A kind of governance: rules, time and psychology in organizations

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A KIND OF GOVERNANCE: RULES, TIME AND PSYCHOLOGY IN
INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION

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Biographical notes

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In the past fifteen years researchers in conversation analysis and discursive psychology have developed novel conceptions of the relationship between organizations, practices and individual psychology (Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007a). They have built an approach to human conduct in institutional settings which is distinct from those traditionally offered in the disciplines of sociology, psychology and organizational studies. This distinctiveness comes from an analytic focus on records of actual organizations at work, supported by new recording technology and new representational forms that enable a more immediate engagement with human practices than is offered by questionnaires, interviews or ethnographic field notes and observations. At the same time it is derived from a rigorous focus on the orientations and constructions of organizational members as these are displayed in interaction itself (rather than reported post hoc in questionnaires or interviews).

In the field of organizational studies these approaches provide one powerful answer to calls to ‘open the black box’ so as to understand the ‘actual behaviour’ of organizations such as boards of companies (Huse, 2005) and one way of moving ‘beyond agency theory’ in empirical work on companies (Pye & Pettigrew, 2005). Although conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists have shown a sporadic interest in the nature and organization of meetings and topics that have traditionally been the purview of organizational science, with the exception of Boden’s (1994) book on the ‘business of talk’ this has rarely come together in a sustained empirical programme (but see important contributions from Atkinson, Cuff & Lee, 1978; Baker, 1997; Boden, 1995; Cuff & Sharrock, 1985; Housley 1999, 2000; Huisman,
Recent moves to develop this connection have come from Dalvir Samra-Fredericks (2004, 2005).

In this chapter we will illustrate the kind of analysis that conversation analysis and discursive psychology can support through a detailed consideration of a single organizational event. We will use this to pick up and explore a set of current themes – time and control, authority and resistance, rules and practices – and to consider in particular the way in which organizational activities can be displayed, learned and resisted as they unfold in time and rework the nature of time.

The analysis offered will be microscopic, but not as a contrast to macro social science—rather it is microscopic as it aims to capture the level of detail and organization that the parties themselves demonstrably find relevant. Conversation analysis and discursive psychology have both shown the need and value of addressing interaction at a level of granularity that can attend to individual lexical items, intonation, overlap and other features of talk and embodied action that speakers themselves attend to. These features can be rendered analytically tractable by the use of a combination of Jeffersonian transcription (see Jefferson, 2004) and digital audio and video that can allow repeated inspection of conduct. This level of granularity does not detract from the focus on institutional organizations; rather, work in these traditions has shown precisely that it is required for a sophisticated grasp of institutional order. This kind of detail does not simply live inside broader structures, like an ant colony lives in a tank; rather it is a part of the constitution of broader structure. And the last decade of work in this tradition has produced a large body of empirical work that illustrates this programme in a range of different settings.
Rules and plans; institutions and psychology

In the course of this chapter, we will focus on how the orderliness of a particular organizational setting - a school board meeting - is built, and resisted, and the systematic resources used for both of these things. In organizations actors are making their world at the same time as they act within it, constituting and reworking institutional procedures from the inside. One area where this is visible is the operation of rules in organizations and their relation to practices. The traditional social science picture has rules as templates that guide and constrain practices (Bogen, 1999). However, the perspectives that we have drawn on provide important correctives to this picture.

In philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) in particular pressed for a much more complex picture of the relationship between rules and actions. For example, he stressed that rules require further interpretive work to allow decisions about whether any particular case is rule following or departing. He undermines arguments that the orderliness of social life can be understood as a consequence of following from encoded templates such as rules. The point is not that rules of some kind are not important for the orderliness or conduct and for organizational patterning; it is that they are not sufficient to produce such orderliness and their relevance does not flow in a simple unidirectional manner between rules and practices.

In sociology the ethnomethodological tradition has developed this perspective most fully. Harold Garfinkel (1967) highlighted the practical and ad hoc way in which individual actions are bought into line with, or shown to break, particular rules. Lawrence Wieder’s (1974) famous study of the operation of a ‘convict code’ in a halfway house for drug rehabilitation highlighted a range of subtle and locally situated activities done by ‘telling the
code’, which cast doubt on the idea that the code could be used as a straightforward explanation for the actions of the convicts.

Let us spend a moment considering Lucy Suchman’s ethnomethodological work on plans (which have often been taken to have the same explanatory privilege as rules). She suggested that although plans are often treated as the crucial determinant of actions they are in practice only a weak resource. Indeed, their apparent importance may be more a consequence of a Western bias toward rationality than a reflection of their actual causal potency. For a plan to operate it needs to have specified connections to the relevant features of settings and the contingencies within settings. However, as Wittgenstein pointed out with rules, this will mean an (impossibly) large set of further specifications. Suchman built a different view of plans which emphasised their role as resources for projecting and reconstructing courses of action in terms of prior intentions. The consequence of this view is that ‘the prescriptive significance of intentions for situated actions is inherently vague’ (Suchman, 1987: 27). Crucially this vagueness is not a defect when compared with full specification; rather it is precisely what makes plans useful for their projective and reconstructive tasks – they can be applied to an indefinite number of situations in adroit and locally specific ways.

