

## *Account episodes in family discourse: the making of morality in everyday interaction*



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**ABSTRACT** This article investigates account episodes in Italian family dinner conversations and illustrates how sequential patterns and participation are organized in terms of preferences indexical of moral ideology and moral order. Accounts have been mostly examined as speech acts abstracted from embedding sequential environment; this article shows that different design features of the priming move in account episodes retrospectively define different aspects of a situation as problematic and prospectively activates the relevance for distinctive remedial moves. On an ideological level, narrative elicitation as priming moves and accounts as remedial moves index a moral perspective that promotes moral reasoning and thus the negotiation of norms. In addition, such moves realize a practice of morality that tends to be inquisitory vs condemnatory, offering the benefit of the doubt prior to guilt allocation. In conclusion, the discursive mechanics of accountability constitutes a medium for reproduction of, and innovation in, the moral order.

**KEY WORDS:** *accountability, agency, family discourse, moral positioning, practices of morality, responsibility*

### *Introduction*

This article investigates spontaneously occurring account episodes in Italian family dinner conversations with the aim of shedding light on how morality is enacted and transformed in everyday interpersonal interaction.

Traditionally, namely in centuries of philosophical speculation, morality has been conceived of as a set of general and decontextualized principles, which orient both individuals' own conduct and the interpretation of others' conduct. These principles may be rooted in the deep interior of human beings and guide individuals from within; see Kant, for example, with his categorical imperative (1952). Alternatively, they can be seen as transcendental and transhistorical, as in Hegel (1977). Philosophical approaches, however, do not clarify when and how normative references become relevant and pertinent in everyday contingencies.

Within social sciences, morality has been conceived in different ways. Until recently, sociologists and anthropologists have conceptualized and analyzed morality in terms of customs and rituals, tracing back to the Latin origin of the term morals, *mores*, meaning traditions (e.g. Durkheim, 1954[1912]). In spite of locating morality in social practices, traditional sociological and anthropological approaches have maintained an abstract view, which depicts morals as preformatted patterns and ascribes to them a quasi-theoretical status (Bergmann, 1998).

Morality (and moral development in particular) has also attracted the attention of psychologists, who have conceived it as a cognitive, individual process, and have investigated it through quasi-experiments and moral dilemma interviews (e.g. Kohlberg, 1981). Recent studies in discursive psychology, linguistic anthropology and microsociology have questioned the epistemological basis of these laboratory methodologies, arguing that they lack ecological validity (as they evaluate decontextualized and hypothetical situations) and they fail to elucidate the deeply intertwined relation between morality and social interaction. In line with these recent studies (e.g. Baquedano-López, 1997; Bergmann, 1998; Capps and Ochs, 1995; De León, 2000; Duranti, 1993, 1994; Goodwin, 1998), this article approaches morality as a situated activity and explores the discursive practice of accountability as an avenue for understanding the making of morality in everyday interpersonal interaction. In particular, this article examines how constitutive moves and sequential patterns in account episodes are constructed and organized in terms of preferences indexical of moral ideology and social order.

The analysis focuses specifically on the practice of requesting for an account, which projects accounts as preferred remedial moves. The ideological meaning and moral implications of such practice are explored.

### *Theoretical background*

The establishment of *accountability* as an area of study can be traced back to Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman's (1968) article, *Accounts* in the *American Sociological Review*. In their pioneering work, the two North American sociologists define an account as 'a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry . . . a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior' (p. 46). Drawing on Austin (1961), Scott and Lyman (1968) distinguish two main types of accounts: *excuses* and *justifications*: the former are 'accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong or inappropriate but denies full responsibility'; the latter are 'accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the fact in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it' (p. 47). The distinction between *excuses* and *justifications* is of primary import as it captures the two general processes that are employed for transforming discrediting evaluations of action, namely the negotiation of responsibility and the recategorization of the problematic event/conduct (as *intelligible* and *warrantable*, Harré, 1977).

Since Scott and Lyman's (1968) paradigmatic presentation of the phenomenon, research on accounts has been flourishing.<sup>1</sup> Several, more articulated and multilayered, typologies have been put forward (e.g. McLaughlin et al., 1990; Schönbach, 1980, 1990; Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981) and various dimensions of accounts have been examined and proposed as privileged interpretive keys. For instance, Semin and Manstead (1983) have underlined the crucial function of accounts as devices for protecting self-image. Similarly, within the impression management perspective, Schlenker (1980) and Tedeschi and Reiss (1981) have emphasized the strategic and rhetorical use of accounts for achieving the audience's consensus and alignment.

Despite such emphasis on the situated and strategic nature of accounts, much of the existing literature has examined them outside their naturally occurring contexts and as speech acts abstracted from the sequential environment in which they are embedded; the research that has stemmed directly from Scott and Lyman's original work generally draws on researchers' intuitions and memory of personal experiences or consists of archive inquiries of written texts (mainly legal documents and trial reports). On the other hand, studies conducted within the positivistic paradigm of social psychology overwhelmingly rely on surveys or laboratory experiments in which the subjects are requested to evaluate hypothetical problematic situations or morally dilemmatic vignettes. These research methodologies leave many fundamental aspects of the phenomenon of accounts unexplored: at a *micro* level, they neglect, for instance, how account episodes are occasioned and sequentially organized in everyday spontaneous interactions, how accounts are linguistically constructed and what constitutes the non-verbal components of accounts (Buttny, 1993b); at a *macro* level, crucial dimensions are neglected, e.g. how accountability practices are indexical of the group's system of norms, moral beliefs and values, and how accounts construct individuals' moral positioning.

