"I don't mean extradimensional in a woo-woo sense": Doing non-explanation in discussions of unidentified aerial phenomena

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

In everyday talk, speakers commonly provide explanations that "make plain" or "make intelligible" prior talk. Little work, however, has examined talk in which speakers offer no explanation for what is being described. We consider talk about "unidentified aerial phenomena" (UAPs) from news media interviews. Interviewees distanced themselves from accountability for explaining UAPs or proposed multiple candidate explanations. Interviewers tabled their own potential explanations. Participants' talk did not "make plain" or "make intelligible" phenomena being discussed. These findings show that explanations are a participants' concern. These interactions allow discussion of topics of broad public interest, thereby "doing news".

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Explanations are a routine part of how individuals in interaction develop accounts of their social worlds: "facts and explanations have more than a one-way relation to each other" (Sacks, 1992, vol.1, p.124). It is therefore unsurprising, as Antaki (1994) notes, that the topic of explanation or "explanatory talk" has attracted much interest over the years. There can, however, be social phenomena that are not readily amenable to explanation and for which speakers are unable to provide accounts that make explicit the basis for their descriptions. It is this absence of potential explanations that provides the basis for the present study. We consider the case of talk about "unidentified aerial phenomena" (UAPs), formerly known as unidentified flying objects. In a study of discussions about UAPs found in US news media interviews conducted with individuals involved in a US national program, we examine how interviewers and interviewees accomplish outcomes of describing UAPs as objects that exist but for which no explanation can be made available.

In everyday talk, individuals routinely seek explanations for actions, events, and other phenomena in making sense of the social world. As Sacks (1992) notes, people treat descriptions that are presented as factual as being amenable to explanation that will account for what is described. Conversely, people, or at least those who are non-religious, do not allow for the possibility of miracles, or events for which no readily available explanation is to hand. Rather, in instances where an explanation cannot be provided, the ostensibly factual description for which an explanation is sought and found wanting is likely to be discounted simply on the basis of that absence. Thus, where no explanation is readily available for a particular version of events, recipients routinely accept different versions for which at least some potential explanation is available: "Something proposed to have occurred can be treated as not so, by virtue of the fact that there's not an explanation for it"

(Sacks, 1992, vol. 1, p.124). For such reasons, individuals in providing factual descriptions will seek to ward off or attend to the potential interactional difficulties that might arise in the absence of an explanation where such explanation becomes relevant. As Antaki (1994, 1996) notes, in seeking to avoid challenges to claims that they are making, speakers commonly provide explanations that are designed to "make plain" or "make intelligible" aspects of prior talk that might be treated as in some way problematic. They thereby seek to resolve any "puzzles" that might otherwise arise.

An example of this sort of interactional work is seen in a study by McVittie et al. (2020) of online discussions centering on accusations of racism made against specific individuals. There, the authors noted that it was not sufficient simply for contributors denying that racism had occurred to attempt to dodge the accusations that were being made; rather those adopting such a position sought to explain why these accusations had been (incorrectly) made in the first place. In this and other instances, then, individuals in seeking to have their claims accepted provide not just descriptions that are designed to be heard as factually correct but also explanations as to why other versions might have arisen and why these competing versions should be discounted.

The explanations proposed for specific events, however, can bring their own problems. One problem arises in instances where a speaker might be heard as having a "stake" or interest in providing one form of explanation rather than another (Potter, 1996). In such cases, one way for speakers to present explanations as *dis*-interested is by discounting other candidate explanations, thereby leaving only one explanation in play. As the last explanation left standing, it will thereby become more convincing in establishing a speaker's claims.

One instance of this discounting is seen in a study by McVittie et al. (2008) that examined unemployed people's accounts of age as a factor that operated against them in their attempts to gain employment. There, speakers referred to their own efforts to find work, emphasizing the number and range of applications that they had submitted and contrasted these with a total absence of response or success. The absence of any actions that might in themselves be treated as evidence of age discrimination posed a particular problem for the speakers in attempting to work up claims that they had experienced such discrimination. Orienting to this difficulty, the speakers raised and discounted a range of other candidate explanations for a lack of success in seeking employment, including a lack of requisite skills, an unsuitability for the employment sought, and other job-related factors. The explanation for the speakers' non-employment, then, became constructed in terms of age discrimination operating against them and not due to any personal factors that prevented them from gaining the employment that they sought. A similar finding comes from a study by Kirkwood et al. (2013) of the accounts of asylum-seekers and refugees who had experienced potential racism while living in the UK. In that study, participants raised and discounted various candidate explanations for the problematic experiences that they encountered, such as the personal dispositions of those who had committed violent actions against them. In doing so, they reluctantly arrived at the only remaining possible explanation for these actions: they had been victimized on grounds of race. In both these studies, ruling out other possibilities allowed the speakers to propose an explanation that otherwise might have been difficult to establish and have resulted in challenge rather than acceptance.