Suchman illustrated these ideas through an analysis of the prosaic and familiar interaction with and around photocopiers. This brought to sharp relief the basic tension between the orderly plans and outcomes that are specified in the manual and embodied in the menu system, and the messy trial and error considerations that appear in operator’s talk. The operators (often) get to where they need in the end, producing their bound and double-sided documents, but their actions on the way are ad hoc. They use the menus, but they provide local interpretations of their sense. They refer to a range of background
considerations and reconstruct the orderliness of what they do as they go along, often in terms of goals and plans. Even in a system as apparently straightforward as photocopier there are no simple set of rules embodied in the manual that directly produce orderly operator conduct. That conduct does have order; but the manual is not sufficient for understanding it.

As David Bogen (1999) has noted, workers using classical conceptions of rules have used a procedure that abstracted the nature of these rules from and observation of practices, and then treated these practices as the orderly product of following these very rules. This form of explanation is sustained by a particular cognitivist picture of rules and practices rather than adequately empirically supported. All of these critical points encourage caution over the use of rules to explain action. Yet this does not suggest that rule formulations are not an important and consequential topic of study. Indeed, this will be an important element of our example below where we will consider the operation of a meeting and the way rules and rule formulation appear within the talk of that meeting.

As well as ethnomethodological conversation analysis we will be drawing on a discursive psychological perspective. The key point here is that we will be considering psychological matters from the point of view of participants. That is, we will be looking at the way psychological states are displayed and formulated and the way psychological categories are used in practice. For example, Derek Edwards (2005) looked at the way speakers display subjective investment in a complaint, or undercut that subjective investment using categories like ‘moan’ or ‘whinge’. Practices such as complaining manage both an ‘objective side’ – the complainable matter in the world – and a ‘subjective side’ – the speaker’s hurt, investment, intentions and so on. Interaction is organized to manage both the subjective and objective simultaneously (Edwards, 2007). One of the features of
managing the ‘subjective side’ is that it may be part of the management of organizational practices (Edwards & Potter, 2001; Potter & Hepburn, 2003; see also Samra-Fredericks, 2004). This will be highlighted in the analysis that follows; for some of complex issues that arising when considering cognition in action see Potter and te Molder (2005).

**Barbiegate, meetings and social relations**

The materials that we will work with come from a specific public controversy and, in particular, one meeting within that controversy. The precise nature of this controversy is not crucial to our general observations, although it perhaps accounts for the strong views expressed. A highly simplified version of events has a third grade school girl in Colorado submitting an experiment to a school science fair that involved asking people which of two dolls, one black and one white, was prettier. The experiment and its results was considered problematic and withdrawn from the fair. The girl’s father complained and the school board met to discuss the controversy. The controversy grew and came to national prominence. For a range of different analyses and evaluations of the heated debate, including our own, see papers in Tracy, McDaniel and Gronbeck (2007).

We were invited to contribute an analysis of the collection that included a set of school board meetings, newspaper reports and other materials. Interestingly the transcript we were given of the pivotal school board meeting where David Thielen, the girl’s father, set out his complaint about the actions of the school, started at the point where he begins to speak. However, when we looked at the video recording we had been given there was a brief untranscribed section where the chair of the school board introduced the meeting. This perhaps reflected that this was mere administrative chatter before the real business of the meeting. Indeed, for many the real interest was in the speech by one individual about
freedom and oppression, for which the apparatus of traditional rhetorical analysis might be deemed most suitable. However, as Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) have shown, it is important to understand even formal speeches in terms of their dialogical and recipient designed features. Moreover, for us the school board meeting itself is a potential organizational setting rather than a frame for an abstract participant’s position on the controversy.

One of the valuable features of these materials is that their recording is part of the data itself. The school board meetings were shown on the local community cable channel. And the record that was available for research was produced for that purpose. There was, then, no specific researcher reactivity. The camera is part of the event and the version it transmitted is a version for the community. The participants may therefore orient to the recording, but in a way that is endogenous to the event rather than researcher inspired (cf. Speer & Hutchby, 2003). Furthermore, as a low budget community channel there is only one camera and the transmission is not edited. These features made the video record an excellent data source.

In choosing to focus on the one school board meeting rather than the broader set of materials and specifically on the opening and closing of this speech rather than the speech itself, and the various potential historical and sociological contexts that might be invoked through historical study or social theory, we have taken a sometimes controversial analytic stance. Nevertheless, it is one common (but not universal) in conversation analytic and discursive psychological studies (compare Schegloff, 1997 with Billig, 1999). There are complicated issues here and we are not going to explore all of them (see Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007b, for a recent summary). However, the point here is that if we want to understand the operation of this school board meeting we should take this as an issue that
may be equally relevant for the participants (although they may have different access and perspectives on this question). The key analytic point is that we will work with the interaction to watch the structure as it is built and rebuilt by the participants themselves.

