

Negotiating Identities of Consumption: Insights from Conversation Analysis

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Introduction

Conversation analytic studies of work identities are distinctive because they reveal how matters of identity are relevant for the actual material accomplishment of work activities, processes and practices. To read conversation analytic studies of identity is to find out what the work of different people consists of and how matters of identity are relevant and consequential for those activities (Schegloff, 1991). All such enquires are based on audio and/or video recordings of people working and all are exclusively concerned, in one way or another, with identity as a *members' phenomenon* (Eglin, 2002); occasions where members' themselves orient to, or variously draw upon, aspects of person-hood in the 'concerted activities of their daily [working] lives' (Garfinkel, 1967: vii).

This chapter illustrates the study ethic and methodological practices that are characteristic of conversation analytic studies of work identities. It does so by drawing on an extended corpus of audio/video recordings that capture the work of buying and selling in a public setting; a busy urban high street in a British city. Whilst the analysis is bound-up with and seeks to explicate the work of selling the *Big Issue* magazine, matters discussed – such as the production of 'sales pitches', the management of customers and the cultivation of a body of 'regulars' – have a broader relevance for more conventional

work settings. First and foremost, however, the chapter is concerned with work identities on the street. It is curious that Organisation and Management Studies should have so privileged the 'enclosed sphere of work' (Foucault, 1977, In Gordon, 1980); at the expense of settings which – whilst less conventional – have nevertheless always been places of work. Various, urban streets are conventional and familiar settings for: selling (products such as food, newspapers, double glazing, motor breakdown cover, etc.); canvassing; consumer research; leafleting and promotion; trade in 'deviant' goods and services such as drugs and prostitution; soliciting charitable donations. What this work consists of and the various accountabilities and identities that are established by the location of such work on busy urban high streets has been overlooked. For exceptions it is necessary to look to Sociology (Pinch & Clark, 1986) and Urban Sociology in particular (Duneier, 1999; Duneier & Molotch, 1999).

Through three empirical sections the chapter considers different ways in which magazine sellers and those who engage with them orient to identities including 'Catholic', 'guy', 'customer', 'regular', 'donor' and 'homeless'. Such identities are approached as positions within a fluid web of accountabilities that are locally invoked and negotiated; not as deeply embedded features of personal biographies or psyches. The matter of whether people really are 'X', 'Y' or 'Z' is bracketed from consideration and supplanted by a study ethic that privileges how people accomplish, *do*, or otherwise draw upon, various ways in which they are available identifiable in the 'concerted activities of their daily lives' (Garfinkel, 1967). In practice, this means looking in detail at 'live' social conduct. Matters considered below include, but are not exhausted by: greetings, bodily

movements and inclinations, smiles, hands gestures, the speed, direction and way that people walk, etc.

The first empirical section considers the problem of *identifying* intended recipients of sales pitches. Of all the people walking past, who is targeted as a potential customer? In part, this problem was solved by the seller describing passers as members of gendered identity-categories, such as ‘bloke’, ‘sir’ and ‘ladies’. In Eglin’s (2002) terms, the seller *found* passers-by to be members of such categories and *used* their gender-status to identify them as the recipients of sales pitches. He never once used their height, weight or dress sense to do this work. Reference terms such as ‘bloke’ and ‘couple’ are well suited to the work of identifying ‘strangers’, but not all passers-by were unknown to the seller. A core task for *Big Issue Sellers* – and for those selling goods and services more generally - is to cultivate a body of ‘regulars’. A second empirical section considers how ‘sellers’ recognise ‘regulars’ and how ‘regulars’ recognise themselves in concerted activities on the street. Finally, the momentary reconfiguration of scenes brought about by acts of charity is considered, to illustrate the fluid, negotiated and continually accomplished character of identities on the street.

In addition to giving an overview of the chapter, this introduction has alluded to the ethic or ‘study policy’ underpinning conversation analytic treatments of identity. The matter of ‘who people really are’ is bracketed from consideration (Garfinkel, 1967) by a policy that privileges how people *find* and practically *use* available identities in the context of their work. This policy can be translated into research practice in a number of different ways and the following three empirical sections present something of this diversity. What links these research practices is an interest in identity ‘as a members’

phenomenon' (Eglin, 2002), as a complex of problems that people confront and practically manage in the context of doing work. In the first instance identity is a puzzle people resolve in the course of their ordinary affairs, conversation analytic approaches explore how they do this.

