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Criteria for an Ethnographically Adequate Description of Concerted Activities and their Contexts

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The object of any ethnography is to describe some people's activities and to locate these activities within the various contexts for their occurrence. There is a requirement, often neglected, that such a description of behavior and its contexts be presented in a way that readers can decide for themselves whether or not to believe the ethnographer's account of what it is that a particular group of people is doing at any given time.
In this paper, we will offer criteria for judging the ethnographic adequacy of any description of concerted behavior, and we will apply these criteria to a film of the activities of a small group of children and their teacher during an 11 minute reading lesson in a first grade classroom. A fine grained analysis of one three-second strip of behavior will be used to highlight the adequacy of the description of the lesson. This strip of behavior has been described as chaotic by many viewers of the film. By pointing to the order in this apparently chaotic behavior, we will raise the possibility that most behavior is ordered in ways about which we as observers or participants are systematically inarticulate. By implication, we will ask the reader to worry about the adequacy of any description of activities that does not meet these criteria.

A fundamental assumption of this paper is that there is a close similarity in the primary problem facing ethnographers and other persons engaged in everyday life. This problem, common to both, is the necessity of achieving a working consensus with others about what is going on in any scene available to their senses. This identity is generally unrecognized. It usually is reasoned that ethnographers must describe the structure of social action in a way which is articulate only to other ethnographers and adequate to predict some next set of native actions. Natives, on the other hand, are less constrained to articulate the structure of their behavior (or more constrained to be inarticulate about what is going on) and are more immediately constrained to achieve a communicational consensus long enough to maintain, change, or walk away from it. Nonetheless, ethnographers and natives share an identical concern. The ethnographer's adequate account of what natives do together must follow from the way in which the natives structure a situation to allow their participation with each other from one moment to the next. The ethnographer must articulate the same hesitant and momentary contexts that the natives are displaying to each other and using to organize their concerted behavior.

The warrant for setting such a difficult goal for ethnographic description is that people manage concerted activity only by constantly informing and conforming each other to whatever it is that has to happen next. It had been thought, instead, that people managed concerted activities simply because they know how to do them. Knowing how to do things is crucial to the doing of them, but there is more involved in completing any activity; knowing how to get from Osaka to Kobe will not get you there. We allow ourselves the illusion that knowledge is the only necessary ingredient in social action, for we all make good guesses about what is going to happen next in social interaction. But we ought to acknowledge that our guessing percentage is directly related to the fact that each of us has a hand in producing the contexts in which we test our hypotheses about what is going on. Our knowledge turns out to be useful only after we have helped to set up conditions for its use.

People manage to know for sure what is going on only in relation to specific interactional environments, and they usually know a great deal about these environments because they have helped to construct them as predictable contexts for plying whatever it is that they know. Such framing takes considerable work, and it is by that work that we are able to locate what it is that members of a group are up to at any given time. We can use the ways members have of making clear to each other and to themselves what is going on to locate to our own satisfaction an account of what it is that they are doing with each other. In fact, the ways they have of making clear to each other what they are doing are identical to the criteria which we use to locate ethnographically what they are doing.

I. The Criteria for Descriptive Adequacy

There are four aspects of the work people do with each other to display a context in terms of which they can organize their next activities. These are not four different kinds of behavior, but often four different aspects of the same behavior. Contexts are: (1) in some way, formulated by the members of the group, in words or gestures; (2) in some way, usually by postural positioning, acted out in form as well as content; (3) behaviorally oriented to as patterns by the members at certain significant times; and (4) used by the members to hold each other accountable. We will elaborate each of these points and then illustrate their use in an analysis of some behavior.

(1) Members usually reference or in some way formulate some of the contexts for their behavior. Members name or otherwise reference a context in situ. We cannot rely on people to name directly the most immediate contexts for their concerted activities. Although they may talk in terms of major events or reportables, they also act in terms of slightly smaller units which are not likely topics of conversation (Frake 1975, 1976). We will have to be sensitive to some of the less obvious formulations in terms of which people struggle to keep themselves informed of what they are doing together. The concern of
this criterion is whether people are able somehow to formulate their behavior as a particular kind of behavior which they can be expected to recognize upon its reference as a possible context of the moment.