On a similar note, speakers are sometimes unable to provide sufficient detail for an explanation that they are providing. In a study of how individuals sought to warrant disbelief in paranormal events, Lamont et al. (2009) examined how participants who had witnessed a psychokinetic demonstration warranted their skepticism towards the possibility that the demonstration displayed paranormal activity. As Lamont et al. noted, participants treated as problematic the absence of any obvious explanation of what they had seen and claimed that a non-paranormal explanation for the event was available in principle, even if not immediately apparent to them. Thus, speakers argued that there was "definitely something" going on, providing them with "a means of offering an 'explanation' without actually explaining anything" (p.554). These "explanations", however vaguely framed, allowed the speakers to avow skepticism towards the possibility of the paranormal, regardless of what they had personally witnessed a short time previously. Similarly, Childs and Murray (2010) noted that members of a team of paranormal investigators who reported experiencing anomalous events did so by discounting readily available explanations for these experiences. Their accounts were designed to imply that these experiences should be understood in terms of paranormal activities but without themselves offering such explanations.

Previous research reveals, then, that speakers routinely attempt to provide explanations in seeking to have their versions of facts accepted by description-recipients. The explanation of facts as presented is a recurring interactional concern addressed by both recipients and speakers. However, to date there has been little or no research interest in one specific form of explanations talk: occasions where speakers craft their descriptions around a central claim that what they are about to describe is inexplicable. It is this realm of talk that the present paper pursues.

Given previous research findings on the importance of explanations, participants should display interactional concerns about making claims that can be explained, at best, by a shrug of the shoulders. Their task is a difficult one. They must:

(a) provide a description of events that will be accepted rather than challenged by the description-recipient
(b) demonstrate that lack of an explanation is not a shortcoming, but rather is to be accepted as part of the description on offer.

To examine such a process in more detail, we consider here the case of what are now termed "unidentified aerial phenomena" (UAPs). Once regarded as a topic of dubious merit, the issue of understanding UAPs has now come centre stage. In 2007 the United States Defense Intelligence Agency, in response to numerous reports by military pilots of sightings of objects

that could not readily be identified, set up an unclassified but little-known program titled The Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP) to study unidentified aerial phenomena. While the AATIP was formally terminated in 2012, with the cessation of US Government funding, at a June 2020 hearing of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence it was confirmed that many of AATIP's activities and remit of studying unexplained sightings had subsequently been taken forward by navy and CIA personnel. Following that hearing, the formation of a successor program, The Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force (UAPTF), was announced and several videos released of navy pilots encountering aerial objects in the course of their duties. More recently, in a report issued on 25 June 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence confirmed that the UAPTF had been unable to identify 143 objects sighted between 2004 and 2021 by US military personnel.

To date, some work has examined ways in which individuals who claim to have witnessed UAPs produce narratives that present their observation as "tellable" events, that is how speakers construct accounts of anomalous sightings in ways that are designed to attend to potential challenges and to enhance their credibility as observers. For example, Woods and Wooffitt (2014) examined how people who were witnessing potentially anomalous sightings in the night sky reported their observations of these events to others (see also Ironside and Wooffitt, 2022; Wooffitt, 1992). Other work has shown how those referring to anomalous events can rely on demonstrative definers such as "that" to propose that what they are describing is transgressive of the usual order, or "uncanny", and thereby avoid offering further detail (Hayward et al., 2015). All such work points to how individuals manage their talk to report experiences of potentially anomalous events. Less attention however has been given to the consequential relevance of such descriptions, in particular how they are taken up by the recipients of the talk and if and how speakers attend to issues of explanation when these become interactionally relevant. In the extracts presented below, those involved in making claims about UAPs are interviewed by journalists. In this context, the interviewees orient to the interaction as of a particular sort. Having consented to being interviewed about phenomena officially designated as 'unidentified', they nevertheless treat their own contributions as being relevant to the question of identification. In short, they pose themselves the task of making something that they themselves have described as inexplicable, explicable.