It should be pointed out that when Scott and Lyman (1968) published their essay, the term 'account' was already being used within ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), and by conversation analysts (e.g. Sacks' lectures, 1992[1964–8]; Schegloff, 1972; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), who in those years were laying the foundations of their new discipline.<sup>2</sup> Both ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have been concerned with the examination of naturally occurring social interactions and their structural and sequential organization. However, within these two theoretical frameworks the notion of account has different meanings: within ethnomethodology, the term covers all the manifold sense-making procedures that people normally use in everyday exchanges (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1988); in conversation analysis, the notion of accounts is closely connected with the concepts of *adjacency pair*, *conditional relevance* and *preference organization* (e.g. Bilmes, 1988; Heritage, 1988; Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987, 1992; Schegloff, 1995). Specifically, accounts are conceived of as 'a way of doing dispreference' (Buttny, 1993a: 44): Accounts are produced as second-pair parts when the first-pair part is not replied to in the way projected.

Thus, both ethnomethodological and conversation analytic views of accounts are more inclusive than Scott and Lyman's (1968) conception, but not incompatible with it.

Given the aims of this article described earlier, the narrower usage introduced by Scott and Lyman is adopted here as a way of foregrounding the remedial and moral dimensions of the phenomenon.

The fundamental functions of accounts as lubricants of interpersonal relationships and as realignment and restoration devices have been subtly explored by Goffman (1963, 1967, 1971). Goffman's exegesis has focused not only on accounts but, more broadly, on *remedial interchanges* (Goffman, 1971), thereby enlarging the analysis both to the other components of the remedial process (i.e. what initiates the episode and how it is closed)<sup>3</sup> and to further remedial moves that occur in the same sequential position of accounts.<sup>4</sup> In Goffman's (1971) view, the *ritualistic* and *ceremonial* function of remedial interchanges is quintessential, to the point that remedial work

... is not communication in the narrow sense of that term ... stands are being taken, moves are being made, displays are being provided, alignments are being established. Where utterances are involved, they are 'performative'. Mutually relevant figures are being cut. A ceremony occurs, something closer to a minuet than to a conversation. (p. 119)

While acknowledging the ritualistic and ceremonial features of account episodes, this article aims to explore their creative and transformative aspects, e.g. by analyzing how individual moves that build account sequences are interactively and contingently constructed by interactants, how moves are bound to each other, and to what extent and in what way they can be negotiated and transformed.

### *Data corpus and analytical procedures*

The present study is based on 60 videotaped dinner conversations of 20 middle-class Italian families.<sup>5</sup> These conversations have been fully transcribed according to the procedural and notational conventions of conversation analysis (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Button and Lee, 1987; see the Appendix for transcription notation). For the purposes of this study, account sequences have been singled out and analyzed. Following the principles of conversation analysis, I have privileged the participants' perspective in an attempt to capture, and then adopt as criterion for data selection and extract analysis, what participants themselves are interpreting as problematic and, subsequently, how they orient to and deal with the necessity of a remedy for the undesirable event.

Therefore, my investigation of account sequences begins with an analysis of the priming move, namely the discursive action that makes an account conditionally relevant in the subsequent turn. It must be pointed out that although the priming move, by definition, operates prospectively, in account sequences it also

works retroactively, singling out and characterizing an event or conduct as problematic. Thus, account sequences present features that are specific to those stretches of talk that Schegloff (1995) has defined as ‘retro-sequences’:

These are sequences *activated from their second position*, which invoke what can be called a source/outcome relationship. What surfaces in the interaction as their first effective component turns out not to have been temporally the first thing in them to have occurred. Rather, the first recognizable sign that such sequence is in progress generally displays that there was ‘a source’ for it in what preceded, and often locates what a source was. But note, the source engendered nothing observable – indeed was not recognizable as a ‘source’ – until the later utterance/action, billing itself as an ‘outcome’, retroactively marks it as such. Their ‘firstness’ follows their outcome, though their occurrence preceded it. These are sequences *launched* from their *second position*. (pp. 225–6)<sup>6</sup>

An act/event constitutes a rule’s violation and/or a breach of expectation when it is framed as such by an interactant. In this sense, the priming move retroactively *constructs* the problematic episode and assigns to it a moral meaning.<sup>7</sup>

A varied and heterogeneous phenomenology of priming moves has been found in the data. This article focuses specifically on the analysis of sequences that are opened by requests for an account<sup>8</sup> and shows how their different design features retrospectively define different aspects of a situation as problematic and prospectively set up the relevance for distinctive remedial moves.

### *Opening the account sequence with a request for an account*

Generally speaking, requests for an account can be conceived of as being syntactically constructed as questions and presenting either a semantic or a prosodic element, or a combination of these elements, which gives the question a moral charge. Two recurrent question formats have been found: the first format is opened by an interrogative formula – either *come mai* (how come) or *perché* (why)<sup>9</sup> – and contains a description of conduct as improper; the second kind of questions is more open-ended and refers only indexically to the problematic event. These questions can be defined as narrative elicitations.

COME MAI (HOW COME) + DESCRIPTION OF CONDUCT AS IMPROPER

*Come mai* (how come) and *perché* (why) are Italian cause/purpose adverbial phrases that can also be used as interrogative markers. In grammar textbooks of Italian language (e.g. Renzi, 1991), no semantic or pragmatic distinction between the two syntagms is given. However, it emerges from the examined data that *come mai* (how come), usually introduces inquiries with moral implications whereas *perché* (why) more frequently marks requests for explanations. Thus, adopting the classificatory terms traditionally employed in linguistics for distinguishing modals (Bybee and Fleischman, 1995; Palmer, 1979, 1986), I suggest considering *come mai* (how come) as a *deontic* interrogative marker and *perché* (why) as an *epistemic* interrogative marker.<sup>10</sup> Consider Extract 1:

**Extract 1**

Tanucci family: Mamma (Paola), Papà (Fabrizio), Marco (10.6 years), Leonardo (3.9 years)

