There has been some adversity.’” If Ava were to show uptake of the latter available hearing, by saying, for instance, "‘What’s up?’” she would be showing orientation to the possible negative implications of Bee’s turn, and would possibly then hear from Bee what her troubles are. In responding with, "‘That’s good,’” Ava ignores the frame of a projection of possible troubles talk, and takes the utterance literally, seeming to treat "‘surviving’” as a report of normality, rather than an indication of troubles. However she goes on to inquire about another person in Bee’s life, Bob (Bee’s boyfriend). Jefferson (1980a, p. 166) understands this "‘secondary inquiry’” to show an orientation to the downgraded quality of Bee’s response, by asking about a person who might be the source or cause of the downgraded conventional response. Upon receiving a normal response to the secondary inquiry, Ava produces the same positive assessment, "‘That::’’s good,” suggesting that she takes each of Bee’s responses to be similarly positive.

We can suggest, then, that here Ava effectively disattends Bee’s possible implication of trouble, thus denying Bee an opportunity to talk about the trouble. Responding to a turn which possibly premonitors trouble as though it were a response which suggests that everything is okay may be a way of avoiding hearing the troubles of another. The trouble-premonitory frame is disattended, and a "‘literal’ interpretation of "‘surviving’” is apparently made that everything is "‘fine.’”

Jefferson et al. (1987) describe how using an impropriety, and sharing laughter with respect to it, can be a way for interactants to construct and display intimacy. Perhaps being able to anticipate the possible troubles of an interlocutor may also be a way of displaying/creating intimacy in the sense that it demonstrates access to the life and perhaps "‘thoughts’” of another.

Something that friends can do for one another, then, is to be alert to the nuances of each other’s lives. Indeed, a way of "‘doing’” being a friend is to be able to divine another’s trouble easily. This is illustrated in the following extract, where Nancy is able to tell from the beginning of Hyla’s response to "‘What’s doin,’” that there may be some trouble to tell.
Responding with a short delay and the postponing element, "Ah:" is apparently sufficient indication for Nancy to infer a downgraded response to inquiry. Not only does she detect possible trouble; she is also able to locate the possible trouble source. A downgraded response to an inquiry seems to be a routine method for projecting possible trouble. We may be able to expect our friends to be particularly adept at diagnosing that there is (or may be) trouble, even if they are not able to diagnose its exact nature.

Bee’s responding to Ava’s " ‘How’ve you bee:n’ " with " ss ‘Oh:: survi:ving I guess, hhh!’ " could be a way of attempting to put this friendly mechanism into operation. As Jefferson (1980a, p. 166) notes, Ava shows some orientation to this by checking on a possible source of trouble, Bee’s boyfriend. However her response of ‘ ‘That’s good’ " to ‘ ‘ ss ‘Oh:: survi:ving I guess, hhh!’ " (as opposed to ‘ ‘Not so hot?’ " for instance) appears to be a way in which she specifically disattends a possible indication of troubles.

As we observed above, in immediately subsequent talk Ava continues to resist Bee’s actions: She resists talking about a topic Bee proffers for them to talk about. Ava builds a line of complaints, and does not take up opportunities to further explicate them. They culminate in the complaint which frames the news of the basketball game. While Bee does not talk further about her own troubles at this point, she sustains the asynchrony produced by Ava’s disattending her trouble-premonitory response to inquiry by a response in turn to Ava’s complaints that disattends Ava’s complaint frame, paying attention to and developing the “news” frame instead. She treats the news as good news, disattending the complainable character which Ava gives it. In this way, Ava and Bee in this segment at the beginning of their conversation work together in such a way as to sustain a lack of synchrony. Placing the instance of disattending in its conversational context enables us tentatively to suggest relational overtones to the disattending that occurs here.

CONCLUSIONS

In each of the instances discussed above a speaker subtly disattends a complaint her interlocutor has proposed. In each case the complaint is proposed in a “frame” for a subsequent “neutral” telling. This makes subtle disattending available as an option. Disattending is achieved by taking up elements other than the complaint available in the storytelling.