In treating UAPs in precisely this way, those involved are constructing encounters with UAPs as events that are not readily amenable to explanation: were any explanation immediately available, that explanation would in itself undermine the construction of such phenomena as "unidentified". To consider how these constructions are developed, and worked up in interaction with others, we turn here to examine the construction of UAPs in interactions between those involved in encounters with UAPs and the US news media. We consider the development of descriptions in interviews conducted by interviewers from US news agencies and those involved first-hand in the program that is responsible for the collection and investigation of data from the reported encounters. News interviews offer a particularly useful setting for investigating issues of explanation and non-explanation, for the talk produced in such settings is often seen to follow an institutional format (Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991; Hutchby, 2006). In news interviews, interviewers typically ask questions to which interviewees are expected to respond with answers, and interactional difficulties can follow if interviewees fail do so. These asymmetrical expectations are especially relevant in the present case, where discussions focus on objects for which no explanation is readily available to interviewees. The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine how in these interactions interviewers and interviewees negotiate the existence of UAPs as objects for which no explanation can be provided.

1. Method

The data come from interviews conducted by media interviewers with current or former military personnel who have reported being involved in encounters with UAPs and with individuals otherwise involved in the AATIP and UAPTF programs. Searches were conducted for records of interviews on the topic of UAPs conducted by media sources, using the terms "unidentified aerial phenomena", "unidentified flying object", and "interview". Results were restricted to reports that included full transcripts of the interviews conducted, and sources that relied upon selective editing or that were incomplete were omitted. The results were also restricted to those involving individuals with first-hand experience of personal sightings of UAPs or of the AATIP and UAPTF programs, omitting commentaries and opinions provided by other interested parties. This process yielded a data set of five individual and group interviews, for which complete transcripts and video recordings were available. Participants in these interviews were five former US navy personnel who reported personal experiences of sightings, and Louis Elizondo, former Director of the AATIP program, Chris Mellon, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence with access to the AATIP program, Sean Cahill, retired US Navy Chief Master-at-Arms. The transcripts of these interviews were checked for accuracy against video recordings and corrected and extended using an abbreviated form of Jeffersonian transcription notation (Jefferson, 2004).

From the data, we selected all passages in which the interviewer or interviewee introduced the topic of how the objects under discussion might be identified or explained. This process was conducted inclusively, with all passages of potential relevance being taken forward for further analysis. We conducted analysis using micro forms of discourse analysis (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008). Analysis focused on (a) participants' own understandings of the issues being discussed, drawing on principles of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), and (b) how these understandings were demonstrated and negotiated in the talk during the discussions, drawing on principles of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992). In line with principles of discursive psychology (McMullen, 2021; McVittie and McKinlay, 2023), we also examined if and how participants in their talk produced constructions of psychological phenomena such as knowledge or absence of knowledge of the matters at hand. Specifically, we examined how the parties involved in the interviews either mobilized potential explanations or made relevant the possibility of providing an explanation for what had been reported. Analysis focused also on the sequential

relevance of these turns, examining if and how they were taken up by the other party or parties involved. We considered also how participants responded to candidate explanations provided by others in the interviews and the interactional outcomes in terms of identification or non-identification of the objects under discussion.

2. Results

Much of the discussions in the interviews being considered is taken up with descriptions of objects encountered by US Navy Pilots and the features and behaviors of these objects. The issue for the participants, however, is not one of providing explanations to warrant the descriptions but rather one of not explaining the objects reported: any "explanation" would necessarily involve some identification / construction of what is being described as unidentified. And, as we see below, interviewees can accomplish interactional negotiations of non-explanation in three ways, as follows:

a. Distancing themselves from accountability for explaining.
b. Introducing a range of possibilities.
c. Allowing interviewers' candidate explanations.

We consider each of these in turn.