- 1 Papà: Leonardo  
 2 (.) ((Leonardo looks at Papà))  
 3 Papà: ascolta una cosa.  
**listen to this**  
 4 → come mai oggi hai graffiato a- a Ivan tu?  
**how come you scratched Ivan today?**  
 5 (2.5) ((Leonardo looks at Papà))  
 6 Papà: eh?  
 7 (1.0)  
 8 → Papà: come mai? che t'aveva fatto Ivan?  
**how come? what had Ivan been doing to you?**  
 9 Leo: pe- pecchè ce stavo prima io di quello. VERO!  
**bec- because I was before that ((kid)). TRue!**  
 10 ((Papà nods))  
 [...] ]

The father warns his son Leonardo to listen before proceeding in his request (lines 1 and 3). Such care for establishing good communicative conditions presages the seriousness of what is coming.<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, once Leonardo's attention is secured, the father solicits from him an account (line 4) by using the interrogative formula *come mai* (how come) followed by a description of Leonardo's behavior (at school with Ivan) as aggressive and untoward. A morally negative evaluation transpires from the father's characterization of Leonardo's behavior, and the act of requesting the child to reply positions Leonardo as responsible for his actions. It is worth noting that at the end of his request (line 4), the father utters the personal pronoun "tu" (you) which is not necessary for specifying the agent of the reported action<sup>12</sup> and therefore functions as an emphatic marker which stresses Leonardo's personal responsibility (Duranti, 1984). Requests for an account, such as that in Extract 1, present normative infractions or improper behavior as indisputable facts. While positioning the recipient as responsible for the problematic episode, the request offers the possibility of mitigating the alleged moral charge and offering a remedy for the conduct in question.<sup>13</sup> Consider another example:

**Extract 2**

Tanucci family: Mamma (Paola), Papà (Fabrizio), Marco (10.6 years), Leonardo (3.9 years)

- 1 → Mamma: come mai non c'è- (.) non gliel'avete messo  
**how come there's not- (.) you guys didn't put**  
 2 → il coltello a Leo? ((prendendo un coltello))  
**down a knife for Leo ((taking a knife))**  
 3 (3.0)  
 4 Papà: non glielo metto mai in genere.  
**I never give him one usually**

- 5 Mamma: io sempre.  
**I always do.**  
 (3.0) ((Mamma gives a knife to Leo and goes back to sit down))

In Extract 2, the mother calls the father and the 10.6 year-old son to give an account for an act of omission. Her request is introduced by the interrogative form *come mai* (how come) which is followed by the depiction of an omission (i.e. a breach of expectations: “non gliel’avete messo il coltello a Leo” [you didn’t put the knife for Leo]). It is worth observing that, while putting forward her request, the mother self-corrects (line 1) switching from an impersonal construction (“non c’è . . .” [there’s not . . .]) to an active personal one (“non gliel’avete messo . . .” [you guys didn’t put . . .]) which makes the agents explicit, thereby pointing out who is considered responsible for the problematic situation. Moreover, it should be noted that at the very same moment she is soliciting an account the mother is already remedying the omission (giving Leo a knife) that she is pointing out with her request. Such non-verbal action foreshadows the fact that the mother will not withdraw her charge: a due act has not been done and Leo will have to have his knife anyway.<sup>14</sup>

MA PERCHÉ (BUT WHY) + DESCRIPTION OF CONDUCT AS IMPROPER

Earlier I contended that the interrogative syntagm *come mai* (how come) activates a deontic dimension, hence it’s more pervasively used than the other interrogative marker *perché* (why) in the delivery of requests for accounts. However, this does not mean that *perché* (why) is never used in the priming move of account sequences. In effect, I have encountered *perché* (why) combined with the adversative conjunction *ma* (but). The contrastive meaning of the connective marker *ma* (but) signals that the speaker’s expectation hasn’t been met and projects a negative shadow on what is upcoming. In Extract 3, for instance, *ma* (but) introduces a request for an account for a vexed attitude:

### Extract 3

Tanucci family: Mamma (Paola), Papà (Fabrizio), Marco (10.6 years), Leonardo (3.9 years)

- 1 → Mamma: ma perchè adesso fai così l’ammusato?  
**but why are you pulling such a long face now?**  
 2 **((to Marco))**  
 3 (.)  
 4 Mamma: che cosa è successo?  
**what happened?**  
 5 (0.4)  
 6 Mamma: perchè t’è stato negato qualcosa?  
**is it because you have been denied something?**  
 7 (.)  
 8 Mamma: a volte si negano anche le cose.  
**sometimes things are denied**  
 9 (1.0)  
 10 Mamma: perchè non sempre è possibile fare tutto.  
**because it is not always possible do to**

- 11 Marco: **everything**  
 io volevo fà solo il dolce  
**I just wanted to make the cake ((in a complaining tone))**

In this extract, the connective *ma* (but) opens the turn, thereby signaling the uptake of the conversational floor, and operates also as shift marker from what was previously ongoing. It is interesting to focus on Mamma's presentation of Marco's problematic conduct (line 1): she uses the expression *fare l'ammusato* (to pull a long face), intensified by the adverb *così* (such). Compared to the ascription of an emotional state, which would require the use of the copula (*essere ammusato* [to be sulky]), *fare l'ammusato* (to pull a long face) characterizes Marco's conduct as intentional and with a communicative scope (to complain). In other words, by using the expression *fare l'ammusato* (to pull a long face) rather than *essere ammusato* (to be sulky), the mother emphasizes Marco's moral agency and points out that not only his attitude but also the underlining intentions need to be revised.

