

Context, Activity and Participation*

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In this paper we will explore some of the ways in which participants both attend to, and constitute, context by investigating the interactive organization of *activities*. In the first part of the paper a range of phenomena relevant to the organization of a single activity will be investigated in detail. We will then look at how the simultaneous presence of alternative activities situates participants within multiple contexts. One process that we will devote particular attention to is the interactive organization of participation frameworks within activities. Data for this analysis consist of videotapes of interaction recorded in suburban Pittsburgh. Talk is transcribed according to the system developed by Gail Jefferson (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974:731-733).

1. The interactive organization of activities

Activities have recently become a focus of study by scholars analyzing language and cognition from a number of different perspectives including pragmatics (Levinson 1979), linguistic anthropology (Gumperz 1982, this volume; Ochs 1988), Vygotskian approaches to cognition (Engeström 1987; Wertsch 1981), and the study of how cognition is embedded within practice (Lave 1988). One consequence of this very productive and stimulating body of research is that the term “activity” has different meanings within alternative research traditions. The simplest way to demonstrate what we mean by activities and how they are relevant to the analysis of context is to provide a specific example. We start with a concrete example of interaction because we want the generalizations we will make to have their roots, not in other generalizations, but rather in close analysis of the sometimes surprising particulars of what people actually do in interaction. In this we will follow Sacks (1984:25):

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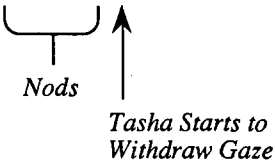
We will be using observation as a basis for theorizing. Thus we start with things that are not currently imaginable, by showing that they happened. We can then come to see that a base for using close looking at the world for theorizing about it is that from close looking at the world we can find things that we could not, by imagination, assert were there.

A brief exchange of talk will now be examined in some detail to demonstrate how the process of *assessment* can be analyzed as a collaborative, interactive activity:¹

(1)

Nancy: *Jeff* made an asparagus pie
it was s : : so | : goo:d.

Tasha: I love it.°Yeah I love that.



Nods

*Tasha Starts to
Withdraw Gaze*

With “it was s : : so: goo:d.” Nancy evaluates or assesses something, an asparagus pie, talked about in her first sentence. She is not, however, the only party to provide such an evaluation. Just before her assessment adjective “goo:d” is spoken her recipient begins an assessment of her own: “I love it.” The evaluation which occurs here is thus performed as a collaborative, multi-party event.

The recipient’s talk² is accompanied by a series of head nods. These nods formulate what recipient is saying as an *agreement* with what the speaker is saying. Indeed by virtue of where they are placed these nods and the talk they accompany in fact constitute a very strong way of doing agreement (we speak of “doing agreement” to emphasize that what we are analyzing here is not some shared state of cognitive consensus, but rather a visible interactive activity). If Tasha had waited until after Nancy had said “good,” producing a matching assessment of her own would have been trivial. However by starting to talk where she does Tasha both produces an

¹This exchange is analyzed in more detail in Goodwin and Goodwin 1987b.

²In talking about this fragment we will frequently call Nancy the *speaker* and Tasha the *recipient*. Use of these terms in this fashion is not entirely accurate since Tasha produces substantial talk of her own and thus is also a speaker. However as long as this is acknowledged no serious problems arise. Use of the speaker/recipient contrast pair is not only less convoluted than more precise descriptions, but also captures in a clear and simple fashion the way in which these parties occupy complementary positions in the activity being examined.

evaluation, and characterizes that evaluation as an agreement, without having heard the evaluation of her coparticipant. She thus demonstrates that she is so in tune with Nancy that she is willing to not only commit herself to an evaluation, but also characterize that evaluation as an agreement, before she has had an opportunity to hear what she is agreeing with.

Though Tasha overlaps the end of Nancy's sentence with a concurrent assessment, she does not say exactly the same thing as Nancy. One reason for this, displayed within the talk itself, is that each participant has different access to the phenomenon being assessed. Unlike Nancy, Tasha did not actually taste the pie being talked about. She therefore uses the present tense to evaluate the type of pie in general terms while Nancy uses the past tense to assess the particular pie that she ate. Thus in the midst of rapid, overlapping talk, participants nonetheless show each other that they view the phenomenon being assessed from *different perspectives* and have *differential access* to it.³ Through the actions performed the participants have brought the activity of collaborative assessment to a peak of heightened mutual involvement. The assessment adjective "good" is spoken in the midst of a range of concurrent vocal and nonvocal activity being performed by both speaker and her recipient, including an overlapping assessment, nods, and other nonvocal displays of heightened involvement.

Having created a state of heightened mutual involvement the issue arises as to how it is to be brought to a close. On the one hand the participants don't want to continue talking about the pie forever. However, on the other hand they are faced with the task of withdrawing from the assessment activity without disaffiliating from it. How is this to be accomplished? In these data Tasha follows her first assessment with a second:

(1)

Nancy:	<i>Jeff</i> made an asparagus pie it was s : : <i>so</i> [: <i>goo</i> :d.
Tasha:	I love it. °Yeah I love that.
	↑ <i>Tasha Starts to Withdraw Gaze</i>

³For more detailed analysis of how *access* is relevant to the organization of language see Hanks 1990, in press(a).