2.1. Distancing themselves from accountability for explaining

A first, and perhaps unsurprising, way for participants to accomplish the non-explanation of a UAP is for the interviewees to distance themselves from accountability for providing such an explanation. For this to be successful, however, they need to attend to that absence of responsibility, presenting their description in a way that will not meet with challenge from the interviewer. Below we see two interactional instances of this distancing. Extract 1 is taken from an interview conducted on 19 December 2019 by Matthew Phelan of Intelligencer magazine with Chad Underwood, a former US Navy pilot who had in 2004 reported an encounter with an unidentified craft. The exchange below follows a discussion of an interview previously given to the New York Times, in which Underwood's then commanding officer, David Fravor, had referred to this and other UAP sightings.

Extract 1

1	Underwood	at <u>no</u> point did I want to speculate as to (.) what I
2		thought this thing was (.) or be associated with
3		>you know< alien beings and alien aircraft and all
4		tha:t stuff (.) I'm like no (.) I do not <u>wa</u>nt to be
5		part of t<u>hat</u> community (.) it is just what we call a
6		UFO (.) I couldn't identify it (.) it was flying (.)
7		a:nd it was an <u>ob</u>ject it's as simple as [that
8	Phelan	[yeah
9	Underwood	I'll let the nerds (.) like (.) do the math on what it
10		was <u>likely</u> to be (.) I just happened to be the
11		<u>per</u>son that brought back the video

In his first turn at lines 1 to 7, Underwood denies that he wishes to offer any explanation for what he had witnessed. He emphasizes the extent and ongoing nature of this denial through "at no point". He also downgrades the status of any explanation that he might have provided, suggesting that it would only be a "thought" about which he might "speculate". And, by describing the object that he saw in the most general terms as "this thing", he avoids presenting further detail. At lines 5 to 7, he provides an upshot of this stance, in stating "I couldn't identify it (.) it was flying (.) a:nd it was an object". In so doing, he draws explicitly upon the three elements of the expression "unidentified flying object". Here, the idiomatic reference allows him to present his claim as something that is common knowledge. This is amplified by his subsequent reference to the relevant acronym: "it is just what we call a UFO". He treats this claim as self-evident in providing the upshot that "it's as simple as that".

In passing, at lines 2 to 5, he describes his motivation for avoiding explanatory talk. He does so by introducing and discounting one specific candidate explanation. Underwood argues that to engage in speculation would involve being "associated" with "alien beings and alien aircraft and all tha:t stuff". The three-part listing suggests that these elements stand for a larger set of possibilities (Jefferson, 1990) to which he is reacting. He specifies his evaluative conclusion on such "stuff" in stating, "I'm like no". Underwood further distances himself from these descriptions by referring to those that might propose this account as "t<u>hat</u> community". Here the use of "that" depicts those who might offer such a view as being transgressive of the usual order (Hayward et al., 2015), providing warrant for Underwood to distance himself from this category and the explanations that members of it might offer for what is being discussed. Instead, he argues that he does not want to be "part of" it, dismissing the candidate explanation that he introduced.

Following the minimal agreement "yeah" from Phelan at line 8, Underwood goes on to attribute to others, "the nerds", responsibility for a specific action of "do[ing] the math". The negative inferences made available by this categorization,

and the specificity of the action as described, work to suggest that the outcome of these efforts will be unsatisfying. Underwood explicitly picks up on such an outcome, arguing at lines 9 to 10 that these actions can produce only a tentative identification, "what it was likely to be", rather than reaching a definite conclusion. He concludes by minimizing his own role in reporting observations of the object, stating that he "just happened to be the person that brought back the video". Here, the depreciatory use of the term "just" (Lee, 1987), his description of his own involvement in passive terms as someone who "happened to be the person", and the reformulation of his actions as bringing "back the video", all work to minimize Underwood's contribution to the reporting of the UAP and to distance him from accountability for explaining it.

Speakers, then, can seek to distance themselves from accountability for producing explanations by minimizing their own roles in reporting observations of events. An alternative strategy is to distance themselves from claims that are made from these observations. Extract 2 is taken from an interview conducted on 16 May 2021 by Bill Whitaker on CBS News "60 Minutes" program with Louis Elizondo, former Director of the AATIP program.