Conversation Analytic (CA) Approaches to Identity

The following sections present data¹ from an extended collection of video-audio recordings of a *Big Issue* seller working on a busy street in the centre of Coventry, a medium sized city in the UK. The *Big Issue* magazine is produced for and sold by the homeless.

Pitches and the Identification of Sales Targets

Part of the work of street selling involves positioning passers-by as 'potential customers' through the production of 'sales pitches'. This positioning may only last a few moments but routinely has material consequences for the conduct of passers-by. Once recognised as the recipient of a sales pitch, people face new accountabilities; whether and how to accept or decline the invitation to buy some product. In one way or another, people respond to the new circumstances. This section considers how these circumstances are generated, through an analysis of a 5 second video clip.

To position others as potential customers street sellers have to get the attention of passers-by, who face the problem of whether and how to recognise themselves as recipients of sales pitches. Such problems are resolved through an intricate choreography of movement, gaze and speech which are by no means distinctive to the work of street

sellers. A great many more conventional sales or service encounters begin with resolutions to such problems. This is known by anyone who has ever tried to get served at a busy bar, or attempted to get a busy waiters attention. How people get another's attention is amenable to research using resources from conversation analysis.

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|  | ↑Hello:, th'big issue ↑guy |
|  | (1.7) |
|  | have a nice day, thank you (2.0) |
|  | It's quite interes, (.) it's interesting |

Figure 1. Images and verbatim for extract 1.

In this instance, the work of gaining another's attention starts before the 'pitch'. The seller takes two clear steps towards the path of the sales 'target' and then stops. The sellers' trajectory is matched to the targets; had the seller not stopped, evasive action would have been required to avert a collision. The second of these steps, the matched trajectories and the stationary position finally occupied by the seller are captured by the first two images in figure 1. To the extent pedestrians co-ordinate their physical movements on busy city streets to avoid collisions, the act of walking directly towards another may be rare, 'noticeable' and thus a device for gaining that person's attention.

As the seller is walking towards the 'target', he produces the 'pitch' ('hello, big issue guy'). As the 'pitch' begins, the passer-by has not demonstrably recognised the seller. He may have *actually* noticed the seller's presence, but he has not *done* noticing him. He has not looked at, spoken to or adjusted his trajectory towards the seller. The pitch begins with a loud and stretched 'hello' (stretched from the 'o' and produced with upward intonation). In this context 'hello' is not produced as a greeting. The seller leaves no space for a return greeting and does not receive one after the pitches' completion. In this context, 'hello' is a preliminary to a pitch; one more little thing that might get the target's attention.

The pitch ends with a 'person reference' (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979) fitted to the 'target'. He is referred to as 'guy'. This is another way the seller shows 'I am speaking to you'. Across the corpus as a whole, the seller exclusively uses these 'single reference forms', never combined forms such as 'young guy', that allowed passers-by to recognise themselves. Almost all were gendered categories; for this seller and perhaps more

broadly, it would seem gendered categories are very usable for the work of publicly identifying strangers.

As the pitch is being produced, for the first time the target publicly orients to the seller, by casting his gaze to the product, which the seller is displaying in a prominent position, using his right arm (see image two especially). At the point the target is adjacent to the seller his gaze moves upwards and they exchange a glance; just as he is about to walk past (see image three).

Precisely at this point, as they exchange glances, something happens which is both remarkable and easily missed. The 'target' has declined the invitation to buy. How can we see this? From a conversation analytic perspective, social actions are nothing more or less than 'members' methods for making those...activities visibly rational and reportable' (Garfinkel, 1967: vii). So how is the declination made 'visibly rational and reportable'? The answer is; by the seller's response 'have a nice day thank you'. Such an utterance, which orients to ending of the encounter, is a practical method for 'noticing' a declination. By saying 'have a nice day thank you', the 'targets' lack of interest in buying a magazine is publicly noticed. For all practical purposes at hand, the seller has looked inside the mind of the passer-by and read his intentions. What evidence might he have drawn upon? Perhaps he found, in (a) the absence of any response to his pitch, (b) the 'targets' unaltered trajectory along the pavement and (c) the continuing pace and rhythm of his movement and gait, no evidence of a forthcoming sale.