### *Narrative elicitations*

So far I have examined requests for an account that are syntactically constructed as questions and that include a definition – articulated and detailed to varying degrees – of the problematic behavior/event. I have emphasized the fact that these opening strategies imply that the participant who solicits the account is the first to provide a characterization of the conduct/episode in question. In the corpus of Italian family dinner conversations, I have also found requests for an account that, in contrast to the previously described forms, leave the recipient (i.e. the one who is requested to provide an account) the possibility/task of providing the initial characterization of what has been put under investigation. These latter forms can be defined as narrative elicitations:

#### **Extract 4**

Bianucci family: Mamma (Sara), Papà (Giovanni), Fabiana (9 years), Silvia (4 years)

- 1 → Mum: Silvia (.) raccontaci bene quello che stavi facendo  
**Silvia tell us precisely what you were doing**  
 2 → con Clara in stanza prima che venisse su Fabiana.  
**with Clara in your room before Fabiana came up**  
 3 Dad: ( )  
 4 Silvia: stavamo giocando a polizia. e poi uno  
**we were playing police then someone**  
 5 c'ha disturbato. ch'eri tu.  
**came and bothered us. that was you ((to Fabia))**  
 6 (2.0)  
 7 Fabia: ti stavi per rompere la testa.  
**You were just about to break your head.**  
 8 ho disturbato.  
**I bothered you.**



- 9 (4.0)  
 10 Dad: ma io l'ho lasciate che volevano farsi un riposino.  
**but when I left them they wanted to take a nap ((to Mamma))**  
 11 Fabia: no::  
**no::**  
 12 Mum: a disfare i letti.  
**to undo the beds**  
 13 (2.0)

In light of the processes of construction and negotiation of norms, of inter-personal moral positioning and of socialization to accountability, narrative elicitations, such as the one which opens Extract 4, carry significant implications (different from the ones implied in the priming moves described earlier). I would argue that narrative elicitations offer the recipient the possibility of using narratives and descriptions as rhetorical resources for constructing a personal defense and a dignified moral position, whereas the priming moves examined earlier (Extracts 1–3) employ them as offensive tools, for exerting moral pressure. As demonstrated in the next section, the different design of requests for an account is far from being inconsequential.

### *Responding to requests for an account*

So far, I have highlighted the indexical nature of requests for an account, showing how their different design features retrospectively define different aspects of a situation as problematic and morally consequential. In this section, I explore in more detail the relation between requests for an account and the responses that are given. The analysis of different kinds of *second-pair parts*, vis-a-vis the different designs and features of the *first-pair parts*, reveals the system of preferences that organizes account sequences. Moreover, it is shown how the two interlocked discursive actions imply participants' positioning in the moral horizon and a negotiation of these interlaced positions. Consider the following two extracts:

#### **Extract 5**

Tanucci family: (see Extract 3) + Fausto (cousin: 9.5 years)  
 ((Marco repeatedly shakes the saltshaker over the chicken in his plate))

- 1 → Mamma: ma perchè tutto quel sale Marco?  
**but why all that salt Marco**  
 2 (0.6) ((Marco looks at Mamma))  
 3 → Mamma: che sei una ca:pra?  
**are you a goat?**  
 4 Fausto: no è [un maiale ((a bassa voce ridendo))  
**no he's a pig ((in a low volume and laughing))**  
 5 → Marco: [eh scende veloce da 'sto co:so  
**well it falls fast from this thing**  
 6 ((placing the saltshaker back on the table))  
 7 (1.4) ((Marco looks at Fausto))

- 8 Marco: ma te sei un maia:le ((a bassa voce))  
**no you are a pig ((in a low voice to Fausto))**
- 9 Fausto: no io so' 'na capra. ((sorridente))  
**no I'm a goat ((smiling))**
- 10 ((Marco and Fausto laugh))

**Extract 6**

Gracchi family: Mamma (Antonella), Papà (Paolo), Tiziana (22 years), Silvana (19 years), Riccardo (7 years)

((Riccardo is eating a slice of bread with olive oil. He has repeatedly added some salt. After a further pinch Riccardo licks the fingertip of his index finger))

- 1 → Mamma: che stai face:ndo:?  
**what are you doi:ng?**
- 2 → Riccardo: sto mangiando il sale.  
**I'm eating salt**
- 3 Tiziana: eh no  
**oh no**
- 4 (2.0)
- 5 → Riccardo: mangiato con il pane e l'olio va bene.  
**if it is eaten with bread and olive oil it's ok**
- 6 Tiziana: che cosa?  
**what?**
- 7 Riccardo: il sale il pane e olio fa bene.  
**salt bread and olive oil is healthy**
- 8 Tiziana: si lo so (.) però metti il dito  
**yes I know (.) but you put your finger in it**
- 9 e lecchi, scusa eh  
**and lick. excuse me**
- 10 Riccardo: ma non- ma non ((avvicinando la mano al sale))  
**but I don't- but I don't ((bringing his hand towards the salt))**
- 11 Tiziana: =stai fermo  
**stop it**
- 12 Riccardo: ma non rimetto lo ste:sso:. ((dito))  
**but I don't use the same ((finger))**
- 13 Tiziana: ah mbe'.  
**oh I see**

The sequences in Extracts 5 and 6 emerge out of similar circumstances; however, they unfold differently, starting from the different way the infraction is signalled (line 1 of each extract). In Extract 5, Mom provides a description of Marco's act as improper (specifically, she characterizes it as excessive). In Extract 6, on the other hand, the request for an account does not make explicit Riccardo's problematic conduct.

The two strategic options are not without consequences: Marco (Extract 5) has to remedy a presupposed *fact* (i.e. excessively salting his chicken), whereas Riccardo (Extract 6) must assert the information himself, because his mother does not make explicit what is prosodically indexed as problematic. In the latter case, the design of Mamma's request for an account offers Riccardo the

opportunity to depict his behavior as intelligible and conventional, hence with no negative moral implications (line 2). Notwithstanding Tiziana's proscription (line 3), Riccardo holds his position and in his following turns (lines 5 and 7) specifies circumstantial elements that confirm the admissibility of his actions. In effect, Riccardo's account is persuasive and Tiziana admits that her little brother is right in his claims (line 8 "si lo so" [yes I know]). However, the charge is confirmed (lines 8 and 9) pertaining to the way Riccardo performs the action (i.e. licking his fingers and then taking more salt from the cup) and not to the action itself. In this instance as well, Riccardo is able to reply (line 12), presenting his conduct as permissible without contradicting his older sister's normative remark.