Extract 2

1	Whitaker	So: (.) what you are telling me is that UFOs (.)
2		unidentified flying objects (.) are real?
3	Elizondo	Bill (.) I think we're beyond tha:t already (.) the
4		government has already stated >for the record<
5		that they're real (.) I'm not telling you that (.) the
6		United States government is telling you that

This exchange comes at the beginning of the reported section of the interview. It is, however, immediately evident that the discussion follows on from previous (unreported) talk, with Whitaker referring to what Elizondo is "telling" him. Moreover, Whitaker's use of the discourse marker "So" at line 1 prefaces an upshot of prior talk (Bolden, 2009; Raymond, 2004). And in this upshot, at lines 1 to 2, Whitaker summarizes Elizondo's prior talk as being a factual claim, stating that what Elizondo has been "telling" him is that "UFOs (.) unidentified flying objects (.) are real". Here, the marker "So", the factual status given to the description, and the personal attribution of this claim, serve to project the expectation that Elizondo will produce an explanation to warrant the claim.

Elizondo orients to this suggestion in his response by rejecting, at lines 3 and 5, the upshot offered by Whitaker. He explicitly denies that he is personally responsible for the claim that UFOs are "real", stating "I think we're beyond tha:t already" and "I'm not telling you that". To warrant this denial, Elizondo suggests that the status of "UFOs" as "real" has already been settled by those who have the authority to make such a claim and is not open to dispute. The authority of those others is highlighted in that they are responsible for making statements "for the record". It is given further emphasis in the way Elizondo works up "the government has already stated" at lines 3 and 4 to "the United States government is telling you that" at lines 5 and 6.

This enables him to adopt a footing of being only the animator of a claim made by others. This switch of footing distances Elizondo from accountability for the claim: if any explanation is required, then it is "the United States government" as author of the claim and not Elizondo himself that is responsible for explaining "UFOs".

2.2. Introducing range of possibilities

Although the interviewees sought to distance themselves from accountability for explaining the events that had been witnessed, there were many instances when the interviewers nonetheless asked them to offer some sort of explanation. Extract 3 comes from another interview given by Louis Elizondo, the former Director of the AATIP program. This interview was conducted on 8 June 2021 by Jacqueline Alemany of The Washington Post. The exchange below comes towards the end of a discussion in which Alemany has been inviting Elizondo to offer some views on the unidentified craft that had been witnessed, and Elizondo has provided generalized responses to her questions.

Extract 3

1	Alemany	is there any sort of way you could (.) >you know<
2		(.) more specifically [
3	Elizondo	[sure (.) so (.) yeah (.) I've said
4		before this is something >and I guess I may have just
5		said it again< but that this could be something from
6		outer space (.) inner space (.) or frankly the space in
7		between (.) there's a lot of options out there (.) this
8		could be something that is extra hyper dimensional
9		(.) now I don't mean extradimensional in a ↑woo-
10		woo sense (.) I mean (.) extradimensional in a
11		quantum physics sense (.) we know that the universe
12		is full of shortcuts and loopholes

Alemany's question at lines 1 to 2 follows on from the previous discussion and invites Elizondo to explain "more spe-cifically" the objects that have been sighted. This is framed in qualified terms, "is there any sort of way", suggesting some difficulty with the descriptions that Elizondo had previously provided.

Elizondo begins at line 3 with what appears initially to be a positive response to Alemany's question, saying "sure (.) so (.) yeah (.)". However, four elements of his reply mark some qualification in this response. First, the brief pauses around "sure" and "yeah" display hesitancy. Second, his initial emphatic claim that "this is something", at line 4, is reworked in a weaker, conditional form as "this could be something" at line 5. Third, his repetition of "something" emphasizes the lack of more substantive description in his reply. Fourth, Elizondo indicates some ambiguity by stating that his reformulation of what he has just said is something he is making a "guess" about.

Having indicated his reservations, Elizondo then takes up the interviewer's request to be more specific. What follows is a three-part listing of possibilities, "something from outer space (.) inner space (.) or frankly the space in between". This listing functions rhetorically to suggest an all-encompassing set of potential possibilities for explaining the unidentified craft (Jefferson, 1990). Elizondo sums up the extent of the possible explanations in his upshot that "there's a lot of options out there".