The analysis has started to recover ways in which people are momentarily positioned as they move through busy urban settings. In building such an appreciation, we are starting to explicate a local system of signification that renders conduct amenable

to assessment and evaluation in this context. In this brief extract, the passer-by does not say anything, but is heard loud and clear.

The encounter does not finish there. There is a nicely choreographed sequence of activities at the close. Arguably, in and through the organisation of these activities, the participants express and enact a more general concern for the 'other'. Following the negotiated declination, the 'target' keeps looking at the product (image 4); even though he has walked past the seller. In response, the seller further adjusts his bodily position through 45° and maintains the magazine in a position of prominence. As the passer-by continues to look, the seller says 'it quite interes, it's interesting'. Through this utterance the 'targets' gaze is made accountable as 'curiosity about the product'; there is a momentary possibility that a sale could be back on the agenda. But there is something more; in this utterance both participants find something to smile about. Whilst the target keeps walking, he has not declined the pitch with hostility, annoyance or ambivalence. The passer-by has manufactured and taken part in a moment that acknowledges the sellers presence on the street.

Selling to Regulars

In the first extract, the seller deals with a 'stranger' who had no prior plans to purchase a magazine. Whilst *Big Issue* sellers participate in such encounters a great deal, a great many of their sales come from 'regulars' and from people who plan to buy the magazine. Like many in local service or sales occupations, *Big Issue* sellers both recognise and consciously cultivate 'regulars'. But what is a 'regular' and how, as an analyst, do you identify them?

For conversation analysts such questions can only be addressed by analysing specific instances. Rather than asking *who* are ‘regulars’, the challenge is to recover *how* and *when* the identity ‘regular’ is an oriented to feature of some work task (Garfinkel, 1967: vii).





| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | S = Seller, P = Buyer |
| | S: ell:o (.8) |
|  | B: Y'alright (.) S: Yeah m'alright (.4) S: Yeah it's the new one yeah (.4) S: D'you find the other one oka- alright with all the internet stuff in it (.) |
|  | B: Yeah () brilliant it's (.) I've only looked at a couple of them so fa[r= S: [so far but] B: =but there[you go S: [there'w'go (.8) |
|  | B: there y'are S: oh: thank'u very much (.) B: okay[see you latter= S: [have a nice day yeah= B: [[take care S: [[thank you |

Figure 2: Selling to a Regular, Imagines and Transcript.

In this extract, which lasts approximately 16 seconds, the seller seems to be dealing with people he knows. But how is it possible to see this? For the business of practically doing conversation analysis, this is perhaps the key question. In this data, how is it possible to see people doing ‘recognition’ and displaying ‘familiarity’?

First, consider how the seller acknowledges the buyer and his associate as they walk directly towards them. As they approach, the seller’s gaze is cast upon them and he stops his continual movement back and forth across the pavement; he waits for them to come to him. As they are motioning towards him, he looks at them directly, leans back slightly and then he smiles. This seems to display an appreciation both of their desire to purchase a magazine *and* a level familiarity with them as individuals (image one is an attempt to capture something of this).

Second consider the production and management of *greetings*. In extract one, ‘hello’ was not produced or oriented to as a greeting, but in the second extract, ‘hello’ *is* produced and responded to as a greeting. Alone, of course, this does not evidence familiarity, it is perfectly possible for strangers to exchange greetings; and street sellers will often manufacture such exchanges to draw passers-by into encounters. But this is not happening here and there is something about the way the seller says ‘hello’ which embodies familiarity. But what is this?

This brings us to a key tension in doing conversation analysis; what level of evidence is required to support the analysts reading of the data? CA *is* an evidential approach, analysts’ accounts have to tally with the displayed orientations of members;

but are these ‘displayed orientations’ always obvious and easy to describe? Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren’t.

The only place conversation analysts look to recover evidence - that an utterance is doing or embodying this or that - is the data, the recording. From the data is there evidence that interlocutors understand an utterance or gesture one way rather than another? Going back to the data in extract two, the buyer certainly finds nothing unusual or remarkable in the sellers ‘hello’; a return greeting is produced which also arguably embodies familiarity. But this doesn’t really help to explicate *how* the sellers ‘hello’ embodies familiarity. A second place to look would be the design and production of the specific unit itself ‘hello’. Comparing the ‘hello’s’ in extract one and two reveals them to be quite different. The first is louder, begins from a higher pitch, the ‘h’ is more prominent and the word is stretched from the ‘o’. The second is quieter, more compact, the ‘h’ is barely audible (the first sound is ‘eI’) and there is upward intonation on the final syllable. The analyst might even deploy an element of intuition here and argue, were someone to produce the second ‘hello’ to a stranger, it would be ‘unsettling’, precisely because it embodies familiarity (Garfinkel, 1967).