In addition to naming, a context can be formulated by a statement of what is required of a member in a particular context. For example, the structure of a classroom reading lesson can be formulated by the teacher calling on a child to read or by a child complaining that he never gets a turn. Such clear signals are usually used at the beginning of a behavioral context or when something goes awry. Thereafter, either through the duration of the context or on repeated occurrences of the context, the signals can be considerably shortened; precise verbal formulation can be replaced by a no less precise, but far simpler head nod or hand gesture.

On occasion, a gesture can stand on its own as the sole signal for a prolonged context. The condition for the description of any signal as a feature of the work members do to contextualize each other is that it is responded to; that is, upon signaling the members act as if the signaled context was in fact the reality at hand, be it accepted or challenged.

We have limited our discussion here to fairly obvious formulations as announcements of a context at hand. However, recent work in conversational analysis indicates that formulations of what is happening at any given time are ongoing, that a single formulation lasts about as long as its constitutive utterance and must be quickly restated in order to act as an organizing device for the members' construction of some next strip of concerted activity.

Sacks (1974) has offered an important example of how people constantly formulate the contexts of their behavior in his analysis of the telling of a dirty joke. Although only one person is telling a joke to two others, the joke's telling takes some 85 different speaking turns on the parts of the three participants. Throughout these exchanges, Sacks is able to show how the members both use and contribute to the formulation of the context for their behavior as both a telling of a joke and a telling of a dirty joke in particular. Formulations are used to describe the moment at hand and reflexively to organize the context in which next actions take place.

(2) Members usually organize their postures to form a configuration or positioning which signals the contexts for behavior. In other words, people usually take on postures which are indicative of the task before them, and they usually do this together. This criterion is essential to the structural description we will offer of the behavior of the reading group members. We must be careful, however, to remember that these positionings do not follow one upon the other with identical form and according to a schedule fixed by an exact calculus. Each positioning represents a struggle during which members negotiate their relations with each other. Every person involved carefully monitors everyone else for an interpretation of what it is that is going on. Thus, people use their positioning of each other to guide their responses to each other, just as they use their own formulations of what they are doing to guide their concerted behavior. It is precisely for this reason that we can use people's formulations and positionings to judge the adequacy of our description of their activities. In making their sense of what they are doing together visible to each other, participants to an interaction make their behavior available to the close scrutiny of an analyst. Thus, we should be able to use members' formulating and positioning work as a warrant for saying precisely what they are up to.

(3) Members behaviorally orient to the order in their concerted behavior and accordingly constitute and signal their contexts for each other. While formulating the positioning according to the most pressing context at hand, members are careful to orient to each other's doing or not doing of the formulated order. Within any interaction, there are some significant moments during which the participants must struggle to preserve the order of their relations. At these special moments, we can locate the concerted attention patterns which make a context what it is. In people's orienting work at these special times, the group's working consensus being serviced by their concerted activities becomes visible.

Sacks (1970) has given the following example which should make this criterion sensible. An American conversation is marked by not more than one and not less than one person talking at a time. Analytically, this sounds like a preposterous working definition, as it is clear that in most conversations there are occasions when two or more or no one will be talking. But Sacks is not interested in a definition of a conversational context simply in terms of a count of who talks and when, just as we are not interested in a definition of a postural context for behavior solely in terms of who moves and when. Rather, his effort is to locate rules people are using to direct conversational behavior. In other words, he is searching for a definition of a conversation as a context, as something that people formulate and act out in observably precise ways. Now we can attend to our third criterion for an adequate description of a context. Sacks' definition of a conversation is, in fact, the definition of a conversation.
as it is operated on by talking people. In most American contexts, anyway, when more than one or less than one person is speaking at a time, participants in the conversation behaviorally orient to the break in procedures. Consider only the uncomfortable feelings most people experience in a lag in the conversation, or the disruption caused by one person constantly interrupting others. At such times, people look away, fiddle with their hands, or simply leave the scene. With such activities, people demonstrate that their definition of a conversational context is behaviorally oriented to and as such constitutes part of their reality.

In using their own formulated and positioned order as a guide to subsequent behaviors, there are two kinds of special moments to which members attend carefully in any interaction.

(a) Transition points are crucial. The shift from one positioning to the next is carefully oriented to, and it is during this time that the members attend to the shared aspects of their realities and move on them in concert and to the same apparent purpose.