Each of the instances examined is amenable to possible explanations as to why disattending occurred. In each case, the disattender appears to be attempting to avoid doing the action that would be accomplished by attending the action of the other — sympathizing with Ava, or criticizing Larry. Possible explanations for the disattend-
ing were offered by examining details of the sequential context of the occurrence of disattending. In the case of Ava and Bee disattending of the complaint of tiredness occurred in an environment of interactional asynchrony. In the case of Marilyn and Ronya, Ronya’s resistance to Marilyn’s complaint about Larry could be explained by the complaint-recipient’s dilemma with respect to the relational concerns implicated in responding to a negative assessment of a third party. Possible motivations for these occurrences of disattending appear to have a relational character, then.

A role that friends may play in each other’s lives is to be attentive to one another’s troubles. You may, for instance, “fish” for sympathy by hinting at troubles and allowing the other to draw out of you an account of the troubles. A way of showing attentiveness to others, then, may be to show sensitivity to such “fishing expeditions.” A method for being insensitive or perhaps of not engaging in the work of friendship is to disattend another’s attempt to complain (and perhaps thereby fish for sympathy). As discussed earlier, interactants general sensitivity to what one another may be trying to achieve through their talk is well documented, and is frequently relied upon by interlocutors attempting to do activities sub rosa. In the instances discussed here we see possible complaint-recipients disattending the available complaint. Not taking up another’s possible projection of troubles is a way in which interactants can display interactional asynchrony. Perhaps recurrent and reciprocated subtle disattending may prove to be a documentable way for creating and displaying relational asynchrony. For in disattending the possible complaint of another, one displays their lack of engagement at least at that interactional moment in the other’s life.

The case studies presented here suggest that speakers’ indications of what they may be trying to do through their talk can become a resource in the work of friendship. By disattending what another can be seen to be possibly trying to do, we can conversationally achieve disaffiliation. Further study of similar occurrences in other conversations may enable us to specify the conversational procedures involved in being “unfriendly,” and ultimately in conversationally creating the end of a relationship.

The account demonstrates that while what a turn amounts to may be interactively arrived at, a speaker generally makes a proposal with respect to what he or she should or could be taken to be doing in that turn. The interlocutor then has the option to take up or not take up that proposal. In this way we can see disattending the action of another (by developing some other available aspect of their talk) as an alternative to attending to the action of another (by co-participating with them in developing it). When disattending occurs, parties may be seen to be “not cooperating” in a literal sense, since they are operating in a somewhat unilateral fashion. In the course of working this out, the original speaker of the disattended matter has the option of pursuing it, or of dropping it, perhaps in favor of pursuing something else, or pursuing it later.

Accounts of why disattending occurs remain speculative. While they are rendered somewhat more convincing by grounding them in an account of identifiable properties of talk, they are most convincing where co-participants’ orientations to these as the “reason” for disattending can be shown. Often this is not available.

My findings illustrate a way in which parties interactively work through what it is they are trying to do. The study shows methods speakers use to indicate what they may be trying to do, but how even obvious actions seem to rely on bipartite cooperation to come to fruition. It also begins to explore what can be said about why participants may choose not to co-participate in another’s apparent action — why one may choose not to assist another in bringing an apparent goal to fruition (cf. Mandelbaum & Pomerantz, 1991). For given the norm that we usually cooperate with one another, resisting the complaining action of another may seem like a particularly puzzling anomaly.
Notes

1 I am grateful to Gina Campochiaro, Ann Snowman, Jacki Englehart and Cee Rios for bringing this fragment to my attention. The fragment is from the University of Texas Conversation Library, and was transcribed by Robert Hopper.

2 These data were examined in sessions at UCLA in 1986-87, and at Temple University in 1987-88. I acknowledge the contributions to this analysis of comments in those data sessions, particularly those from Emanuel Schegloff and Anita Pomerantz respectively.

References