Even though conversation analysis is an ‘evidential approach’, something often escapes rational discourse. This is recognised within the community of CA scholars. In extract two the features of the second ‘hello’ that make it embody familiarity are difficult to access and get across in a transcript. For this reason, it is essential that – where it is possible to do so – data is made public². To ensure reflexively, the operation of the researcher’s native competencies have to be open to public scrutiny. The reader of this

chapter can look at the data and see if they hear the second ‘hello’ as it has been described.

* * * *

In this data, the most obvious way both parties display their ‘relationship’ is through talk about a prior edition of the *Big Issue* magazine (‘the other one’), which we might assume the buyer purchased from the seller the previous week. The seller both solicits an assessment from the buyer (‘was it oka, alright’) *and* displays his knowledge of this buyers interest in the internet which, again, must have been accrued from previous interactions. Here we see the seller crafting a narrative that links previous encounters to the present one. In contrast to much ‘narrative research’, which analyses manufactured stories and narratives, *this narrative is part of the world it reflects upon*. It is part of a process through which the seller gets to know his customers.

Some initial steps towards addressing the question, how is it possible to see ‘regulars’ have been taken by briefly considering (a) the production of initial glances and acknowledgements, (b) initial greetings and (c) narratives that trade upon prior encounters. Perhaps it is precisely through such glances, greetings and narratives that sellers ‘recognise’ regulars and buyers recognise themselves as ‘regulars’?

But there is something quite uncomfortable about the analysis produced thus far. The identities ‘regular’ and ‘stranger’ have been invoked purely by the analyst and not by members. This has not been done flippantly. There are major differences between extracts one and two. Where people orient to a prior relationship, there are significant consequences (Schegloff, 1991) for the way buying and selling get done. But the labels

have come from the researcher, not the field. One reason for selecting this clip, however, is for what happens right at the end.

Following the sale, the seller walks past the camera which is set up at the side of the pavement. He says to the operator, *'that's one regular'*. What is the relevance of this? It does not somehow prove the passer-by really was a regular, but it does illustrate that 'the regular' is a familiar and recognised identity on the street. It is not simply an analysts' invention. More broadly, such comments are themselves amenable to analysis, as a way of appreciating consequences of filming people as they work. In this case, the cameras presence on the pavement gave the seller an opportunity to discourse upon his approach to selling. He alludes to a lively sense in which his work is subject to various techniques and strategies.

Giving Not Buying

Thus far no mention has been made of 'charity', even though the 'regular' in extract two lets the seller 'keep the change'. This final section briefly considers an episode where identities of consumption are displaced through an act of giving. The moment by moment negotiation of accountabilities and identities on the street is massively apparent in the following brief exchange.

In figure three below, an individual walks towards the seller and is initially seen as a customer. How is it possible to see this? Following the 'pitch' she walks directly towards the seller. Following a brief pause, she looks in her bag. It is this searching which occasions the sellers *'oh bless you'*. Through thus utterance, the 'donors' activities have been seen to embody an intention to purchase a magazine. As she is searching, the

seller thumbs a copy of the *Big Issue* from the pile he is holding (image 2). We can see he is expecting a sale. These are the accountabilities in play, within which the ‘donor’ is momentarily caught.

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <p>S= seller, D = donor</p> |
|  | <p>S: Hello the big issue mam (.6)</p> |
|  | <p>S: arh, bless you, thank you very much</p> |
|  | <p>S: havin a good day (.) D: not to bad [()] S: [oh that's good (6.0)</p> |
| | <p>D: I don't want the magazine, I hope you don't mind ([])= S: [no:: I don't mind] D: =it's just that I'm a catholic and ([])= S: [alright] D: =([]) catholic stuff S: alright (hoo) whatever ((continues))</p> |

Figure 3. Giving Not Buying, Images and transcript

We can also see the ‘donor’ recognises this definition of the situation. Easily enough, she says ‘I don’t want the magazine’. Even though the seller responds by saying ‘that’s fine’, the ‘donor’ produces an elaborate account that locates reasons for giving in her and the conditions of her life. She has lots to read, by dint of being a Catholic? Again, the interest is not *who* people are, but *when* they are (Eglin, 2002). In this instance, the ‘donor’ is a ‘Catholic’ in the context of an account for giving. Rather circuitously perhaps, her donation is not framed as a good deed via Catholicism, but as a rational response to being already overwhelmed with reading materials. In and through the framing of her actions, the individual expresses and enacts a more general concern for the ‘other’; the donation is handled gently, with due concern for the socially implications of giving.