Going back to Extract 5, we see that the characterization of the problematic act at the beginning of the sequence not only rules out the possibility for Marco (i.e. the subject of the problem) to provide a definition of his conduct but also projects conditions onto the type of account that he's being requested to provide. Specifically, the problematic conduct is depicted by the mother in a way that blocks the possibility of replying with a *justification*: "tutto quel sale" (all that salt) would be excessive even if the chicken were insipid. Thus, the request for an account in this sequence leaves limited room for remedial maneuvers; maybe for this reason Marco initially hesitates: the pause, in line 2, shows that the child does not have a ready answer. The mother, however, reiterates her request for an account (line 3), this time employing what Sacks has called *the correction–invitation device* (Sacks, 1992: 21–2),<sup>15</sup> namely she provides an incorrect account for soliciting from Marco the substitution with a valid one.<sup>16</sup> At this point the child proffers an *excuse* (line 5) that portrays his unfortunate action as accidental, due to the unusual functioning of the saltshaker. Thus, Marco implicitly ratifies the mother's evaluation of his conduct as untoward but denies responsibility, at least in part, because of lack of intent.

In sum, Extracts 5 and 6 reveal the subtle correspondence between the priming move and the remedial complement. Thus, it is possible to provide a more detailed description of different configurations of the adjacency pair *request for an account – account* as different designs of the first-pair part (i.e. the request) project distinctive remedial moves as second-pair parts (i.e. the account). Extract 5 indicates that requests for an account that include an explicit (negative) characterization of the problematic event make excuses (vs justifications) sequentially relevant as remedial complements. In effect, excuses ratify the depiction of what is put in question, though they deny responsibility (partially or fully) for the problematic episode. In other words, participants who are called to account admit that the assessment of their conduct as improper is correct – and align themselves with such a normative interpretation – however, they try to negotiate the moral and interpersonal position that they have been relegated to through the very same account call. Extract 6 highlights that requests for an account that hint at something problematic without providing a description of a disturbing element (i.e. narrative elicitation) do not bind the response with equal specificity and restriction: Therefore, they can be followed by excuses, but more often are

responded to with justifications or conventionalizations that reject the negative evaluation conveyed by the request, as illustrated also in the next extract.

**Extract 7**

Fanaro family: Mamma (Teresa), Papà (Silvano), Sergio (7.5 years), Stefania (5.5 years), Andrea (Sergio's friend: 7 years)  
 ((Laughing with his mouth full Sergio spills something onto his plate))

- 1 → Papà: Sergio allora che è questa cosa?  
**Sergio so what is it?**
- 2 Sergio: papà:: ((in tono lamentoso))  
**da::d ((with complaining tone))**
- 3 (5.0) ((Sergio and Andrea can't restrain themselves from laughing))
- 4 → Sergio: no, ho fatto uno scherzo. mi so' messo a ride',  
**no. I was joking. I started laughing,**
- 5 → e siccome stavo a mangia' m'è venuto di fa' così  
**and since I was eating I felt like doin' like this**
- 6 (3.0)
- 7 → Sergio: perchè a te quando ridi se mangi non  
**when you eat while you're laughing,**
- 8 → succede la stessa cosa? ((a Papà))  
**doesn't the same thing happen to you? ((to Papà))**
- 9 → Papà: eventualmente mi metto la mano davanti (.) eh  
**in that case, I put my hand in front (.) eh**

Sergio's reply to Papà's open request for an account presents a causal chain of events (lines 4–6).<sup>17</sup> The close tie of cause and effect between sequential components makes the untoward behavior look unavoidable, thereby mitigating Sergio's responsibility for it: a joke inevitably causes laughter, and if it happens while one is eating, then keeping the food in one's mouth becomes extremely difficult! In other words, Sergio, with stunning rhetorical ability, proffers an account that focuses on the causal links, while the actual actions constituting the problematic episode are left in the background. In this way, his acts are presented as taken for granted and incontestable, whereas they could easily be criticized (e.g. to joke excessively while eating dinner could be a cause for reproach).<sup>18</sup> Sergio concludes his intervention by employing a further, highly effective, rhetorical stratagem (lines 7 and 8) that aims to invalidate the request for account by claiming that in similar circumstances everyone would do and/or feel what the speaker has been charged with.<sup>19</sup> In his lectures, Sacks (1992) talked at length about such a discursive device and referred to it as an 'account apparently appropriate, negativer' (abbreviated as A3N):

'Everyone does, don't they?' is one of the most fabulous things I've ever seen. Where persons are engaged in trying to get an account from somebody, there's an object that the person who's being questioned can slip in. This is one of them. And what it does is, it cuts off the basis for the search for an account. I don't have a terribly elegant name for it. What I called it was, 'account apparently appropriate, negativer.' Or A3N. (p. 23)

In parallel fashion, Sergio appeals to the generality of the situation by calling on his father's experience as a behavioral and moral precedent. The result is equally effective: Papà does not deny his son's argumentation, thereby implicitly acknowledging the possibility of incurring a similar incident. However, he admonishes Sergio that a remedy for the untoward conduct (i.e. to put one's hand in front of one's mouth) is required anyway.

