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Description of membership and enacting membership: Seeing-a-lift, being a team

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Abstract

Researchers in ethnomethodology have found that accounts of action are not identical to actions themselves. This investigation uses video technology to examine the *enactment* of membership, distinct from the *description* of membership. This paper takes up this line of inquiry by examining the way in which in situations of team training, in the sport of powerlifting coming together for seeing-the-lift, gazing on a lifter for an extended period, is an affiliative act. Using video data from several different team training settings, in conjunction with Instagram posts, and drawing on the authors' ethnography and experience in strength training settings, this paper demonstrates that the differing organization of accountabilities in seeing-the-lift highlight that in team settings watching exercise is a collective matter of membership in the team. Thereby this article highlights a practice of embodied action which enacts membership roles in a powerlifting setting.

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1. Introduction

Sacks' initial program of research was directed at exploring member's methods of description as a respecification of the problem of sociological description (Sacks, 1963, 1972a, 1972b, 1992; Sacks and Garfinkel, 1970). It was in this investigation of member's practices of *description* that Sacks found the technology of membership categorization analysis (MCA). Now it is certainly not the case that the program of research into MCA has found and explored *only* description (Schegloff, 2007a, 2007b; Stokoe, 2012) but it certainly has overwhelmingly focused on the analysis of talk (and text). Given the small size of the research program of MCA (Stokoe, 2012) this focus is not unreasonable; there are a great many members' methods of description, categorisation and so forth yet to be found in talk-in-interaction. However, advances in video technology since MCA's inception as a program of research now give us access to members embodied practices in close detail, potential new territory for MCA. This paper explores one kind of setting in which 'who we are' to each other is *enacted*—not *described*—via embodied means. Using the problem of who may be allowed to [see-a-lift] in a setting of training/exercise, I contrast the members' maxim that strangers may not observe a lift, while for team mates such an act is affiliative. In presenting these findings I argue that the description, or reference to, collectives is not the same as *enacting* those collectives.

The scholarship of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, while focused on the organization of talk, was certainly not logocentric. The text of 'home position' (Sacks and Schegloff, 2002:13) was the result of the influence of the Goodwin's¹ work on Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson.² Even earlier, Sacks' lectures connected the question of membership and the organization of glances (Sacks, 1992:87). Noting that glances are an action, the standpoint I take here, Sacks introduced

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¹ For more see Goodwin (1980, 1981, 1986, 1988, 1994, 2006, 2007, 2010).

² I reference Gail Jefferson here based on personal communication with Anita Pomerantz regarding Jefferson's intense interest in Chuck Goodwin's data. In sessions at UCLA, and elsewhere, apparently Jefferson would take careful line drawings on the video monitor screens (of the chicken dinner and Auto discussion) in order to conduct close analysis of embodied conduct.

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the order of relevance in the arrangement of possible categories that might organize ‘who someone is’ at a glance. Sacks’ interest here was in the arrangement of how people arrange others into categories ‘on seeing’ and less with the properties of the glances themselves. This later developed into the ‘viewer’s maxim’ (Sacks, 1972a, 1972b) which was Sacks’ solution to the members’ work of ‘doing describing’ and ‘recognizing a description’ (1972a:329). The viewers’ maxim was “if a member sees a category bound activity being done, then, if one can see it being done by a member of a category to which the activity is bound, then [sic] see it that way” (1972b:338). The ‘seeing’ here is for the member’s organization of generating and recognizing descriptions. That is, while it references ‘looking’ it is not an analysis of members’ practices of looking, glancing or staring, it is a description of members’ practices of description. While Sacks (1992:93) discusses the reciprocal nature of ‘glances’ briefly, the viewers’ maxim evolved as a mechanism of talk (Schegloff, 1992:xxxiii).