In its content this second assessment (“Yeah I love that.”) displays continuing appreciation of what is being talked about. However this talk is spoken with noticeably lowered volume (indicated by the smaller typeface in the transcript); Moreover as she says this Tasha withdraws her gaze from her coparticipant. She thus overlays talk showing continuing appreciation with her behavior displaying withdrawal from the activity. Such *activity occupied withdrawal* is in fact one of the characteristic ways in which participants close down a range of activities within conversation (C. Goodwin 1981:106-107).

The displays made here highlight the importance of *participation status* (Goffman 1981; C. Goodwin 1981; M. H. Goodwin 1980; Heath 1986) in the organization of context and activities. Through the details of the ways in which they participate in the activity of the moment, co-participants display to each other both their understanding of what is happening, and their alignment to those events (Goffman 1961a, 1981). Such displays can be used not only to ratify the proposals and evaluations being offered by others, but also to challenge them (C. and M. H. Goodwin 1987:42-45).

Simultaneous talk, such as that found at the end of Nancy’s utterance, is frequently treated as a prototypical example of the disorder that many social scientists assume pervades actual interaction. Thus Duncan (1974:320) states that when overlap occurs “the turn-taking mechanism may be said to have broken down, or perhaps to have been discarded, for the duration of that state.” Even the very brief examination we have thus far given this fragment casts doubt on such claims. Instead of chaos what Nancy and Tasha do together seems to provide an example of very finely tuned social behavior.

Noting the closely synchronized behavior that occurs at the end of Nancy’s utterance raises the question of how it might be accounted for. By this we do not mean an analyst’s explanation for *why* the parties might perform concurrent assessments (for example an argument that concurrent assessments are a way of showing empathy, that they mark a certain kind of relationship, that the parties are close friends (they’re not) and thus are well attuned to each other’s behavior, etc.). Rather what we want is to specify some of the resources and procedures that participants themselves might employ to systematically accomplish the coordinated action observed here.

Looking again at Nancy’s utterance it can be observed that the assessment adjective which is overlapped by recipient’s concurrent assessment is preceded by an intensifier “*so*”:

(1)

Nancy: *Jeff* made an asparagus pie
 → it was s : : *so* [: *goo*:d.
 Tasha: I love it. °Yeah I love that.

Moreover this intensifier is spoken with enhanced intonation (indicated by the italics and colons in the transcript). Speaker's involvement in her display of heightened appreciation thus begins before the assessment adjective itself is actually spoken. This raises the possibility that recipient might use the intensifier to *project* what is to be said next: an assessment adjective such as "good." Support for this possibility is provided by the fact that the end of the intensifier is the place where recipient begins to produce her own concurrent assessment.

In essence the recipient uses the talk so far produced to 1) make inferences about the activity (producing an assessment) that the speaker is engaged in; 2) project with some precision future events in that activity; and 3) perform at an appropriate point behavior of her own that contributes to the activity.

Rather than looking at the talk, intonation, and body movement that occurs in this example as different channels of behavior to be analyzed separately, it seems more profitable to conceptualize what is happening as a single, *interactive activity* of assessment that the participants collaboratively recognize, bring to a climax or peak, and then withdraw from. This activity knits an array of heterogeneous phenomena — syntactic position, intonation, body movement, displays of agreement, differential access to a world beyond the activity, etc. — into a coherent course of collaborative action. By looking at how strips of talk are embedded within activities it becomes possible to see how diverse phenomena within the utterance — the placement of intensifiers, changes in intonation and volume, etc. — are attended to by participants in a way that is relevant to the tasks at hand.

The activity itself, and the articulation of the interaction through which it is accomplished, constitute a self-explicating system of meaning and relevance. This is not surprising. In order to achieve coordinated action participants must display to each other the intelligibility of the events they are engaged in, including what activities are in progress and what they expect to happen next (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984; Kendon 1985).

What happens here is quite relevant to the analysis of how intersubjectivity is organized as a social process (Heritage 1984; Schutz 1967 [1932]; Weber 1949) within talk through use of language. In light of this several features of this process require further comment. First, recipient uses an incomplete fragment of the activity

in progress to make inferences about what it will become. She then acts on those inferences by producing behavior (a concurrent assessment of her own) that further elaborates the hypothesized pattern. Recipient is thus engaged in the type of analysis that Garfinkel 1967:78) has called the “documentary method of interpretation:”

The method consists of treating an actual appearance as ‘the document of,’ as ‘pointing to,’ as standing on behalf of a proposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of ‘what is known’ about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other.