Thus, we can observe that, within the space of three turns, the meaning of Sergio's conduct is transformed: initially indexed by the father as problematic (with no more specific negative characterization), it is then presented by the child as unavoidable. Sergio does not deny responsibility for his act<sup>20</sup> but justifies it – as perhaps unfortunate but inevitable given the circumstances. Papà admits, then, that in exceptional cases the improper act cannot be avoided, but he admonishes that such inevitability does not constitute a justification; therefore, a remedial act to repair the breach must yet be provided.<sup>21</sup>

I have repeatedly emphasized that embedded in any call for accountability is the attribution of responsibility. The type and severity of such ascription is varied and multifaceted, depending upon the moral dimensions that are made relevant in the request. The dimensions of agency and intentionality are often invoked and become constitutive of the moral positioning of the person from whom the account is being requested. These same dimensions are, hence, addressed and negotiated in the accountability response, as we have seen for example in Extract 1 (presented again below):

#### Extract 1

Tanucci family: Mamma (Paola), Papà (Fabrizio), Marco (10.6 years), Leonardo (3.9 years)

- 1 Papà: Leonardo  
 2 (.) ((Leonardo looks at Papà))  
 3 Papà: ascolta una cosa.  
**listen to this**  
 4 → come mai oggi hai graffiato a- a Ivan tu?  
**how come you scratched Ivan today?**  
 5 (2.5) ((Leonardo looks at Papà))  
 6 Papà: eh?  
 7 (1.0)  
 8 → Papà: come mai? che t'aveva fatto Ivan?  
**how come? what had Ivan been doing to you?**  
 9 Leo: pe- pecchè ce stavo prima io di quello. Vero!  
**bec- because I was before that ((kid)). TRue!**  
 10 ((Papà nods))  
 [. . .]

In Papà's opening request for an account (line 4), Leonardo is positioned as intentional agent of an improper action. The request thus puts in question the child's intentions beside the child's conduct. Leonardo remains silent (see the pauses in lines 5 and 7). In the following turn, the father reiterates his request (line 8), suggesting however a different position for Leonardo vis-a-vis the prob-

lematic episode; whereas the opening request had highlighted Leonardo's agency and had ascribed to him malicious intentions, the following query suggests that the child could in fact have been the victim of Ivan's previous misdeeds. Such different positioning affords the child an argumental trail for accounting for his action towards Ivan.<sup>22</sup> In effect, Leonardo replies to his father's second request reporting a contextual antecedent (line 9) which alludes to previous overbearing actions that he suffered. Thus, retrospectively, Leonardo's initial silence (lines 5 and 7) could be interpreted as a stubborn resistance against a moral positioning that charges him with a severe and hardly disputable fault. Papà seems to understand such resistance and, when repeating his request for the third time (line 8), he mitigates the accusations. In sum, in this short alternation of requests and silence, participants negotiate ascriptions of responsibility, transforming Leonardo's position as moral agent in the context of the problematic event.

### *Distribution of responsibility in account sequences*

So far we have examined the structure and the pragmatic trajectories of requests for accounts and their responses. To understand how interlocked account moves enact and transform norms and interpersonal moral positionings, it is important to consider how interlocutors orient and are positioned in relation to a purported breach in each account episode. The act of requesting an account ascribes responsibility to the recipients but does not always position them as the agents of the problematic action. Alternatively, individuals can be considered the agents of improper actions without being held responsible for them, as in the following extract:

#### **Extract 8**

Soldano family: Mamma (Raffaella), Papà (Vittorio), Stefano (8.10 years), Gianluca (4.3 years), Marina (8 months), Nonno (Grandfather: Gianni); Nonna (Grandmother: Emilia).

- 1 → Mamma: Gianluca ma come mai hai le mani verdi?  
**Gianluca but how come you have green hands?**
- 2 (.)
- 3 Mamma: è stato il pasticcino:  
**was it the little pastry ((smiling and turning her eyes towards Nonno and Nonna))**
- 4 → chi l'ha scelto quel pasticcino?  
**who picked that little pastry?**
- 5 Nonno: ah no io no  
**oh no I didn't ((looking at Mamma first and then at Nonna))**
- 6 Nonna: no? [l'hai presi da solo  
**didn't you? you got them on your own ((to Nonno))**
- 7 Mamma: [fammi vedere le mani.  
**let me look at your hands**
- 8 (1.8) ((Mamma takes Gianluca's hands and looks at them carefully))

- 9 Mamma: hi: hai mangiato con queste mani?  
**oh: my. Did you eat with such hands?**
- 10 (0.4)
- 11 → Mamma: Vittorio non avevi guardato?  
**Vittorio didn't you check ((Gianluca's hands))?**  
 [. . .] ((about 15 seconds during which food is passed around))
- 12 → Mamma: Vittorio non hai visto che mani che c'ha Gianluca?  
**Vittorio didn't you see the state of Gianluca's hands?**
- 13 Papà: (beh te) l'ho detto prima non hai sentito?  
**(well) I told you earlier. didn't you listen to me?**
- 14 Mamma: si ma ( [ ] )  
**yes but ( [ ] )**
- 15 Papà: [quando l'hai sentito gliele potevi  
**when you heard then you could have**
- 16 lava' te allora scusa eh.  
**washed them ((Gianluca's hands)) yourself excuse me**

The sequence is opened by Mamma, who explicitly calls her son Gianluca to account for an undesirable lack of hygiene (line 1). Her question points out an untoward condition (i.e. to have dirty hands) rather than referring explicitly to the action and the agent that brought about the problematic circumstance.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it is not completely surprising that the vicarious account that Mamma proffers (line 3) for exculpating her son, by ascribing agency to the little pastry (“è stato il pasticcino” [was it the little pastry])! Moreover, while articulating the defensive move for Gianluca, the mother turns her gaze toward the grandparents thereby anticipating the transference of responsibility to them. The ascription of responsibility to the grandparents is then made explicit in line 4 when Mamma calls them to account for the improvident choice of little pastries. When shortly afterwards Mamma more carefully inspects Gianluca's hands (lines 8) and realizes that they are surprisingly more dirty than she had initially thought, she questions her son again (line 9). This time she presents the problem as a durative activity ([i.e. to have eaten with dirty hands] vs a punctual condition [i.e. to have dirty hands]) and positions Gianluca as agent of the undesirable course of actions. It is evident that at this point the charge is more severe. However, it is not entirely blamed on Gianluca: Mamma also calls her husband (Vittorio) to account (lines 11 and 12), thereby assigning him part of the responsibility for the problematic event. While Gianluca does not provide any reply to Mamma's interrogations, the father, Vittorio, responds promptly (lines 13, 15 and 16) rebutting her accusation and reminding her of her own responsibility for the unpleasant event. In sum, through articulating different requests for account and addressing these queries to different recipients, the mother outlines the moral characterization of the problematic event and the moral positions of the participants engaged in the episode under inquiry.<sup>24</sup> Participants' responses as well as their silences challenge and dynamically transform this moral framework and the participants' positioning within it.