(b) All members of the group also attend carefully to breaches of the formulated order. In the event of a breach involving some members, the group never disintegrates, and it is unlikely to do so without a specific closing procedure (Deutsch 1977, Kendon 1977, Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Most often, one of two order-preserving activities takes place on the occurrence of a breach of the formulated order. On the one hand, a group can quickly reorganize back to the context at hand without any acknowledgement that anything was wrong. The context proceeds as usual, the only difference being that the contextualizing ‘work load’ was temporarily carried by only one or two people, while the rest of the group put the context on hold. On the other hand, the breach can be attended to by someone, and the group is actively called back into a positioning. In both cases, the order or structure of the context at hand is behaviorally oriented to by the participants. In the latter case, the context also is used as a device for holding members accountable to certain ways of proceeding, and this will be considered separately as the next criterion. Both responses to breach behaviors are rampant throughout the film record under analysis.

(4) Members usually hold each other accountable for proceeding in ways consistent with the context for their concerted activities. Perhaps the most compelling of the criteria for locating people’s answer to the question of What’s happening? at any given moment is that the members of any group hold each other to behaving in certain contextually appropriate ways. Depending upon the positioning that the group members achieve, there are only certain kinds of behavior which are acceptable at certain moments, and the members call upon those who misbehave to change their behavior to fit the dominant version of what that positioning should look like. This is most clearly the case in the classroom reading lesson, during which stragglers can be called back into a focus on reading activities by the teacher calling them back, by other members of the group simply stopping their own participation until the stragglers return, or, in a case to be described in detail, by an elaborate postural-kinesic dance in which the children and the teacher quietly round each other up until they all return to the book to read.

This criterion is most intriguing, for in holding each other accountable members often must act in ways which fit the other three criteria we are using to evaluate the ethnographic adequacy of a description of a unit of behavior. In order to call each other back to a particular way of behavior, the chastising members must orient to the break in the order of their behavior, formulate what has to be done, and reestablish their bodies into a positioning that signals the formulated order. And, no less importantly, the people held accountable most often respond by immediately performing behavior formulated as appropriate for the context at hand. Thus the order in their behavior becomes obvious not only in the ways that they try to hold each other accountable, but in the ways they are held accountable.

For example, in a classroom reading lesson, when the teacher says, Ted, you’re not looking at your words, she clearly formulates what everyone should be up to at that time; she describes the behavioral markers of the reading positioning, orients to someone not doing that positioning, and finally holds the child accountable. In responding to the teacher, Ted is no less demonstrative of the working consensus which is guiding their interaction; on such an occasion, Ted simply moves back to his book and acts in accord with the other members of the reading group. Thus, both Ted and the teacher offer a warrant for considering the reading positioning to be a significant organizational device and the most immediate answer to any question about what it is that they are doing together.

By formulating an order in their behavior, giving it form with their bodies as well as with specific actions by orienting to highpoints in the order and holding each other accountable to it; people manage to organize environments for each other in terms of which they can know for sure what it is that they are doing with each other; together, they manage to do the social order. Because this is how face-to-face behavior is organized, we have a great resource for
II. THE STRUCTURE OF SOME CONTEXTS FOR ACTIVITIES

When people identify the contexts for their behavior, how they have organized it, this behavior is available and accessible also to the ethnographer. The following sections are a brief demonstration of the ethnographic method we have been describing.

### TABLE 1

**A hierarchy of contexts for the children and the teacher while reading the book**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Time in the classroom (5 hours)</th>
<th>Time at the reading table (30 minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reading the book by turns (11 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional rounds</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turns to read by person(s) designated</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individual movements which by way of form and apparent consequence are recognizable parts of the group's concerted activities: smiles, gazes, gestures, offerings, complaints, readings, fights, etc. Ideally, the effort of a context analysis is to account for all the moves of individual actors in organizational terms. This chart offers a considerable simplification of our context analysis, in that it allows the reader to assume that every action by every member is in fact constitutive of the group Positionings. Although there is truth in this simplification, we must note that other levels of concerted activity could be written into the chart between Positionings and Actions, particularly the many two, three, or four person coalitions which develop within most Positionings. A thorough account of these and how they work in the production of more inclusive levels of behavior listed in the chart would greatly enhance the adequacy of our ethnographic description.
group as a whole. It became clear that almost every movement, at the time of its occurrence, helps to form the contexts which the members use to construct and maintain the units of concerted activity which give order to their next concerted activities and to our analysis.