However, in producing this listing, which apparently encompasses all forms of space, Elizondo faces potential criticism that his reply is overly general and thus fails as a response to the interviewer's request for more specificity. And Elizondo seems to orient to this potential challenge in offering up an alternative explanation grounded in dimensions rather than space. At lines 7 to 8, he offers this alternate explanation, namely that "this could be something that is extra hyper dimen-sional". He treats this candidate explanation, however, as one that is perhaps ambiguous and that requires further discursive unpacking. In developing it further, Elizondo contrasts two potential uptakes of his description of the unidentified vehicles as "extradimensional". The first is framed in somewhat colloquial terms as "↑woo-woo", with its idiomatic quality undermining its possible status as an explanation. The second is framed in terms of a specific form of science, "quantum physics", making available the inference that such an explanation would have a sound basis. And, indeed, Elizondo draws upon the potential recognizability of such an explanation in his statement that "we know that the universe is full of shortcuts and loopholes". He does not though develop this explanation further or specify how it might apply to the unidentified vehicles being discussed, but instead treats it as a self-evidently sufficient response.

Extract 4 is taken from an interview conducted on 17 May 2021 by Chris Cuomo of CNN News with Sean Cahill, retired US Navy Chief Master-at-Arms, and Christopher Mellon, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence. This exchange follows a discussion about reports of "unidentified vehicles" entering US airspace.