The fact that the document being examined here is an utterance that has not yet come to completion provides additional organization within this process. Syntactic structure places constraints on what can occur next in a strip of talk. This provides an unfolding horizon of future possibilities that recipient can use as a resource for the organization of her own action. Thus, by applying her knowledge of the syntax of English to the talk so far produced, the recipient can anticipate in some detail what that talk might become as it unfolds through time. The way in which visible structure in the stream of speech interacts with grammatical knowledge to provide resources for the accomplishment of coordinated social action provides support for the argument made by Gumperz (this volume) that

that conversational interpretation is cued by empirically detectable signs, contextualization cues, and that the recognition of what these signs are, how they relate to grammatical signs, how they draw on socio-cultural knowledge and how they affect understanding, is essential for creating and sustaining conversational involvement and therefore to communication as such.

Second, the way in which events are not static but rather emerge through time is a key constitutive feature of the processes being examined here. For example, synchronous action at *Time B* is made possible by analysis of how events are structured at *Time A* (e.g. recipient can use the intensifier to anticipate a point at which it will be possible for her to collaborate in the activity in progress in a specific way). In so far as such analysis is embedded within time and includes projections about events which have not yet happened it runs a very real risk of being in error, and indeed mismatches do occur (C. and M. H. Goodwin (1987:30-32).

Third, one phenomenon given central attention in almost all approaches to the study of context is the issue of *interpretation*. Frequently pragmatic analysis focuses on how the invocation of an appropriate context can resolve the essential indexicality of language, for example provide resources that enable participants to find the sense of a strip of talk that is appropriate to specific circumstances. Close attention to the interaction through which talk is constituted reveals that there are in fact a range of

different levels within which issues of interpretation become relevant. For example, within the small fragment being examined here at least three different types of interpretation have been found to be relevant: 1) congruent evaluation of the phenomenon being talked about (asparagus pie) with appropriate attention to how the differential access that the separate participants have to that phenomenon is consequential for the detailed organization of their talk; 2) nonverbal cues that elaborate and comment on what is being said in a variety of ways, for example the head nods that formulate Tasha's talk as an agreement; 3) recipient's interpretation of speaker's unfolding talk as a recognizable activity with a structure that can be projected into the future, and that recipient can join speaker in accomplishing.

The third type of interpretation has a number of features which distinguish it from the other two. Most importantly the analysis which recipient engages in is a constitutive feature of the very same activity that is being analyzed: Recipient interprets what speaker is doing as evidence for a larger activity pattern so that she can then collaborate with speaker in producing that activity. This has a number of consequences. First, this analysis encompasses not only what speaker has already done but also what is about to happen. By virtue of the way it is embedded within an ongoing sequence of interaction, recipient's analysis has prospective as well as retrospective components. Second, the way in which this analysis functions as an aspect of embedded praxis, a way to help accomplish the events that the participants are then engaged in, provides a motivation for recipient to perform such analysis in the first place: if she is to participate in the activity in an appropriate fashion she is faced with the task of figuring out what the activity is, and precisely where and how she can join it. Third, in so far as she acts upon her analysis, i.e. produces further action which displays how she interpreted prior events, her understanding of those events is made public. Fourth, embodying her analysis in action provides a proof procedure for the interpretation she has made that is intrinsic to the activity itself. If she produces an inappropriate next action the mismatch, and the errors in her analysis, are available to coparticipants as well as herself; by way of contrast a next move that fits what speaker has gone on to do displays appropriate understanding through the very process of performing proper subsequent action.⁴ Viewing interpretation within such a time-bound interactive framework contrasts with some pragmatic analysis of how context is relevant to interpretation which treats the recipient as a disinterested observer contemplating an utterance and trying to make

⁴For more detailed consideration of how the properties of interaction provide proof procedures relevant to the activities that participants are engaged in see Sacks 1967 and Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974.

appropriate sense of it. When interpretation is conceptualized as lodged within activity, the party making the interpretation can instead be treated as an active co-participant faced with the task of using the event being attended to, and the process of interpretation itself, as a resource for the accomplishment of further action. By analyzing the production of talk in this fashion it is possible to empirically investigate the constitution of intersubjectivity as a visible, ongoing activity.

Most importantly, the interpretive tasks posed within activities are subordinated to the interactive task of collaboratively building the activity in concert with others through the appropriate deployment of a range of vocal and nonvocal resources at relevant moments in time. From such a perspective phenomena typically located within single individuals, including cognition, affect and action, can be analyzed as events that are socially distributed and systematically, but artfully, accomplished within the constraints of time-bound interaction.