Each box in Table I represents a unit of the group's activities. Together in taxonomic form, the units represent the structure of the members' activities during their time at the reading table. In order for such a description to be ethnographically adequate, the units described must be shown to be the products of the structuring activities of the members trying to make sense of each other (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970, Mohan and Wood 1975). That is, it must be shown that in the course of doing what they are doing together (i.e., reading, getting a turn, behaving unarchically, or waiting) the members of the group constantly identify for each other what they are doing, and in so doing reflexively structure their activities in ways which show up on the chart as units of the structure of their concerted behavior.

Although we have listed five levels of context in terms of which most of the members' activities can be understood, there are no doubt many other contexts according to which members might be organizing their behavior. Some of these contexts might be individual (fantasies, for example), and others quite pervasive and systematic (for example, the members' participation in American culture and the political economy which supports that participation). We will make no attempt here to discuss such contexts, although in other papers we have argued that fine-grained analyses of small samples of
behavior can provide considerable insight into cultural and institutional order (McDermott and Aron 1978, McDermott and Gospodinoff, in press). In this paper we will limit ourselves to examples of a single level of behavior, that of the positioning. We are doing this not only because the main point of the paper is methodological, but because this particular level of behavior is central to how people determine ‘for sure’ what it is they are doing with each other at any given time. Before applying our criteria to the description of the structure of behavior at the level of the positioning in the reading lesson, we need a more extensive description of what a positioning is and why it may be an important unit of description and analysis to the ethnographer.

III. POSITIONINGS AS CONTEXTS FOR ACTIVITIES

Our problem is to describe the contexts or environments people use to limit each other to performing the particulars of whatever they are doing together.

Fortunately, students of body motion and communication have been working on this problem and have given us a record of how the postural configurations people achieve with each other function as the most immediate environments for the organization of their behavior with one another. The contexts in terms of which people do their social organizations are embodied in their postures as these are arranged across persons over time. To the extent that they are embodied, we can call them environments. In the communicational literature, they are called positions by Scheflen (1973) and configurations by Kendon (1973). In order to stress that they are ongoing interactional accomplishments and not fixed entities, we call them positionings; in the sense that participants in any group consistently are positioning each other.

A topological metaphor offers a useful gloss of what we mean by a positioning. Imagine people to be involved with each other through a medium of elastic sheeting (Brod and Elkaim n.d.). Just as the elastic pulled at one end can stretch and reshape the elastic at the other end, every move by every person would have an effect on all the others. So it is in human interaction, although the media through which members work on each other are more complex. Now imagine that, before any single part of the elastic sheeting was stretched, the rest of the sheeting was informed of how it should respond to the upcoming stretch. In this way, all the parts of the elastic could move at a single time to a new organization. So it is in human interaction. Not only do people adjust themselves to each other, they often do it at the same time. The important thing about the notion of positioning is that people not only organize themselves posturally in relation to what they are doing together, but that they take on the postures characteristic to what they are doing together at exactly the same moment. As such, they appear to be responding to some higher order contexts or working consensuses about what they are doing together.

In moving in and out of various positionings together (as in moving through Figures 1-3), people constitute contexts or environments for their next moment, offer information about the consensual reality of their present moment, and supply any analyst with the material for describing what they are doing together.

In the 24 positionings in Table 1, most are established and broken in concert. In Table II, we have listed just how carefully the members of the group participate in the beginnings and endings of the nine occurrences of the reading positioning (I). This is an extraordinary record of fine tuning by the members of the reading group. Consider the work they must do to arrange the consensuses which allow all the members of the group to move approximately at the same time, in the same way, and to the same apparent interactional purpose. Both the sequences and consequences of members’ activities appear to be well organized at the level of the positioning, and the work that members do to arrange these positionings offers us a useful tool for describing the contexts for the organization of concerted activities.

Although the positioning is a useful descriptive tool, we must remember that a postural configuration, by itself, is never an exact calculus for anyone wondering just what the members of the group are doing at a particular time. Each positioning, on each occasion of its occurrence, is a delicate balance of members knowing approximately what to do, doing it, carefully monitoring how everyone else is doing it, and holding each other as close as possible to the working consensus achieved by the simultaneous attention to the task at hand. The attentional and postural balance is always dynamic. Members constantly move in and out of a postural configuration shared by others in their group; sometimes they are called in or pushed out. In this way, members are constantly and dynamically identifying for each other and for any observer just what they are doing together.