A manual for chairing

What kind of thing is the social organization of a school board? Whatever else it is, this social organization is something built, managed, undermined and enforced in the local setting. Part of this is undoubtedly supported by the physical layout of the meeting with the board president sitting behind a raised desk at the front of a room (Image 1) and the speakers from the floor speaking from behind a podium and addressing the president with the audience behind them (Image 2). The issue of how to describe participants over the course of analysis is a subtle one, raising fundamental issues around analysts’ versus participants’ understandings. Person reference is interactionally live in interaction in a range of ways (Schegloff, 2006; Lerner & Kitzinger, 2007; Watson, 1997). Indeed, this is itself an issue of organizational politics. Whose characterizations of events should prevail? Should we as social researchers offer a technical specification or should we attempt to work with the categories and displayed understandings in the material? Thus although we have used the descriptive category ‘Chair’ rather than ‘president’—as this reflects a conventional understanding of the business conducted by this actor in this interaction—it is important to avoid doing analysis by fiat simply in the selection of categories. Here the category ‘Chair’ will be treated as provisional and subject to further respecification. Part of our interest will be in how the job of ‘chairing’ is accomplished.
The physical features of the scene are supplemented by the technological features. Both president and speaker are provided microphones built into the furniture (i.e., a table for the president and the podium for the presenter). This underscores who the significant speakers are by, for example, making their speech clearly audible over background audience noise. Inspection of the videotape also shows that this is a well-attended event. Most of the chairs are full—the room feels busy. People appear to be listening attentively. It is a live organizational setting —speeches are being made to an audience both present and virtually present via the television transmission.

Let us start by considering the 70 or so lines of transcript before the ‘speech’ starts. The tape edit cuts off the first moments of the Chair’s introduction. We have used standard Jeffersonian transcript (Jefferson, 2004) and supplemented this some basic indications about non-vocal activities. Video of the whole piece is available via the Loughborough Discourse and Rhetoric Group Website (webaddress). We reproduce it in its entirety to give a sense of its fluidly unfolding nature.
Extract One

Chair: ... any: issue you wan’ to:, (0.5) u:m
(. we only have a coupla ground
ru:les:, the first and the most important
i:so (0.6) er:: that you have to: um (1.0)
s:start and complete your: comments within
two minutes, (0.6) u:m
(0.8)  Sandy how’r we doin’ on our: (0.3)
on our TIMEr tech- (. ) technology.
(0.7)
Chair: Good. = I noticed at the
last one that er (0.4) .hhh
t the: EGG timer was just not quite
as precise as we needed.f
(0.5)
Chair: [ (I) s(h)e(h)nse, ]
Various: [((Quiet laughter))]”
(0.3)
Chair: Some people
would get about forty
five seconds and o’r people
get (0.2) four or five minutes
[cos of the way those things work so.]
Various: [ [ (Laughter)) ]
(0.6)
Various: [((Quiet laughter and mumbling))]”
Chair: Ah: thanks: er:
an we appreciate that, (0.6)
U:M: (0.8) so
I am gonna try duh- e-
looks right
looks down
looks up
I don’t wanna be er - a tyrant up here, please try to keep your comments to two minutes: we do have a lot of speakers tonight, hhh (.) an’ I am required by board policy to finish all the speakers within an hour.

Chair: Which I think we can do, if everybody abides by the rules.

Chair: So lemme call you up here five at a time; five till five.

First of all David Theelan, then John Ketling, Esme Patterson, Kate Morley, and Lauren Heger. Come on up.

Chair: S’alright.

Chair: I’m sorry one and -

DT: "Five minutes" I planned for five.
minutes and I’m sorry so I’m gonna looks up at Chair
have to I guess (0.3) looks to right
rush through this. looks to chair, claps hand to stomach
(0.3) hands in pockets, looks down
Chair Well I’ll be genl. DT looks at Chair
(
Chair: But* ah: (.).hh (0.2) ah w- i-< DT looks down
it’s been two minutes for quite a DT looks at Chair
while so do the best DT looks down
you can to: er (0.5)
stick to that. DT looks up
(0.7) DT looks down
DT U:m (0.9) My daughter did hands in counting motion,
a science fair experiment like many looking at Chair
others.

As a first take on this material let us consider the way chairing a meeting may be a
dilemmatic activity. One of the themes in discourse work, particularly that associated with
Billig, Edwards and others (Billig et al., 1988; Edwards & Mercer, 1987), is the centrality of
dilemmas to the operation of social institutions. In their work on ‘ideological dilemmas’,
they note that institutions are often characterized by dilemmas over, for example, control
and freedom, regulation and spontaneity, and formality and informality. Rather than see
these dilemmas as problems to be solved for the smooth running of an organization, they
suggest quite the reverse that they provide resources for sustaining that running. Take
education, for instance. It is common to distinguish two kinds of educational ideology. A
“traditional” ideology focuses on learning set outcomes and following rules; a “progressive”
ideology focuses on developing pupils’ own potential and helping them come to their own
understanding of the world. Although these two seem opposed, work in this tradition highlighted the way these two ideologies are *simultaneously* drawn on as teachers manage classes and encourage pupils to reach particular outcomes. As Hepburn (2003) shows, what appear to be tensions and problems between ideologies in the abstract can be flexible resources in practice.