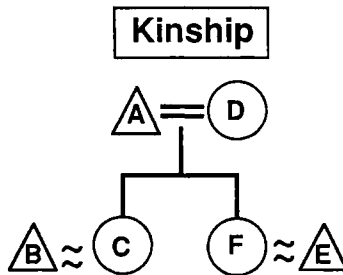
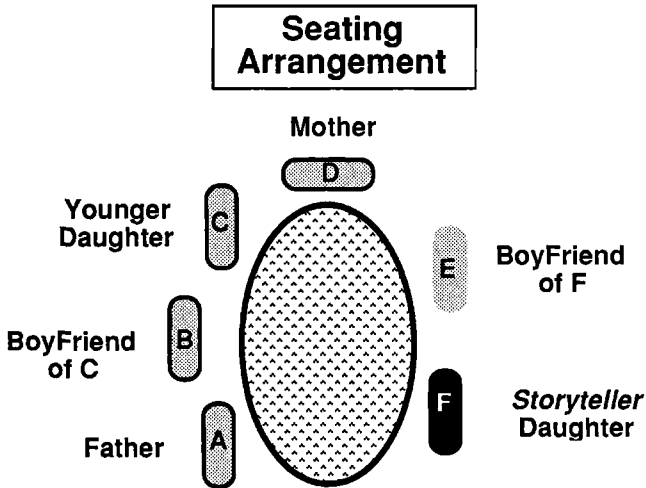
2. Multiple contexts

When social scientists analyze events it is frequently assumed that the event being studied is the only activity that the participants are engaged in. However within actual interaction people are frequently involved in a range of different activities simultaneously. For example talk can itself divide into multiple substreams, and those present may also be involved in eating, child care, etc. while their conversation is in progress.⁵ Participants are faced with the task of coordinating the different events they are engaged in, meshing separate activities with each other, and attending to multiple, and sometimes contradictory, demands.

To explore such issues we will examine a number of different events that occurred during a comparatively short stretch of talk. These data are taken from a middle class American family dinner. Present were Mother and Father, their two teenage daughters, and each daughter's boyfriend. The younger daughter, a senior in high school, was seventeen, and had been going with the boyfriend invited to dinner for several years. They were later married. The elder daughter, aged twenty, is a sophomore in college. She had known her current boyfriend for only a couple of months. Both boyfriends were frequently invited to dinner. Seating position and specific patterns of mutual orientation are quite relevant to the phenomena that will be examined. To make it easier for the reader to follow this we will identify each participant with a letter, starting with A for Father who is seated on the left of the

⁵For other analysis of how participants coordinate talk with other activities see C. Goodwin 1984.

screen. A diagram of the participants' kinship relationships is found below the seating diagram (Δ stands for male, O for female, equal sign for a marriage tie, tildas for boyfriends; daughters and their boyfriends placed a level below the parents):



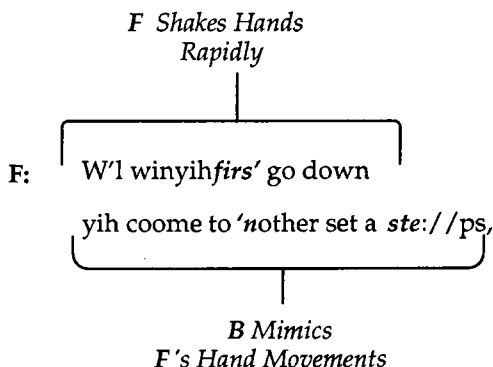
In the fragment we will look at there is no E since the person sitting in that position, F's boyfriend, has left to retrieve more food from the kitchen. F is the principal speaker. She has just returned home after several weeks of work with a Christian fellowship group, and for the past several minutes has been telling the others about an elaborate mansion that she had visited while she was away. In the following she is describing the mansion's swimming pool:

(2)

- 1 F: W'l winyih *firs'* go down
 2 yih coome to 'nother set a *ste://ps*,
 3 B: °(Little Bunny)°=
 4 F: =A[m'yer STA:ND]ING ON
 5 B: °(F o u F o u)°
 6 F: thi[s: *porch* li]ke=
 7 C: sss : : : : :
 8 F: =en you *look down'n*
 9 there's this gi:guunda poo:l
 10 *hh with *all* around it (0.2) yzhknow
 11 like a [sto:ne thing a *di*vving board,
 12 D: (some place ta set that)
 13 F: *hh like *a:ll* these chairs
 14 'n all this stuff set up *hhh

2.1 Recontextualizing a gesture

Throughout this sequence F is performing very animated gestures. In line 1 she holds her hands on both sides of her head and shakes them excitedly, perhaps depicting stepping motions used by someone to descend a staircase. B then mimics these hand movements, by first re-enacting them and then accompanying the re-enactment with lines from a children's camp song "Little Bunny FouFou":



B: $\underbrace{\text{°(Little Bunny F o u F o u)°}}_{\substack{\mathbf{B} \text{ Mimics} \\ \mathbf{F}'\text{s Hand Movements}}}$

By mimicking F's gesture in this way B shifts attention from the talk F is producing to her performance as a speaker. Such a process not only competes with the line she is attempting to develop in her talk by proposing a new focus of attention, but also undercuts the very act of speaking she is engaged in by calling into question her performance as a speaker.

The way in which this mimicking is accomplished throws further light on how context is organized interactively and will therefore be investigated in more detail. The gestures that F makes do not stand on their own as meaningful statements. However they do become comprehensible as an accompaniment to the talk in progress when they are viewed in conjunction with that talk. Through such juxtaposition body movement and speech are seen as tied to each other, and each can provide resources for the other's interpretation.