Extract 4

```
1    Cuomo    Sean (.) what do you think is the likely universe of
2             explanation that will come up (.) at the end of these
3             reports (.) and addressing of this
4    Cahill   Chris (.) I think that we're >going to find that< this
5             phenomenon represents a ve:ry large spectrum of
6             different things (.) at edges of that spectrum are
7             going to be near-peer technology of our adversaries
8             (.) ↑here on Earth (.) at >the other end< of that
9             spectrum is going to be something that we don't yet
10            understand (.) and haven't identified yet (.) so: (.) I
11            hesitate to speculate on the source (.) but I can tell
12            you that I don't believe that this is within our
13            arsenal of any human technology at the moment
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Extract 4 begins with a question from Cuomo that explicitly asks about an "explanation" and that is directed personally to Cahill in asking "what do you think". This question, however, allows for the possibility that there might not be a single definitive explanation, with Cuomo suggesting that there might be a "likely universe of explanation".

Cahill in his response takes up this possibility of a multiplicity of explanations. He begins by suggesting that what will follow is a personal response as made relevant by Cuomo's question, stating "I think". As he continues, however, he immediately shifts ownership of the description to follow to a more collective basis, "we", suggesting that he is not to be treated as solely responsible for it. What follows at lines 4 to 10 is a description that is framed in terms of extremely wide and undefined possibilities, in the form of "ve:ry large spectrum of different things". Cahill develops this description by referring to the "edges" of the spectrum, spanning possibilities from those that might appear more readily recognizable through being present "here on earth" to a possibility that cannot be treated in the same way and that is "something that we don't yet understand (.) and haven't identified yet". Here, the vagueness adds rhetorical strength to Cahill's description, with the avoidance of detail making it robust to challenge (Potter, 1996). It is only after offering this description in general terms that Cahill returns to offering any personal view of what he had witnessed. And, as he does so at lines 10 to 13, he downgrades the status of his own view, arguing that he "hesitate(s) to speculate" and that what he is saying is a matter of belief not a claim for veracity. These qualifiers serve to suggest that his description is not to be treated as an explanation as such. His concluding

statement thus functions to reject one element of "the spectrum" that he described earlier, but only tentatively, leaving available the all-encompassing range of possibilities set out earlier in his response.

2.3. Allowing interviewers' candidate explanations

This far, we have seen how interviewees can seek to avoid offering explanations by minimizing their own roles in the reporting of observations or in making claims, or by invoking a range of possibilities. One corollary of this avoidance is that it allows interactional space for interviewers to introduce their own candidate explanations for what has been reported.

Extract 5 is also taken from the interview by Chris Cuomo of CNN News with Sean Cahill, retired US Navy Chief Master-at-Arms, and Christopher Mellon, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence. This extract follows almost immediately on from the exchange seen in Extract 4.

Extract 5

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1     Cuomo    that statement will get this picked up (.) and sent all
2              over the internet (.) because there'll be a legit
3              Military person saying that >maybe this is from
4              outer space< (.) do you want that to be taken from
5              [people?
6     Cahill   [we::ll that would be taking my words out >of
7              context< (.) what we ca:n say is that we don't know
8              what this is (.) and it's here (.) it's going to take all
9              of us to figure this out together
10    Cuomo    and Chris (.) what's your comment on that (.) they'll
11             say look at the resumes of these two guys (.) they're
12             both saying that it might be from another world
13    Mellon   there's no scientific reason or basis to doubt that
14             possibility (.) tha:t's a hypothesis that could explain
15             the facts (.) people need to be open to that
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In his question at lines 1 to 5, Cuomo selects out one potential explanation from the range of possibilities made available by Cahill in the previous turn, that "maybe this is from outer space". Cuomo argues that this possibility will receive extensive publicity through being "sent all over the internet" on the grounds of Cahill's credentials as "a legit Military person" that would lend credibility to such a claim. His question asks whether this an outcome that Cahill wishes to achieve.

In responding, Cahill acknowledges that such an outcome might well incorporate his own words. But he nevertheless seeks to undermine it, in that those words would have been wrongly removed from their wider interactional background. To emphasize this criticism, he contrasts this state of affairs with another, which identifies "what we ca:n say", implying that "maybe this is from outer space" is something that cannot be said. Having rejected talk of outer space as something that can be said, Cahill provides a three-part list at lines 7 to 9 of what can be said: "we don't know what this is (.) and it's here (.) it's going to take all of us to figure this out together". His first claim offers a rationale for his rejection of Cuomo's formulation. If no one know what "this" is, then a fortiori no one knows whether "this" came from outer space. His second claim addresses the potential difficulty associated with offering a description of events, which he explicitly acknowledges has no explanation, namely that such a description is viewed as unwarranted. He orients to this difficulty by treating the existence of those events as unproblematically true. His third claim picks up on his switch from "my words" at line 6 to "we ca:n say" at line 7. The use of the collective pronoun prefaces his attempt to divert personal responsibility for offering any explanation, suggesting that producing any explanation is a collective responsibility instead of one resting solely with him.

In the subsequent turn, at lines 10 to 12, Cuomo responds to Cahill's rejection of the candidate explanation by reformulating his question and this time directing it to Mellon. Again, Cuomo draws upon the credentials of the interviewees in referring to their "resumes" and seeks to recycle earlier turns of both interviewees in suggesting at lines 11 to 12 that "they're both saying that it might be from another world".

Unlike Cahill in the previous response, Mellon here does not reject the formulation that Cuomo has introduced. Instead, he reworks the status of the candidate explanation that is on offer. He does not accept Cuomo's suggestion, but instead recasts it as a possibility that cannot readily be dismissed, referring to an absence of grounds for rejecting it, "there's no scientific reason or basis to doubt that possibility". This leaves Cuomo's suggestion available as "a hypothesis that could explain the facts", and a possible explanation to which "people need to be open". Mellon thus allows Cuomo's suggestion to stand as one "possibility" but does not himself indicate any agreement with this candidate explanation or introduce an alternative explanation.