The last extract presented here offers a further illustration of the complex and never predetermined moral and interpersonal meanings of discursive moves in account sequences:

**Extract 9**

Fanaro family (see Extract 7)

- 1 Stefania: mamma::  
**mom**
- 2 Mamma: dimmi.  
**tell me**
- 3 → Stefania: com'è che Sergio non si taglia mai le unghie?  
**how come that Sergio never cuts his nails**
- 4 → ce l'ha tutte nere.  
**he has them all black ((sic))**
- 5 Mamma: le unghie?  
**his nails?**
- 6 Stefania: eh.  
**yeah**
- 7 → Mamma: e beh veramente gliele abbiamo sempre tagliate  
**well actually we have always cut them for him**
- 8 → allora evidentemente non facciamo in tempo  
**then it seems we don't have enough time**
- 9 → a farle crescere.  
**to have them grow ((sic))**

The syntactic format and semantic content of Stefania's question (line 3) convey criticism. The little girl's negative evaluation seems to refer to her brother's lack of personal hygiene and to invite Mamma to reprimand him. Surprisingly, Mamma takes Stefania's request as a call to her duties as a mother to take care of her children (duties that Sergio's dirty nails reveal to be not being impeccably accomplished). Consequently, instead of requesting a remedy from Sergio, Mamma provides an excuse aimed at alleviating parental responsibility.

It remains unclear to us what Stefania's initial intervention (line 3) was pursuing. What matters for this analysis, however, is Mamma's uptake of her daughter's turn, since Mamma's interpretation unveils nuances of interpersonal positioning and subtle dynamics of power and authority: by providing an excuse as a response to Stefania's intervention, the mother acknowledges that her daughter can problematize parental practices and ask parents to account for their conduct (at least for their parenting practices).<sup>25</sup>

### *Conclusions*

This article has attempted to shed light on accountability as everyday discursive practice, whereby morality is interactionally enacted and transformed. The present study has highlighted the fact that individual moves that build account sequences define and bind each other. Specifically, this analysis has shown that different design features of requests for an account retrospectively define



different aspects of a situation as problematic and prospectively set up the relevance for distinctive remedial moves. Analysis of responses to different request formats has revealed that accounts are not ready-made linguistic devices; rather they are designed contingently, in ways responsive to the specific circumstances established in the preceding moves. Indeed, different ways of signaling and formulating the problematic event activate different dimensions of moral reasoning and project distinctive preferred responses for overcoming that event. In this way, the relevance rules and the systems of preference that organize account episodes implement the group's logic and morality of human action.

On an ideological level, *requests for an account* as priming moves in account sequences and *accounts* as preferred remedial moves index a moral perspective that promotes moral reasoning and thereby the negotiation of norms. By being requested to provide an account, children are positioned as moral agents, responsible for their actions and at the same time they are solicited to enact their moral agency. In this sense, *requests for an account* realize a practice of morality among Italian families that tends to be inquisitory rather than condemnatory, offering the benefit of the doubt (vs condemning until proven innocent) and the opportunity to mitigate the ascription of fault prior to guilt allocation and punishment.

Finally, the analysis has revealed that accountability in Italian family dinner conversations is a collective activity. The collective participation in account episodes activates multiple dimensions of responsibility and moral reasoning across family members. Requests for accounts, remedial replies, counter-accusations, etc. position family members as moral agents, as the family itself, as a unit, and construct its moral perspective.

In conclusion, the present study has shown that the discursive activity of accountability both instantiates Italian family moral beliefs and practices, and provides a locus for negotiating cultural norms. As such, the discursive mechanics of account episodes constitute a medium for reproduction of, and innovation in, the moral order.

#### NOTES

1. For an exhaustive review of the accounts literature see Benoit (1995), Buttny (1993a), Semin and Manstead (1983).
2. In the foreword to Buttny (1993a), Marvin Scott has revealed that he and Stanford Lyman adopted the term 'accounts' on the recommendation of Harvey Sacks.
3. According to Goffman (1971), the *remedial cycle* originates from and responds to a *deed*, i.e. an act that offends another and consequently also discredits the actor. The full expansion of the basic remedial cycle comprises two *rounds* each containing an adjacency pair: the first round is constituted by *the remedy*, offered by the offender, and *the relief*, i.e. a sign of acceptance of the remedy from the victim. This last move solicits the offender to express gratitude; hence the second round with the offender's *appreciation* and the victim's *minimization*. Goffman remarks that the basic structure of remedial interchanges is often subject to transformations as some moves may not be performed (e.g. the second round adjacency pair) and/or further moves may appear (e.g. a *priming move* that invokes the remedy).