Discussion

As mentioned, to read conversation analytic studies of identity is to find out what the work of different people consists of and how matters of identity are relevant and consequential for those activities. In the above sections, the work of street selling has been shown to consist of such things such as (1) describing passers-by (‘guy’), (2) recognising intentions to buy (‘arh bless you’), (3) gaining the attention of passers-by and (4) recognising repeat buyers or ‘regulars’. An attempt has been made to reveal how matters of identity are relevant for these activities. In one way or another, the analysis has been concerned with identity as a *members’ phenomenon* (Eglin, 2002); with occasions where sellers and those who deal with them orient to, or variously draw on, aspects of person-hood in the ‘concerted activities of their daily [working] lives’ (Garfinkel, 1967: vii). Despite considerable interest in identity over recent years, arguably research within

Organisation and Management Studies remains far removed from ‘the work itself’ (Strauss, 1985); not least because of the empirical materials that are conventionally analysed, interview data and *post hoc* recollections from ethnographic journals.

How best to characterise conversation analytic approaches? In relation to familiar conceptual distinctions, CA is firmly anti-realist. Identity is viewed as an ‘ongoing accomplishment’ (Garfinkel, 1967). What is interesting is how people *do*, or otherwise draw upon, aspects of personhood in the ‘concerted activities of their daily lives’. But the approach is also materialist, in the sense analysts are concerned only with interpretations that are part of the social world they reflect upon. More broadly, CA might be seen as part of a broader theoretical movement that de-couples identity from individuals. In conversation analysis, identity is akin to a position within – or a property of – accountabilities that open, close and change with every on-going utterance and action. As in post-structuralism and structural linguistics, in CA identity is not owned by individuals.

But such conventional distinctions fail to capture the most interesting and radical feature of conversation analytic approaches. In the history of Organisation Studies, and Social Science more generally, analysts have allocated identities to persons such as ‘manager’, ‘entrepreneur’, ‘employee’ or ‘professional’ without explicating how those identities are ‘relevant’ and ‘consequential’ (Schegloff, 1991) for the concerted activities of the workplace. This is a considerable omission which reflects the long standing tendency within Organisation Studies to approach identity – and other core categories – from within an analysts’ frame of reference. But in the first instance, such matters are confronted and resolved by members and it is their solutions, not analysts, which are implicated in the constitution of social scenes. Whether a *Big Issue* vendor is a

‘salesperson’ or a ‘homeless person’ is not resolvable from within an analytic attitude. It is only resolvable by members *in situ*. Practical scenes of work are filled with sentient actors who, in building their work activities:

‘Orient to their context under some formulation or formulations; who grasp their own conduct and that of others under the jurisdictions of some relevancies and not others; who orient to some of the identities they separately and collectively embody and, at any given moment, not others. And, because it is the orientations, meanings, interpretations, understandings, etc., of the participants in some socio-cultural event on which the course of that event is predicated, it is those characterisations which are privileged in the constitution of socio-interactional reality, and therefore have a prima-facie claim to be privileged in efforts to understand it’ (Schegloff, 1997: 166-7).

Historically, researchers with Organisation and Management Studies have accommodated the actor’s perspective by talking with them, getting to know them and by observing them at work, often over extended periods. Such approaches allow researchers to describe how particular identities are relevant for people *personally*, but unless the researcher can analyse ‘live’ recordings, they will not be able to reveal how work identities such as ‘manager’, ‘entrepreneur’, ‘employee’ or ‘professional’ are relevant and consequential the activities and practices of people at work. The absence of this account is a major weakness of Organisation Studies; whose practitioners remain unable to demonstrate how core work identities are demonstrably relevant for the actual activities of people at work.

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¹ The three clips reproduced in this chapter are all publicly available; they can be observed through the author's website (llewellyn.nick.googlepages.com/).

² Please refer to footnote 1.