**Chairing dilemmas**

Let us explore this idea with the Barbiegate materials. We will focus first on the introductory remarks from the Chair. Analysis may seem micro or even trivial at times—but we are after the lived specifics of how this institution is subtly built by its participants; and not always built in ways that are designed for transparency. The videotape starts during the Chair’s opening remarks, which include points about procedure—these are points about what should happen in what way, and in what order.

First, note that the structuring of what goes on in this setting is not being treated by the chair as something that will happen automatically. Rather, various procedural elements are described – such as the time allocated to speakers. At the same time it is clear that the chair is not attempting to describe the complete ‘institution’ of the school board is to be beforehand – there are likely to be a wide range of taken-for-granted things that are brought to the situation (about how interaction works, about what kinds of things are likely to go on at meetings and so on). Moreover, as Wittgenstein argued with respect to rules and practices, the task of describing all that would be indefinite and counter productive. Thus those procedural elements that are described may be so because they specify things that are either unique or unpredictable; or they may be described because they have been
areas of difficulty in the past, or are expected to be areas of difficulty on this occasion, or because they are departures of some kind.

Second, let us consider how this introduction is done. It has a number of interesting features. Take the chair’s very first words:

**Extract 2: The rule**

1. Chair: ... any: issue you wan’ to:.
2. (0.5)
3. Chair: u:m (. ) we __ only have a __ coupla ground
4. ru:les: , the first and the most important
5. i:s (0.6) er: : that you have to: um (1.0)
6. s:ta rt and complete your: comments within
7. two minutes.

Consider the delivery of these opening words. Already we can see features that suggest the management of dilemmas of control in this institutional talk. Apart from the reflexive content of the talk on how the interaction will proceed, note the delivery, with its pauses and errs and ums. These occur most strikingly on line 5, prior to the delivery of the ‘first and most important’ rule, suggesting some kind of caution or trouble with the delivery of that rule. In conversation analytic terms this is a form of self repair, a word search (Schegloff, 1979). These features have been found, for example, in the openings of market research focus groups (Puchta & Potter, 2003); and they contrast with degree-awarding speeches and other formal and ceremonial occasions that do not have the same emphasis on shared involvement (Atkinson, 1982).

The hesitancy and the informality work against hearing the ‘ground rule’ about time limits as authoritarian and impersonal.
Laughter and Authority

A further element that contributes to the management of the dilemmas surrounding control can be seen in the next selection, which continues from the previous one.

Extract 3: the joke

Chair: (0.8)  
S: how’r we doin’ on our: (0.3)
on our TIMER tech- (0.) technology.
(0.7)
Chair: Good. I noticed at the
last one that er (0.4) .hhh
the: EGG timer was just not quite
as precise as we needed.£
(0.5)
Chair: [ (I) s(h)e(h)nse, ]
Various: [((Quiet laughter))]  
(0.3)
Chair: Some people
would get about forty
five seconds and o’r people
get (0.2) four or five minutes.
[cos of the way those things work so.]
Various: [ ((Laughter)) ]
(0.6)
Various: [((Quiet laughter and mumbling))]  
Chair: Ah: thanks: er: [probably to
an we appreciate that, (0.6) ]Sandy
One of the things that Puchta and Potter (2003) noted in the way market research moderators opened focus groups was that they often used laughter. Laughter does not have to involve the more elaborate joking that goes on here, but can be part of managing delicate actions. For instance, Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1987) describe the way that laughter can be used in the pursuit of intimacy, and Jefferson (1984) shows how laughter can serve as a display of making light of one’s troubles by a troubles teller. Hence laughter and humour can be used to “soften” troubling or critical actions.

First note the way here the Chair addresses Sandy by her first name (a feature of interaction between familiars) and using the folksy and inclusive “how’r we doin” (not “how are we doing”, “how are you doing” or “is the timer working?”) when asking about “our timer technology” (again the inclusive “our”). This sets up the ironic, indeed bathetic contrast between the “timer technology” and the “egg timer”. The contrast is underscored in the delivery and intonation—“TIMER” is emphasised with increased volume, while “tech-(. ) technology” is stumbled over somewhat and given some emphasis (line 8). Similarly the “EGG timer” is emphasised by increased volume (line 12). The second element of the contrast is also delivered in a “smiley voice” that, combined with the volume increases, sounds as if the speaker is on the edge of laughing. This hearably cues its non-serious nature and perhaps encourages the laughter that follows in line 16. More extended laughter follows the playful unpacking of “not quite as precise as we needed” following the contrast with forty-five seconds to four or five minutes in lines 23 through 25.

The point about this ironic and humorous construction here is that it manages the Chair’s emphasis on improved accuracy in timekeeping (in comparison to previous sessions). The tensions between control and democratic participation are softened. Control is stressed, yet the authority that goes along with that is softened.
Dilemmas and rules

We see the Chair doing further work with this dilemma in the next section, which again follows directly from the previous one.