Of the four positionings listed in sequence in Table I, we will concentrate on the analysis of positioning I during which the members are organizing themselves to read or discuss their reading books. In
TABLE II
Reading group members behaviorally orienting to the beginnings (B) and endings (E) of the reading positionings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Turn 1</th>
<th>Turn 2</th>
<th>Turn 3</th>
<th>Turn 4</th>
<th>Turn 5</th>
<th>Turn 6</th>
<th>Turn 7</th>
<th>Turn 8</th>
<th>Turn 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>3 x 4</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>x 0 x 0 x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>3 x 4</td>
<td>x 0 x x</td>
<td>x 0 x x</td>
<td>x 0 x x</td>
<td>x 0 x x</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
<td>x x x 1</td>
<td>2 x x 0</td>
<td>3 x 4</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timmy</td>
<td>x x x x 1</td>
<td>2 x x 0</td>
<td>3 x 4</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
<td>2 x x x</td>
<td>x x 3</td>
<td>4 x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
<td>2 x x x</td>
<td>x x x 3</td>
<td>4 x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
<td>1 x x 1</td>
<td>2 x x 3</td>
<td>4 x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x x</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
1. x: orient to beginning or ending of the reading positioning.
2. 0: maintains a reading positioning throughout the change of turns.
3. x: Timmy sullenly watches Timmy, and the teacher attends to their breach until Perry returns to the expected position.
4. Ted: As Annah reads, another teacher enters the room. All but Ted and Anna attend to the visitor, and Ted's turn never clears up.
5. As the teacher's turn ends, the teacher is attending out of the group, and the children spread their attentional focus about the room. The teacher returns in time for Maria to complete her turn, and the rest of the children slowly catch up (7 seconds) and reorient into a Positioning II calling for a turn to read.
6. The teacher exits to remove a visitor from the reading table while the rest of the children read in chorus. Gradually, the children stop reading and attend to the teacher's struggle. Then they simultaneously move into a Positioning III, or anarchy, and the teacher rushes back to the table.
7. Rosa squirms about, a lone example of a breach which is not intelligible in social organization terms.

Explanation:
A table of regularities in the member's orientations to the beginnings and endings of Positionings does not constitute, in and of itself, an analysis. An analysis exists only when this behavior is contextualized. Accordingly, exceptions to the regularities are not significant challenges to understanding the members' behavior. What is of primary interest is how these exceptions are accomplished, how they are treated as exceptions, and how they are repaired:
1. They are not exceptions which prove the rule statistically. They are structurally incongruent behaviors for which members are held accountable.
2. As an exception from outside the system.
3. It is not something for which we can account yet.

TABLE III The Behavioral Features of the Reading Positioning (I)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Positioning I</th>
<th>Variants of Positioning I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared focus: the degree to which the members of the group direct their head-eye orientation either toward the same or similar objects</td>
<td>Single focus by each member to the reading book</td>
<td>Multiple focus to the book, the teacher and board in response to the teacher's questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerted activities: the degree to which members move parts of their bodies in time with each other in apparent response to some identifiable contexts</td>
<td>Fairly constant between beginnings and endings</td>
<td>More necessary during question-answer sequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vigilance: the degree to which each member must actively monitor other members, particularly the teacher, in order to receive some explicit instruction as to what to do next</td>
<td>Minimal, as the members follow the reading of the book</td>
<td>Opens slightly to allow for members to see the board when that is necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpentering: the degree to which members assume postures which fit the contours of the table around which they sit</td>
<td>Tight fit around the table, with the corners marked by elbows and uniform shoulder/table angles</td>
<td>Intense, as outsiders are ignored and excluded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External border work: the degree to which members actively mark themselves off from the rest of the class by way of gaze aversion, the careful placement of appendages at possible entry points to the reading group, and even by occasional confrontation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal border work: the degree to which members compete with each other for access to some resources, usually the teacher's attention or favor, by blocking each other from the teacher's view or attacking each other</td>
<td>Pedagogical talk, mostly reading, choral and individual with others</td>
<td>Content questions and instructions from the teacher, word calling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table III, we have listed some behavioral features of the reading positioning. The following scenario is expected and often appears. When the teacher calls on a child to read, all the children move down to their books at approximately the same time. The child called on begins to read, and the others listen or read along in chorus. Ideally, everyone remains in this configuration until the designated child has finished reading, and the rest of the children look to the teacher to find out who is to read next. Between these clearly marked beginnings and endings, during a positioning I, the members concentrate their attention on the book and use the designated reader as a drum major. Thus, they move together in congruent postures which match the form of the table; they appear oblivious to outsiders and ignore each other except during breaches to the expected order. A checklist of idealized behavioral features is not, however, a sufficient account of what the members are doing with each other. Until it is possible to understand the members' behavior in the same way that they do, whether they can articulate that understanding or not, it will not be possible to present an adequate ethnographic description. To this end, we will apply our criteria to the work the reading group members do in positioning each other.