In the present data when B mimics F's gesture he ruptures the conjunction between speech and body movement she had created. The gesture is extracted from the talk that originally provided context for it. Rather than being seen as a subcomponent of that earlier talk the body behavior being mimicked is now offered as a naked, isolated object. Without the surrounding framework provided by her talk the body movements appear ridiculous.

Two other features of this process can be quickly noted. First, the way in which stripping the body movement of its embedding talk exposes it, and its speaker, as an object of ridicule suggests that the original conjunction of talk and nonvocal behavior contained within it a framework for the organization of attention. The official focus of the participants rested on the line being developed through speaker's talk, with gesture and other accompanying body behavior being interpreted with reference to that line. One effect of removing the surrounding talk is to reconstitute that body behavior as the official focus of attention. Second, the technique employed here to extract speaker's body behavior for independent treatment in its own terms, i.e. redoing the movement with systematic changes (indeed such *gestural quotation* constitutes a nonvocal version of what Voloshinov 1971 analyzed as reported speech), is in fact used quite generally in conversation to make some element of prior talk once again available as the focus of current action. Thus one characteristic way in which something that was said can be challenged is by repeating the trouble

source. Varying intonation in the repeat makes possible a range of different types of operations - from repair initiation (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977) to outright challenge (M. H. Goodwin 1983) to playful byplay (M. H. Goodwin 1990). Here we find this same process applied to nonvocal phenomena.

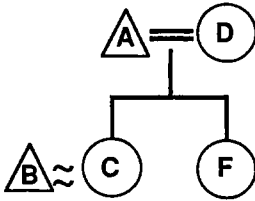
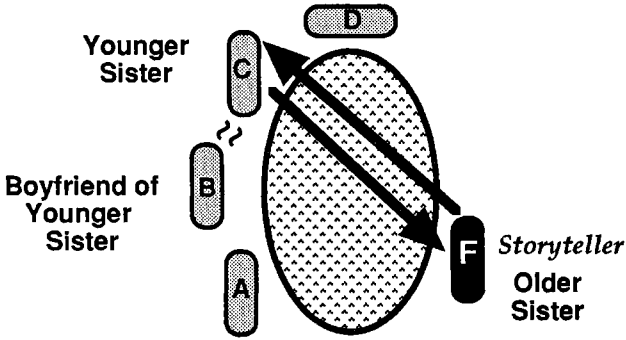
After offering the gesture in isolation **B** next ties it to a new strip of talk: "Little Bunny *Fou Fou*." By quoting the children's song⁶ **B** has imported into the current interaction a new context for its interpretation, one that further trivializes the movement being played with. The way in which **F**'s gesture can be tied to this new talk once again demonstrates how linking movements to units of talk can be used to create a framework for their interpretation. In brief, within this sequence **B** first extracts some of speaker's body movement from her talk, focuses attention on the isolated gesture and then recontextualizes it.

Looking at these data from a slightly different perspective we note that it is frequently argued that the cues used to contextualize an event are typically nonsegmental, nonverbal, paralinguistic phenomena. In the present data precisely the opposite occurs. Talk is used to contextualize nonvocal behavior; **B** uses the children's song to provide a new interpretation for the gestures of speaker's that he is mimicking. Indeed when talk and gesture occur together they typically function as *mutually contextualizing phenomena* with the talk providing resources for the interpretation of the gesture, while for its part the gesture elaborates and further guides the interpretation of what is being said within the talk (C. Goodwin 1987).

Disattending a heckler

B is now actively making fun of **F**'s performance as speaker. This raises the question of how **F** deals with this heckling. When the video is examined it is found that she averts her gaze from **B**'s activities, keeping them focused on her sister **C** who is gazing back toward her:

⁶The song being alluded here beings
Little Bunny FouFou
hopping through the forest
scooping up the field mice
and bopping them on the head.



Responses to heckling quite different from that found here are clearly possible. For example speaker could herself join in the byplay, or alternatively challenge the heckler⁷. Indeed immediately prior to this sequence **F** openly complained to her recipients about their lack of orientation to her talk. While **C** acquiesced to the complaint, **B** moved from disattention to outright heckling, a process being continued in the present sequence. Thus **F** might be reluctant to issue further complaints because they can backfire and escalate open opposition to her talk, while **B** might be becoming more flagrant in his heckling because it has already been demonstrated that **F** will now let such activities pass without challenge.