Extract 4: The disclaimer and the rule

Chair: U:M: (0.8) s:o
28  I ↑am gonna try duh- e-
29  (0.2) I-I don’ wanna
30  be er- (0.2) er: (.) a ↑tyrant up here
31  but please try to keep your comments to
32  two minutes:, (.) er we do have a lodda
33  speakers tonight, (.) .hhh (.)
34  an’ I am required by board policy to finish
35  all the speaker:s (0.4) er within an hour.
36  (.)
37  (.)
38  Chair: Which I think we can do,
39  ↑if everybody (.)
40  .hh (. ) u:m (. ) abides by the rules.
41  (0.3)

Consider line 29, where the Chair’s initial utterance emphasised his own role in performing some action ‘↑am gonna try duh-’ – most probably ‘try to keep everyone to time’ is repaired. The disclaimer ‘I don’t wanna be er- (0.2) er: (.) ↑tyrant up here’ (lines 30-31) follows this cut-off, and explicitly attends to the emphasis on his own role that was created by that initial utterance. This is then reformulated as a polite request ‘please try to keep your comments to two minutes’ (lines 32-33). By repairing his prior utterance, the
Chair attends to the potential for his actions to be heard as (over) controlling and this is managed with the disclaimer.

There is another similarity here with the start of market research focus groups, where a similar issue of control is being managed. A highly recurrent practice is for the moderator to say what the focus group is not (it is not a test, it is not like a school, it is not somewhere where there are right or wrong answers). That is, the relevant and troubling alternative is disclaimed. This is precisely what happens with the Chair’s disclaimer.

Tyranny is highlighted as a relevant problem category where rules are being imposed; that is not what is going on here.

**Rules in practices**

Let us stand back for a moment and consider again the broader issue of rules and practices. What we have here is not rule-bound activity in a simple way. At least, it may or may not be such a thing but it is not clear what evidence could settle the matter, or whether any evidence could (cf. Bogen, 1999). However, we do have locally produced and reflexive rule formulations. The Chair glosses what the rules of the organization are. However, note the delicate way the Chair does this. He builds a separation between himself and board policy. Rather than acting as an agent of authority, administering it to others like some more or less benign Judge Dredd, he is *himself* constrained by it: ‘I am required by board policy to finish all the speakers (0.4) er within an hour.’ (lines 35-36). He separates the constraining action of the ‘board policy’ rules from his own goals or desires—the emphasis on ‘am required’ counters the possibility that he may have a free hand in this. Although he does not explicitly say that he would like speakers to take longer, the explicit separation makes available such a possibility. We can see here a practical arena in which the classic
sociological structure/agency divide is produced for the practical purposes of managing the Chair’s accountability.

There is another important element to the Chair’s construction of rules. Directly after his request that speakers must finish within two minutes he offers the description ‘we do have a lodda speakers tonight’ (lines 6-7). In this interactional slot this description is hearable as an account for finishing within two minutes. That is, the Chair moves beyond an emphasis on rules (without, however, deleting such an emphasis). Instead he emphasises a timescale will not only be practical (giving everyone time) but will be fair (giving everyone a voice). Put another way, for the participants to disagree with such a request, for example, by bidding for extra time, might undermine this practicality and fairness. It is striking that even when considering the discourse of fascists or those arguing against ethnic advancement, argumentative commonplaces stressing practicality and fairness are commonly employed (Billig, 1978; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

This point is further underlined by the Chair with his conditional on lines 38-40: ‘which I think we can do [finish within an hour] if everybody (0.1) .hh (0.1) u:m (0.1) abides by the rules.’ Note the display of hesitancy before the delivery of ‘abides by the rules’ again showing a possible softening of the rule formulation (through delaying it and showing attention to its delicacy). Note also that this utterance provides an environment where someone wishing to press something different may be heard as wishing for special treatment at the expense of others and/or an extension of the length of the meeting. By this point, the Chair has built (one element of) the working of this organization by using resources from lexicons of bureaucracy, of practical common sense, and of moral/political sense of fairness.
Time, Rules, and Resistance

All this interactional work on the part of the Chair does not necessarily ensure that the time rule is followed. It may set up an environment where deviation is tricky, but people have a wide range of resources for resisting the imposition of strictures of this kind. Another way of looking at this is that this kind of organizational setting is produced conversationally, and as different analysts have shown conversation is an arena of contingency. One turn may set up conditions for what comes next, but it does not determine what comes next (Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992). Conversation is highly orderly, but not in the way a car engine is orderly. Turns of talk typically occasion a range of relevant options. One of the points of our analysis of the specifics of this interaction is to catch both the building of constraints and the resistance to those constraints. Moreover, we can see the parties' construction of versions of this process as either democratic or authoritarian. That is, the parties themselves are performing their own political analysis of the interaction they are a part of.

We will consider both the start and end of David Thielen’s contribution to the interaction. This extract, again, follows on from the previous one.