In the reception of Sacks’ work, researchers in the project of membership categorization analysis (MCA) have largely focused on the ways in which the apparatus of categories and devices produced in *talk* has been applied to the world by participants. In researchers’ descriptions of members’ methods of grouping, categorizing and collecting other participants, researchers in MCA have largely not yet explored the intersection between embodied work and membership. Hester and Francis’s (2003) analysis of a narrative of a ‘walk to the shops’ exemplifies how attempts by researchers in MCA to explore the organization of membership in relationship to the embodied world that have fallen short of analysis of actual bodies interacting. Their analysis was of a ‘stream of consciousness’ narrative *describing* a walk to the shops. That is, this was not (as they make clear) the analysis of an otherwise personal, non-interactive scene, but the analysis of the *description* of a personal scene. So, when Hester and Francis (2003) state that the analytic concepts of MCA might be used on the ‘analysis of visual scenes’ they are basing that suggestion on their data of the *description* of visual scenes, a domain where MCA is long established. The risk here is logocentrism, simply applying the categories of analysis relevant to talk (see Stevanovic and Monzoni, 2016). Instead, in this paper we use close analysis of video recordings of embodied practices to highlight participants’ work of the embodied *enactment* of membership.

To demonstrate this enactment of collectivities, displays of membership, I present the case of [seeing-the-lift] in powerlifting team training. When exercising in gyms bystanders and exercisers alike take it that there is a socially sanctionable limit to the amount of time one may spend observing the exercise activity of another person. Much pop culture commentary is directed at the types of people taken to stare over-long at their fellow gym-goers.³ As an initial observation I contend that members act as if there is a maxim of the *non-observability of exercise*, following Goffman (1963). That is, that there exists an organized ‘civil inattention’ toward the exertions inherent in exercise. This maxim extends from the general *observability* of observation (Sharrock and Turner, 1980) and the arrangement of rights and responsibilities in the duration of observing others (Sudnow, 1972). Such overlong observation may call other parties to account (Kidwell, 2005) or reframe the orientation to a persons’ body (Heath, 2006) but in each case such ‘observation’, ‘glances’, ‘looks’ or ‘staring’ is *action*, and an accountable action at that.

It is noteworthy then, that in team training in powerlifting it is acceptable, and even encouraged,⁴ to suspend exercising in order to watch a team-mate’s lift. It is the organization of these moments of embodied affiliation to which this article is addressed. I examine the co-ordination of [seeing-the-lift]⁵ in conjunction with the stream of activities in the conduct of team training, highlighting two teams’ differing norms of the organization of sets (turns at conducting an exercise). I also illustrate two different practices of assembling to watch a lift’s course, being *cohorted* (Butler, 2008; Garfinkel, 2002) by a participant’s *incitement* (yells of encouragement) of the lifter and an occasioned practice of *assembling together*. My principal argument is that the suspension of the maxim of the *non-observability of exercise* for team-mates’ [seeing-the-lift] in these cases, is evidence of a team-bound exercise oriented *role* enacted in and as [seeing-the-lift]. That is, certain people with a specific *role*, spotters, coaches, team mates, may in fact ongoingly observe a team mate’s lift. However, as warrant for this exercise in the analysis of [seeing-a-lift] as a collaborative endeavor I begin with the demonstration that participants take it that there *is* a maxim of *non-observability of exercise*.

2. Data and methods

My evidence is drawn from three sources. First and foremost, I have been a powerlifter for 6 years and attended gyms weekly for over 18 years. I have coached numerous athletes and I have a qualification in Strength and Conditioning.⁶ Across these years and especially while as a powerlifter my focus has been on strength training, emphasizing the ‘three main

³ Such memes may be ‘staged pranks’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4JuKmsgSRI> images memes <http://www.ruwikmann.com/uploads/images/Blog/Photo-30-07-2014-14-19-31.jpg> journalism <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11587175/Womens-fitness-What-men-really-think-about-women-in-the-gym.html> blogs <http://www.fitnancials.com/staring-at-the-gym/> or forum discussions https://www.reddit.com/r/AskMen/comments/3ggx28/how_ofen_do_you_look_at_women_at_the_gym_brutal/.

⁴ Conversation with Coach Mel, Onerepmax, Feb 10, 2015.

⁵ Square brackets are employed on [seeing-the-lift] in this paper in the way which Garfinkel (2002) suggests, in order to highlight that it is a member’s method being described.

⁶ <https://www.strengthandconditioning.org/courses/level-1-information>.

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