At this point multiple streams of conversational activity are occurring simultaneously. Though both have their origins in principal speaker's talk (unlike the case where multiple streams result from the fissioning of the conversation into separate subconversations), they are separated from each other both in terms of what is being said within each line, and spatially. **F** is able to argue for the ongoing integrity of her line of talk by focusing her orientation on someone who is orienting to her. By not officially acknowledging the heckling she is receiving she does not

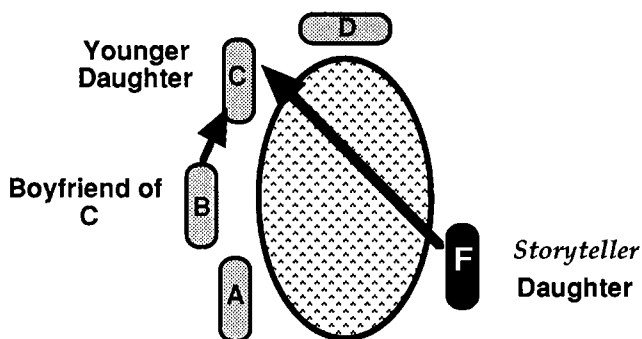
⁷For more detailed analysis of coparticipation alternatives in byplay, and choices between such alternatives are interactively managed see M.H. Goodwin (1990).

become responsible for taking it into account in the organization of her own action. This is not to say that she doesn't perceive it. The context constituted by these participants for the multiple streams of talk in progress is not a static, monolithic whole, but instead a process that encompasses diverse perspectives (for example very different proposals about the status of F's talk) made visible through competing alignment displays.

2.3 *Competing alignment claims*

While F's disattention of him permits B to engage in rather flagrant commentary on her performance as a speaker, it does not provide him with an audience. Unless the actions he is performing are acknowledged and ratified by someone else the commentary he is making, the fun he is having with the talk of the moment, will remain a solitary event, or worse become an embarrassment.

As B mimics F's gestures he gazes toward his girlfriend C who is seated beside him, and also shifts his upper body slightly in her direction. However at this very same moment F is also gazing toward C, and in so doing marking her as the principal addressee of the talk being produced at the moment:



Gaze toward someone is one characteristic way of soliciting their alignment to, and coparticipation in, the activity that the party performing the look is engaged in at the moment (cf. C. Goodwin 1981 and Heath 1986). C is thus the focus of two competing alignment claims. Both her sister and her boyfriend are making simultaneous, incompatible demands on her, one to ratify her talk by acting as a recipient to it, and the other to undercut that very same talk by joining in ridicule of it.

How does C deal with the conflicting demands being made upon her? When F looks toward her as he begins to speak she moves her gaze to him:

F: W'l winyih ↑firs' go down
 yih come to 'n other set a ste:ps

└──────────────────────────┘
 |
B Mimics
F's Gestures

→ °(Little Bunny Fou Fou)°

└──┘ └──┘
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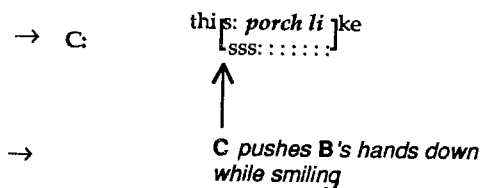
- 1) C looks *Toward B*
- 2) C *Withdraws* from B and returns gaze to F

However there is no “uptake” in C’s look to B, no recognition of the activity he is performing or any display of coparticipation in it. Instead while holding a deadpan face she immediately returns her gaze to F.

Having failed to secure a collaborator in his heckling B begins to drop his arms, thus providing a visible display that the activity he is engaged in is coming to a recognizable close. As soon as this happens C begins to attend to what he has been doing. With the hand nearest him she pushes his already descending hands down further while admonishing him to be quiet with a low “shush.” However while she is doing this her face begins to form a smile, and the quality of her appreciative pleasure is visible as well in the way in which the “shush” is spoken:

F: Am' yer STA:NDING on
 B: [°(Fou Fou)°

└──┘
 |
B's
Gesture
Drops



Through the mix of activities she engages in **C** is able to display to **B** appreciation for, and enjoyment of, the commentary he has provided on **F**'s performance, while at the same time maintaining her position as a rapt, attentive listener to **F**, indeed one who admonishes those who would undercut her performance. By using different parts of her body to make different kinds of displays to different recipients she is able to juggle the multiple participation frameworks she has become embedded within. Some theories of human communication might describe the mélange of apparently contradictory signals she is providing at this point as a pathological "double bind" (cf. Bateson 1972). In fact it seems to be nothing of the sort but rather a clear demonstration of how participants are able to deal with the sometimes incompatible demands of the multiple contexts they find themselves embedded within in the midst of mundane interaction.

The way in which the activities **C** performs here are organized in both time and space merits further discussion. As has been noted **C** is the focus of two acts of address and is thus positioned in two participation frameworks simultaneously. The spatial organization of her body reflects this in fine detail. Consistent with Kendon's analysis of the F-formation (Kendon 1985, 1990) her lower body displays a primary orientation toward **F**, something that is reinforced by the way in which her face, a primary locus for official "front stage" activity, also remains focused on **F** except for very brief glances to **B**. The hand movement to him is not only far more transitory than the continuing alignment to **F**, but is done below the visual axis between **F** and **C**, i.e. in "backstage" region where necessary side activities (for example passing food to someone acting as a recipient) can be done without challenging the alignment being sustained toward another party. The spatial organization of **C**'s body thus displays a hierarchy of alignments with a visible primary focus on **F**, and subordinate engagement with **C**.