Extract 5: The minutes

42 Chair: So: er lemmee call you up here
43 five at a time;
44 (0.2) .hh a:nd um (1.1) now we’ll get ↑started.
45 First of all David Thi:elen, (. ) then John
46 Ketling, (0.6) Esme Patterson, (0.7) Kate Morley,
There is a range of interesting features of this stretch of interaction. Let us focus in particular on some features of the exchange between David Thielen (henceforth DT) and the Chair.
The earliest thing that DT can be heard saying on the audio is ‘five minutes’ (line 57). It is quiet, but that is probably because he was still moving into range of the microphone. Most likely he had already said ‘I planned for five minutes’ and now repeats himself when the microphone allows him to be heard over the room noise (lines 59-60) when it becomes clear that people cannot properly hear. He continues, saying that he will be forced to ‘rush through’ his speech (he shuffles through the notes while saying this in a visual display of how the orderliness of his talk will be disrupted). DT’s talk here is built in a way that manages two things simultaneously.

First, note the way DT formulates the hurried nature of his speech as a product, not just of his own preparation of five minutes worth of material, but also of the time rule (‘I planned for five minutes and I’m sorry so I’m gonna have to I guess (0.3) rush through this.’ lines 61-62). In particular note the finessed way the constraint from the rule is constructed—‘so I’m gonna have to I guess rush through this’. What the ‘I guess’ does is present the link between the rule and effect on his speech as something contingent. It projects the possibility of new information or actions changing the state of affairs. In effect it places the Chair in the position of being able to undo the problem or of sustaining the rule with its negative consequences. Note the way DT looks at the Chair through lines 60-62—this highlights his potential relevance as a next speaker. So although DT begins with an apology, he is subtly attributing the problem elsewhere. It is not simply his fault but the fault of the school board’s (now constructed as) autocratic time rule. He does not say, formally and explicitly, he is being unfairly treated, but it is one way of hearing what he is saying that he has made available.

Inexplicit though DT actions are, the Chair shows that he understands them. That is, he orients to the responsibility that is being placed on his own actions by suggesting that
those actions will be ‘gennle’ (line 64). This softening is combined with both a reassertion of the rule and the statement that the rule has been in place for ‘quite a while’. This picks up and counters the implication that DT is being treated unfairly, or specifically denied what anyone could expect in these meetings, or what he personally could reasonably expect, in terms of time. Again, in terms of dilemmas of control and cooperation the Chair manages this by both the soft construction of his control (gentle) and the reassertion of the rule as longstanding. More broadly DT and the Chair negotiate the nature and legitimacy of these institutional arrangements as they unfold. This is not an abstract and theoretical negotiation over participation and organizational structure, and how it can be sustained or denied. Instead, it is a locally managed, rhetorically situated negotiation, rooted in the practical politics of everyday life (Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

Psychology, Perception, and Time

So far we have noted in passing the role of a range of ‘psychological’ categories and attributes—planning, being sorry, guessing, being gentle. We have tried to make explicit some of the practices that they play a role in. One of the things that discursive psychology has focused on is the way that psychological categories are oriented to actions (Edwards & Potter, 2005; Edwards, 2007). Some of this work has looked at the use of psychological predicates and ascriptions (Edwards, 2006; Potter & Puchta, 2007). Other work has looked at more indirect psychological orientations and issues. For example, Charles Goodwin has done a number of studies of seeing as parts of practices such as air traffic control and oceanography (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996).

We are now going to leap forward in the current materials, ignoring the fascinating speech that DT makes (see Hepburn & Potter, 2007; and other chapters in Tracy, McDaniel
& Gronbeck, 2007 for more on that). Loosely speaking we focused above on how DT’s presentation was opened, now are going to focus on how it is ended. Our general point will be to reveal the complex, situated, conflictual work of both opening and closing. We will continue the line numbering to indicate the missing material.
Extract Six

162 DT: Hhh (0.3) we bemoan the lack of
163 children going into sound of digital alarm
164 ↓science especially women and camera pans from poster to DT
165 DT: minorities.=
166 Chair: Is- is that- (0.2) the timer?
167 (0.4)
168 Chair: Kay (.) um: (0.3) TAKE about another
169 thirty seconds "Mr Thielen."
170 ((2.6)) DT shaking head, arms out wide
171 DT: I’m sorry this was so: wrong in so counting motion
172 many ways. Hhh (0.4) it was censorship shaking head
173 pl(h)ain and si(h)mp(h)le. Hh (.) hh was claps fingers together
174 this appropriate for elementary schoo;l, turns page
175 (0.2).h >e^elementary kids as young as claps fingers together
176 kindergarteners in< ~Sa(h)lma Alabama still in counting motion
177 marched u(h)p~ (.) HHH raises head, mouth wide
178 ~ag(h)ainst wh(h)ite police officers with open on inbreath
179 [german shepherds] and fire hoses~.
180 Chair: (((clears throat)))
181 (0.5)
182 DT: And yet (.) we cannot ask (0.3) our children of counting motion
183 the same age (.) hh to address (0.2) or be open on inbreath
184 willing to be expo:sed to (.) racial issues
185 here.
186 (0.3)
187 DT: After those kinds of things wenn o:n. (0.2)
DT: Hhhh this was sweeping it under the rug hands up and down

not cos the children’re uncomfortable in counting motion with it but because the adults in an all white staffed elementary school.