4. Goffman (1971) has examined the apology with special meticulousness. In contrast to justifications, apologies imply the acknowledgement that the conduct in question is improper; however, unlike excuses, apologies admit responsibility for the problematic conduct. The prototypical apology presents five constitutive elements: 'expression of regret, acknowledgement of expected behavior and sympathy for the reproach, repudiation of the behavior and the "self" committing it, promise to behave correctly in the future, and atonement and compensation' (Goffman, 1971: 113–14). Moreover, Goffman points out that an apology implies an underlying process of splitting of the self into two parts: the culpable and blameworthy part, which committed the misdeed, and the good part, which deplors that act.
5. This study is part of a larger project, 'Discourse and Socialization at Family Dinner', directed by Clotilde Pontecorvo (Department of Developmental Psychology, University of Rome, La Sapienza).
6. Noticings, other-initiated repairs and some instances of laughter are Schegloff's (1995) illustrative examples of retro-sequences.
7. It is worth specifying that we are not arguing for a relativistic perspective on morality; rather, we are trying to emphasize the rhetorical and situated characterization of normative references in everyday interaction: norms are presented in ways that are not the only possible ones, but are the ones that best fit the pragmatic specificities of the occurring contingencies. The creative power of the priming moves is inherent in such a possibility of different characterizations of the problematic event. As a methodological implication, given that accountability is not a mere epiphenomenon of a pre-existing assiological and normative framework but is a discursive practice which contributes to the construction of such moral horizon, analysts cannot assume a decontextualized moral framework as a criterion for selection of extracts and their analysis but they have to rely upon the perspective of the participants.
8. Overt accusations, corrections and reproaches, besides requests for an account, constitute priming moves in the account episodes that I have analyzed.
9. *Perché* (why) is frequently prefaced by the adversative conjunction *ma* (but) (see later).
10. The distinction is important insofar as each of these interrogative formulae can stand by itself as an exhaustive question ("come mai?", "perché?") or they can introduce vague propositions, which are hard to characterize in terms of moral implications (e.g. "*come mai* tutto ciò?" [how come all this?], "*perché* è così?" [why is it so?]). I contend that even on such elliptical occasions of use, the two interrogative forms maintain their different characterization, thereby making sequentially relevant two distinctive actions as response (i.e. an account vs an explanation).
11. Emanuel Schegloff has included the adjacency pair summons–answer in the set of discursive devices which cataphorically mark the next move as dispreferred or as somehow potentially face-threatening to the recipient (Schegloff, 1980). These discursive elements have been defined by Schegloff as *pre-delicates*.
12. Italian is a pro-drop language.
13. Cf. different priming moves such as "Che cosa è successo oggi con Ivan?" (What happened with Ivan today?) or "Che cosa hai fatto ad Ivan oggi?" (What did you do to Ivan today?): such kinds of requests would allow the recipient the possibility of offering the first characterization of the problematic behavior/event (see later, in the narrative elicitation discussion).
14. Mother's question in Extract 2 resembles a type of interrogative often found in news interviews, identified and described by Clayman and Heritage (in press), and labelled as 'accusatory question'. Accusatory questions normally have the format "how can

you X” or “how could you X”, which is ‘clearly confrontational’ hence implying ‘the unanswerability of the ‘question’” (p. 33).

15. Where one wants to get, from the person one is talking to, an account of something – why they did something or why they have something – one way you can do it is by saying ‘Why?’ . . . Now it also seems that one can ask for an account by naming, in question form, one member of the class, of which the account will be another member. (Clayman and Heritage, in press: 33)
16. The employment of such a rhetorical strategy confirms that an account (and not another remedial move [e.g. an apology]) is being requested of the child.
17. Papà’s request neither overtly states what is problematic (and in need of an account) nor positions Sergio as an agent in the problematic framework (which would be the case if he asked “What are you doing?” [see and compare also Extract 1]).
18. As a matter of fact, Sergio, cunningly, talks about eating while laughing and not the other way around!
19. Earlier in the sequence (line 2), Sergio had already tried to resist father’s request for an account. His complaint, however, was inefficacious.
20. Any request for account implies the attribution of responsibility to the recipient, both for the event in question and for the remedial move that consequently becomes relevant.
21. It seems to us that the act of putting one’s hand before one’s mouth has primarily the ritual function of communicating to interlocutors that one is not intentionally annoying them but that an unforeseen accident has occurred. Therefore, we would suggest that such a gesture can be considered a *spill cry*. (Goffman, 1981: 101–3)
 

Goffman mentions as prototypical examples *Oops!* and *Whoops!*:

. . . the sound advertises our loss of control . . . defines the event as a mere accident, shows we know it has happened, and hopefully insulates it from the rest of our behavior, recommending that failure of control was not generated by some obscure intent unfamiliar to humanity or some general defect of competence . . . A part of us proves to be organized and standing watch over the part of us that apparently isn’t watchful. (p. 102)
22. He can plead to have acted *in self defence* or *under great provocation*.
23. By way of speculation, consider other possible request formats – paying special attention to the semantic cases encoded therein – and their implications for the moral positioning of the protagonist, e.g. “Gianluca ma come ti sei fatto le mani verdi?” (Gianluca how did you make your hands green?); “Gianluca ma perchè ti sono venute le mani verdi?” (Gianluca but why did your hands turn green?).
24. Thereby, the mother also raises her position of moral authority.
25. On the other hand, the fact that Stefania signals Sergio’s carelessness to her mother, rather than admonishing her brother directly, could be interpreted as positioning Mamma as moral authority while assigning to herself a less powerful position.

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## APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT NOTATIONS

.	a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence
?	rising intonation, not necessarily a question
,	'continuing' intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary
:::	stretching of the preceding sound, proportional to the number of colons
-	after a word or a part of a word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption
<u>word</u>	some form of stress or emphasis on the underlined item
WOrd	upper case indicates loudness
° °	segments of talk which are markedly quiet or soft.
> <	talk between these symbols is compressed or rushed
< >	talk between these symbols is markedly slowed down
=	no break or delay between the words it connects
(( ))	encloses descriptions of conduct
(word)	all or part of an utterance in parentheses indicates transcriber's uncertainty
( )	inaudible stretch of talk
(1.2)	measures silences in tenths of a second
(.)	'micropause, usually less than 0.2 secs
[	on two successive lines with utterances by different speakers indicates
[	conversational overlap
hhh	audible aspiration

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