Temporally **C** responds to the same event in two quite different ways at different moments, first treating what **B** is doing as irrelevant, and then a moment

later actively appreciating it. What seems to be involved in such differential treatment are not simply issues of interpretation. Rather, the response that an addressee makes will constitute the action in progress in a particular way. If **C** had displayed active appreciation, enjoyment and coparticipation in what **B** was doing at the point where the activity was at its peak and she and **B** were mutually gazing toward each other, a far more noticeable, and potentially serious disruption of recipientship to **F**'s talk would have been visible. Indeed active coparticipation at the peak of the activity may well have led to escalation of the activity. By responding at the point where the activity is about to terminate,⁸ and including in her response further moves toward closure, **C** appreciates what has occurred at a very safe place, i.e. at a point where its potential to lead to further disruption is minimized.

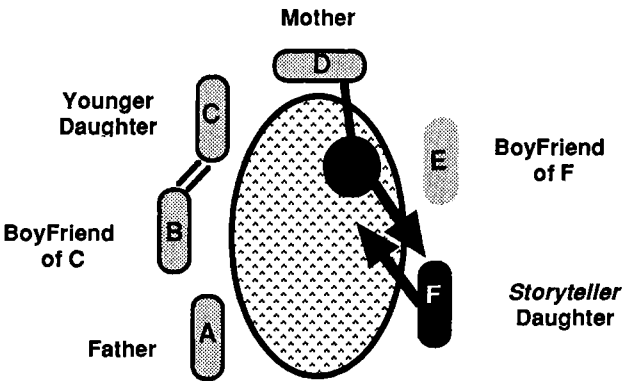
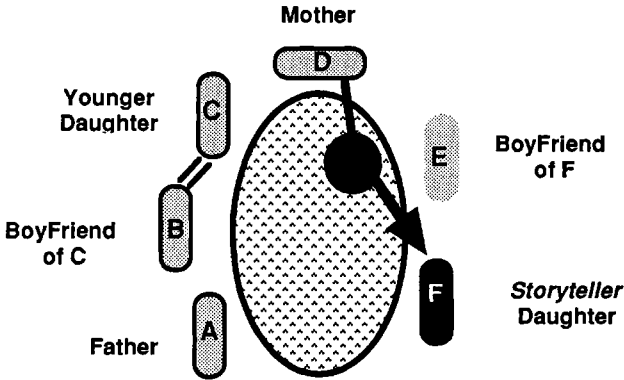
Looking at these same events from a slightly different perspective it can be noted that **C** is put in a situation where contradictory demands are being made by parties who have competing social claims to her: her sister and her boyfriend (who later became her husband). The situation she is in thus reflects stresses created by larger social arrangements within the society, e.g. conflict engendered by being simultaneously embedded within a family of origin and a (potential) family of procreation. The solution she finds to the contradictions she has become embedded within involves a complex articulation of behavior that attends to how events are interactively organized through time and in space. Though her plight is organized in part by larger social structures its resolution is accomplished through detailed interactive work.

2.4 Multiple interpretive frameworks

F's talk is vulnerable to disruption from another quarter as well. In addition to sustaining a state of talk those present are also eating a meal, with all of the attendant tasks such an activity poses. While **F** is talking, a bowl of potatoes is being passed from one person to the next. During the sequence we are examining it reaches **D** who then attempts to pass it to the person next to her, **F**, the last person in the chain. First **D** holds the bowl in a transfer relevant position just beside **F**. However **F** fails to acknowledge it and continues with her talk (see first figure below). **D** then pushes the bowl toward **F**. **F** then waves her hand back in the direction of the bowl. The

⁸Jefferson's (1979, 1984) work on laughter has clearly demonstrated that activities can be revitalized and re-escalated by recipient response even at a point of incipient termination. Hence the importance of **F**'s simultaneous moves toward closure.

directional thrust of **F**'s hand gesture in essence pushes the bowl away (see second figure below):



D then abandons her attempts to get **F** to take the bowl and hands it across the table to **B**, asking him in line 12 to find a place to set it down.

Though this exchange is nonvocal it is organized structurally like other sequential phenomena which occur within conversation. Thus **D** makes an offer to **F**. When **F** does not initially respond **D** escalates the offer. **F** then performs gestures which seem to reject the offered bowl and **D** abandons her efforts to get **F** to take it. **F**'s arm movement is seeable as a rejection, rather than just a random movement, because of the way in which it is lodged within this interactive sequence, and

provides a subsequent move to the action just performed by **D**. The recognizable activity (passing something from one person to another) which encompasses the movement provides context for its interpretation.