(0.6)

DT: This violates six (. out of the thirty bullets in your strategic plan’n beliefs behind it.

(0.5)

DT: That’s twenty percent of them.

(0.5)

DT: Hh (. an this h’s opened up the school district to serious legal liability.

(0.3)

DT: Where you have clearly violated the rights to free speech: (. this [ is what I w’s]

Chair: [((clears throat))])))

DT: told by: >an attorney with the American civil liberties union< HHH[H th]at you

Chair: [Okay]

DT: clearly violated her civil rights because she was (. u:m (0.3) this was done because of race.

Chair: We- (. we get [your ] drift mi-

DT: [(and)] raises right hand

Chair: mister thielen: (0.3) thanks very much.

(0.3)

DT: Um (0.2) I (0.2) am sorry that to the board

>issues this serious are< not worth (0.9) cocks head side

a couple more minutes.= walks away
Chair: We'll a number of us have spent quite a bit of time on the phone with you Mr Thielen. camera back to Chair

but (0.3) ANYway why'n’t you take (0.5) er the poster board with you. who is pointing at poster

JOHN KETTLing? Grasps mug

Let us start by considering the Chair’s practical display of “hearing” in the context of the continued negotiation of the rules of timekeeping and, more broadly, the distribution of voice that is central to organizational participation.

The hearing

The timer goes off precisely two minutes and one second after the start of DT’s speech (this two minutes does not include their negotiation about time). The timer is relatively quiet, but clearly audible on the recording (during line 164). At the point at which the timer goes off the video pans away from a poster that DT has placed in front of his podium and back onto DT’s face. This suggests that the camera operator is orienting to the timer, moving to DT’s face to catch his reaction for the television audience.

We are particularly interested here in the delay between the timer sounding and the Chair’s display of hearing. The Chair has waited until what conversation analysts would call the end of DT’s turn construction unit before showing that he has heard the timer (Schegloff, 2006). That is, he waits for a place where orderly speaker transition between turns could occur. This does four things.

First, it is less invasive than cutting in when the timer goes off, so it avoids an overly intrusive interruption. Note, though, that there is good interactional evidence that the Chair
expects DT to continue, despite the prosodic and syntactic evidence that this part of the utterance is completed. It is often a feature of this kind of public speaking that closing and continuing intonation plus pauses are retained, despite the lack of formal need for them—perhaps it makes speeches sound more interestingly conversational (Atkinson, 1982). That said, no doubt DT can also hear the timer, and may be expecting to be interrupted. In any event, the Chair comes in noticeably early before the next TCU (line 166) heading off any possible continuation that DT might produce.

The second thing that the Chair’s question—‘Is- is that- (0.2) the timer?’ (line 166)—does is that it allows DT the opportunity to orient to the timer himself, either more or less explicitly. He can do that, for example, by answering the question. There is no evidence that he does this, although he is not visible on the recording at this stage. He does not note the timer’s noise verbally, and he certainly does not stop when it is first audible on line 164.

The third thing to note is that the Chair presents himself as responding to the timer, but doing so in a casual and flexible way. This flexibility is underlined by the concession of ‘about another thirty seconds’ (lines 168-169)—the imprecision signalled by the use of ‘about’ displays the Chair as not overly concerned by the timer rule. This relates to the fourth point about the indirectness of the Chair’s actions. Rather than saying your time has run out or you must stop his voiced display of possibly not hearing the timer (is that the timer?) both allows DT the opportunity to police himself, and produces the Chair as someone not using the timer in a rigid and autocratic manner; indeed, he is precisely not being a tyrant as he has already indicated.

Standing back again, the two parties have continued their delicate and indirect negotiation of the rules concerning time. The Chair has continued to manage the dilemmas of authority and democratic participation with indirect and conciliatory moves. Yet DT’s
resistance has earned him more time and, maybe, further helped display himself as a victim of school board actions.

**The drift**

Let us consider a final part of the sequence to see how this negotiation over time and authority plays out. Here when the Chair clears his throat on line 180 DT has been speaking for two minutes and fifty-six seconds from the start of his speech. Of course, a throat clearing could just be a throat clearing (just as within psychoanalytic therapy a cigar may sometimes just be a cigar), but its clear audibility suggests that it has been done for the microphone; there is no sign of the chair trying to mask it. And such throat clearing is, of course, a conventional way of drawing attention to something.

Toward the end of the sequence we can see the Chair making three increasingly explicit attempts to bring DT to a close. The first on line 180 is the throat clearing that we have already noted. The second is on line 183. The Chair says ‘okay.’ This is close to the transition relevant place after ‘union’ where DT is rushing through and doing an in-breath with extra volume, both displaying his claim to continue holding the floor. By saying ‘okay tha-’, a receipting turn, the Chair is reflexively constituting DT as having completed. Nevertheless DT produces what he says next as a continuation (constituting the Chair as interrupting rather than receipting). This occasions a third and most explicitly terminal turn (lines 187-189).