Extract 6 comes from the CBS News "60 Minutes" program on 16 May 2021. Here, Bill Whitaker is interviewing Ryan Graves, a former US Navy Pilot who had witnessed an encounter with an unidentified object.

Extract 6

1	Whitaker	what do you th<u>ink</u> when you <u>see</u> something like
2		this?
3	Graves	this is a di:fficult one to explain (.) you have
4		rotation (.) you have high altitudes (.) you have
5		propulsion (.) right (.) <u>I</u> don't know (.) I don't know
6		what it is (.) frankly (.) I would <u>say</u> (.) >you know<
7		(.) the highest probability is it's a threat observation
8		program
9	Whitaker	could it be Russian or Chinese technology?
10	Graves	I don't see why <u>not</u>

As is the case in many of the exchanges seen across the present data, the interaction above begins with a question that invites the interviewee to explain what has been seen. Graves responds in non-committal terms, first stating explicitly the difficulty involved in attempting to explain what he saw. At lines 3 to 5 he addresses this difficulty by listing features of the vehicle that he observed. Again, the three-part listing serves to suggest a more extensive set of features, emphasizing rhetorically the capacities of the vehicle that Graves saw. However, although all three features can be associated with ordinary aircraft, he does not go on to unpack why this particular group of properties constitute a difficulty in reaching an explanation. Instead, he treats his description as warranting a stronger claim that explanation is not just difficult, but impossible, in that he does not know "what it is". It is only after Graves' repeated denials of knowledge that he goes on to offer a candidate explanation. And, as seen in earlier extracts, this candidate explanation is proposed in extremely qualified terms, here as "the highest probability". His description of this probability as "a threat observation program" is presented in a vague form that does not attribute the "program" to any agent, rendering the description difficult to challenge.

The absence of reference to agency allows Whitaker at line 9 to respecify Graves' generalized description by introducing a more specific potential explanation of "Russian or Chinese technology". And, in his subsequent turn at line 10, Graves neither agrees nor disagrees with this suggestion stating that he does not see "why <u>not</u>". Thus, the possibility introduced by Whitaker is allowed to stand as a candidate explanation for the unidentified craft.

3. Discussion

What we see above is that the interviewees, both those who claim to have witnessed UAPs directly and those otherwise involved in the reporting of sightings, treat questions of explanation as ones that can be relevantly directed to them. They have available to them, however, a range of ways of avoiding offering a single definitive explanation for the events under discussion. They can seek to distance themselves from responsibility for providing an explanation by minimizing their own roles in reporting observations or providing descriptions, they can propose a range of candidate explanations rather than a single one, or they can simply go along with a potential explanation that is tabled by the interviewer. In no sense, then, does the interviewee's subsequent talk "make plain" or "make intelligible" the phenomena that are being discussed. The puzzle of how UAPs should best be understood remains unresolved.

The interviewees' avoidance, and the consequent absence of a clear explanation, does not however lead to their claims and descriptions being discounted. Far from it. The interviewees' candidate descriptions, howsoever framed, go unchallenged. And, in the course of the interviews, the interviewers routinely put forward their own candidate explanations for what is being described. In so doing, the interviewers themselves orient to the descriptions of UAPs on offer as being factual and potentially at least as being amenable to some sort of explanation. Taken together with the interviewees' descriptions, these forms of turns are designed to leave in play any and all forms of explanation for the UAPs that are under discussion. The highly qualified and tentative forms of description do not seek to arrive at any clear identification of the craft but instead to raise possibilities and to continue discussion of something that falls to be treated as not readily identifiable. In this, the interviewers and the interviewees' turns here together reflect the "interactional choreography" (Puchta and Potter, 2004) of the news interview.

These findings, then, suggest that there are at least some instances where the absence of an explanation does not jeopardize the factual status of a description of events. In discussing explanations, Sacks (1992, p.124) argued that people's "hold of possible facts is that those facts are possible for which there is an explanation. One can't merely say 'Well I saw it. You explain it'". Here, however, that is the form of response that interviewees produce when asked to explain what has been reported. What is key to this, we would argue, is not the issue of whether individuals produce explanations that meet specific criteria, in terms of "making plain" or "making intelligible" what has gone before, or establishing the facticity of prior descriptions, but rather how their responses and descriptions are taken up by the description-recipient. For example, the vague explanations seen in the study by Lamont et al. (2009) of how individuals might explain psychokinetic demonstrations functioned as explanations not due to their intrinsic features but precisely because they went unchallenged by the interviewer. Had they met with challenge, these forms of talk might have been found wanting as explanations for the phenomena that had been experienced. On a similar note, those found in other studies to have described potentially anomalous experiences (Childs and Murray, 2010) or reported witnessing UAPs (Hayward et al., 2015) were not challenged by recipients to provide further explanation of their experiences. In the present case, participants' descriptions are equally open to challenge

but do not meet with any resistance and are treated by both interviewers and interviewees as being sufficient in their terms. The issue of what counts as an explanation, and indeed whether any explanation is required at all, can be seen to be a participants' concern in the local context.

Now it might be argued that what we have considered here is an exceptional case; that the occasions on which a vague and non-explanatory response will go unchallenged might be few. This could well be so, but it draws attention to the importance of examining what, in the immediate context, participants take to be the interactional business at hand. Thus, for example, the interactional business of telling a joke (Sacks, 1978) differs from that of troubles-telling in a group context (Taormina et al., 2021) or avoiding confrontation in an arts and crafts guild (McKinlay and McVittie, 2006). The context here is one in which the participants are jointly engaged in discussion of objects that are unfamiliar and beyond everyday experience. The interactions seen here, then, function not to produce clear and definitive answers to immediate questions but instead to provide stimulating viewing for local and more distal audiences. For the participants in these news interviews, the issue at hand is less one of engaging in an institutional question-answer format with routinized turns than one of allowing for ongoing discussion of a topic that appears of interest to a broader public, one of accomplishing "doing news".

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Declaration of competing interest

None

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