This is not, however, the only way that this arm movement can be interpreted by **F**'s audience. While the bowl is being offered to her, **F** is providing a very animated description of the mansion she visited. As she is speaking she engages in a series of gestures that elaborate her talk. Thus as she describes "STA:NDING on this: *porch* like" her hands depict a flat surface. Then as she says "gi:guunda poo:l" she pushes her right hand outward toward the center of the table in an expansive movement. After this her arm is retracted and cocked. Then as she says "with *all* around it (0.2) yĩkknow" the arm is uncocked and propelled outstretched into a much larger sweep toward her right, the precise place where **D** is pushing the bowl toward her. Indeed the arm passes right over the offered bowl. The arm movement used to reject the bowl is thus simultaneously offered as a gesture in speaker's talk, a nonvocal elaboration of the description she is then producing. By virtue of the way in which participants can see these movements as events within the talk of the moment they can maintain the primary focus of their attention on that talk, even as events that could disrupt it are actively dealt with.⁹

The same physical action thus functions within two activities simultaneously, constituting different types of objects with different types of meaning in each one. Moreover these separate systems of activity are organized so that the talk in progress constitutes the primary focus of the participant's attention, and the food pass is subordinated to that. Simultaneous activities thus create multiple contexts for the same event, while organizing these contexts relative to each other within a perceptual hierarchy.

3. Conclusion

In the prospectus for the conference that led to the present collection of papers it was proposed that the essential point underlying the notion of contextualization

is that contexts are constituted by interactional participants by means of the same verbal and non-verbal social activities which are made interpretable by these contexts.

⁹For more detailed consideration of how focus is maintained on talk by transforming phenomena that could disrupt the talk into events within it see C. Goodwin 1981b:142-14, 1986) and Goffman's discussion (1961b) of how encounters create a permeable membrane around them which transforms external events into phenomena that can be dealt with within the encounter. Related issues are analyzed by Heath (this volume) in his discussion of "double duty gestures."

Similarly Gumperz (this volume) argues that “all understanding, whether what is at issue is a word, a phrase or an utterance, rests on inferences made with reference to activity constructs.” In the present paper we have attempted to empirically explore such issues by looking in detail at how participants constitute activities in the midst of moment-to-moment interaction while using these very same activities to provide organization and coherence for the events they are engaged in. To do this we have investigated activities in two slightly different ways. In the first section of the paper we focused on how a single activity was organized as an interactively-constituted system of meaning that integrated the collaborative production of a diverse range of vocal and nonvocal phenomena. Processes of interpretation were quite relevant to the organization of this activity in a number of different ways. First, the activity of assessment provided resources through which different participants could calibrate their separate evaluations of events in their phenomenal world and intricately demonstrate how their minds were in tune with each other. Second, interpretations about the activity itself were central to its interactive accomplishment. These interpretations were situated in the midst of the activity¹⁰ and required that a participant use an incomplete trajectory of action to project future events in which it was appropriate for her to collaborate. There are great analytical gains to be made by looking very closely at how particular activities are organized. However within actual interaction it is rare for only a single activity at a time to be on the table. Moreover those present may have competing agendas even within a single activity. In the second part of the paper we therefore investigated how the simultaneous presence of different activities situates participants within multiple contexts.

A truly vast array of different types of activities can be enacted within interaction. Despite such diversity it does seem possible to uncover general processes implicated in the organization of different activity systems. For example in so far as activities embed individuals within social action, frameworks for the organization of *participation* are central to their structure. Such frameworks encompass at least two different types of phenomena: 1) displays through which participants make visible their current engagement in the activity, and 2) structures that provide for the relevance of particular types of displays at specific moments in time. Placement is as crucial as the display itself, since it creates a framework of relevance for the interpretation of the display that is consequential for what the activity will then

¹⁰These processes thus provide an analogue to phenomena that linguist anthropologists investigating metalanguage have noted for speech (c.f. Hanks in press (b)).

become.¹¹ Thus in #2 B's explicit parody and look toward F at the height of his heckling created a position for her to visibly coparticipate. The blank look she then gave him could thus be seen as a refusal to join in the activity he was proposing, rather than merely a random head turn. By virtue of the slot created by the activity, C's absence of engagement was as significant as a display of reciprocal involvement would have been. Slots for participation create the possibility of meaningful alternatives and thus provide participants with resources for collaboratively constituting within the activity itself what shape it will take as it unfolds.

Activities provide context that guides the interpretation of events lodged within them. Indeed, as F's rejection of the bowl demonstrated the same strip of behavior can be interpreted in quite different ways when it is lodged within different activities. However while such interpretive issues are important they do not provide a comprehensive picture of the social and cognitive phenomena relevant to the organization of activities. While using activities as interpretive resources participants are simultaneously faced with the task of building these very same activities. This process is accomplished through a complex deployment of inference, action and behavior which is situated within time and space (note the precise timing and spatial organization of C's response to F's request to join in his heckling). Within such a framework individual behavior is transformed into meaningful social action, and affect, action and cognition can be analyzed as socially distributed phenomena. The analysis of participation within activities make it possible to view actors as not simply embedded within context, but actively involved in the process of building context through intricate collaborative articulation of the events they are engaged in.

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¹¹The way in which activities create slots for particular displays of participation displays is an example within activity structure of what Schegloff 1968 has analyzed as *conditional relevance*.

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