The Chair’s turn is hearably critical. How does it achieve this? Part of what is going on can be understood from the sequential order of things—after the accusatory turns at the end of DT’s speech (lines 182-186) it is hard not to hear the Chair as having a slot for a rebuttal or account. Put another way, the accusatory turn generates an environment where
all the parties (DT, the other people there, the local TV viewers, and us as overhearing analysts) are likely to inspect whatever comes next for its role in rebutting, accounting and so on. Furthermore, we can speculate that the Chair is indirectly admonishing DT for going on too long, perhaps trying to get more than his organizationally appropriate due time. Yet he does not directly respond to the material in DT’s final turns, but makes a more general response. His formulation ‘drift’ may indicate that the details are unimportant and/or unclear. Moreover, as an idiom it does not require specification of what the meaning or purpose of DT’s speech is that has been ‘got.’ It does not show a specific understanding that might be open to contest, using up more time.

The sequence as a whole ends with a pair of turns that escalate the dispute even further. DT may be responding to the critical nature of the Chair’s turn. He expresses disappointment (‘I am sorry that to the boa:rd >issues this serious are< not worth’, lines 191-192). This is combined with a construction of what has produced the disappointment. This construction is contrastive—the seriousness of the issues (line 192) is set against the very small value placed on them by the board (‘not worth (0.9) a couple more minutes.’ lines 192-193). One of the central themes in discursive psychology is the way constructions of mind and constructions of reality are produced to sustain particular actions, and how the one plays off against the other (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This is a compact example of this in action. By constructing his psychological state as ‘sorry’, he builds the solidity of what is generating that mental state—the actions of the board forcing him to curtail his speech. DT’s ‘psychological’ response supports the seriousness of the board’s flawed response; the harsh nature of the response provides a warrant for his psychological response. Each plays off against the other. DT here produces the board as arrogant and presents himself as
undermined and excluded. This reworks the institutional procedures as strategic and pernicious rather than generic. Its legitimacy becomes a sham.

At this point the Chair does something interesting. Let us stand back a bit before considering it. As we have already indicated, there has been a lot of dispute in discourse studies about the nature of context, and how it should be analysed (Billig, 1999; Schegloff, 1997, 1999; Wetherell, 1998). Many issues here are not easily resolved, and depend on the broader aims of the research. Nevertheless a conversation analytic and discursive psychological approach urges caution about claiming the relevance of contextual particulars without a careful analysis of how such particulars are oriented to, or how they become relevant, in interaction. One way of being cautious like this is to consider context as an issue for participants. What contextual features are invoked or constructed in the course of interaction? This is, of course, pervasive. Throughout his speech, for example, DT is working on a version of the relevant context for his actions. Indeed, he constructs both a locally relevant version of his daughter’s science project, and a grander narrative on the nature of prejudice and the nature and history of science. He draws, as people do, on all the world-building potential of talk.

What is notable on this occasion is that in response to DT’s criticism of the board, the Chair constructs a fragment of context. He describes time spent on the phone to DT by board members (‘us’) prior to the meeting. This does two things. First it claims, in the face of his contrary claims, that DT has been given time and has been taken seriously. Second, it implies that the Chair has been acting properly by not revealing this until it becomes relevant to DT’s criticism.

It is worth noting the detailed construction of the Chair’s claim. A range of work in ethnostatistics and quantification rhetoric has started to outline some of the ways in which
quantification is produced to rhetorical effect (Gephardt, 1988; Potter, Wetherell & Chitty, 1991). While DT’s claim is a minimizing one with its ‘couple more minutes’, the Chair’s ‘number of us’ (line 17, note the emphasis on number) and ‘quite a bit of time’ (lines 17-18) is both vague and at the same time maximizing. The power of vagueness of this kind is that it makes the claims hard to contest (Drew, 2003; Potter, 1996). More broadly, the different versions on offer paint different visions of DT’s involvement with the democratic process emphasising that he has been either indulged or frozen out.

Psychology—Institution—Interaction

In our analysis we have tried to show how the particularity of what is going on, with all the specifics of sequence, repair, intonation and so on, is fundamental to the analysis. The style of analysis used here draws on both conversation analysis and discursive psychology. A key feature is that it treats neither organizational structures nor psychological states as prior to, and separate from, the interaction (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007b). Rather, we have tried to show how both structure and psychology become interactionally live in the fine specifics of these materials and how they can be made analytically tractable through a close study of the materials. In terms of classic sociological debates over the primacy of agency and structure, these things become practical issues for the participants as they attempt to build, and resist, the causal power of structure and manage their own and others’ agency. Psychology here is something to be accomplished, as is organizational structure. Participation is supported, managed and constrained through different practices. Can the Chair maintain control and reassert institutional procedures without being treated as tyrannical or authoritarian? Can David Thielen develop his critique of the school board’s actions with respect to his daughter’s project without being treated as
racist or reactionary? To understand what this organization is here as it emerges in the course of these few minutes we have had to pay attention to these concrete practices. If that is true in this one case it may be true more generally in organizational studies and this will mean some major theoretical and methodological movements.

Acknowledgement


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