IV. APPLYING THE CRITERIA: DESCRIBING ORDER IN APPARENTLY CHAOTIC BEHAVIOR

Table I offers a fairly adequate description of behavior at the reading table, in the sense that every unit in the description can be said to be formulated and positioned by the participants and that the maintenance of the formulated order is oriented to and used by the members to hold each other accountable. Every unit in the taxonomy is acted on by the members.

The description of these units was quite difficult, particularly at the level of the positioning, for it is often the case that not everyone produces idealized postures and behavior and that a particular positioning will be temporarily invisible. It appears that members are attending to some other activity than the reading lesson. At such times, members orient to their breach of the formulated order and hold each other accountable for returning to that order. In addition, even though the members sometimes seem to be attending elsewhere, they maintain positioning I as a context and a reference point for that wandering. Thus even when they are not acting as if they were in positioning I, it is positioning I and nothing else that they are not doing (Frake 1977, McDermott 1976). In order to observe that their apparently chaotic behavior is regularly sequenced and has predictable consequences, it is necessary to describe how the members do their organizing work.

The specific example we will discuss seemed especially chaotic to us and other observers as well. It is a few seconds of behavior which did not seem to make sense in terms of what preceded and followed it. In other words, it appeared to be without a context and apparently random and chaotic behavior. However, when we examined this activity in terms of the four criteria for an ethnographically adequate description of behavior, its structure and sense became evident.

The example we are discussing is Maria's second turn to read. It does not display the behavioral features of a reading positioning. Remember that a reading positioning is marked by everyone looking at their books in congruent postures carpentered to the table, moving in concert, and reading with the assigned reader (see Figure 1 and Table III for a definition of terms). The teacher calls on Maria to read, and soon everyone is looking in different directions. How could this be a reading positioning without being acted out as a reading positioning? The answer is that, even though they do not act it out immediately, the members of the group formulate a reading positioning when Maria is called on to read, and they are liable to being held accountable if they do not act it out. The demonstration of this is quite subtle, and we will offer it in some detail. The reader is encouraged to follow the figures (4-9) along with the text.

The beginning of Maria's turn is complex. Immediately after the teacher starts to call on Maria, Rosa calls for a turn. The teacher responds to her behavior as a breach in the order and says, Rosa, we don't call out. Then the teacher again asks Maria to read. Again the group begins to settle into a reading positioning. But before they complete their turn, the teacher leans out of the group to speak with Audrey who has been sitting on the floor near the reading table. The two children nearest the teacher, Anna and Ted, follow her shift in gaze out of the group. Soon, Perry and Rosa also are looking around the room (Figure 4). So Maria has the turn to read, but she has no audience, and the reading positioning is basically invisible.

At this point, what takes place is an incredibly precise dance involving most of the group members. The dance is made up of five movement clusters, involving four members of the group. Initially the group is dispersed as in Figure 4. At the end of the dance, about two-and-one-half seconds later, the children and the teacher are back in a reading positioning. All this happens without a single word being said.
Assume the group to be positioned as in Figure 4. After dealing with Audrey on the floor, the teacher starts to return to focus on Maria who has been reading the assigned page. On the same frame (at 24 frames/second) of the film in which the teacher completes her return to Maria and the group, Maria stops reading (in the middle of the assigned text) and starts to move her head up from reading. And within the next five frames, Anna and Maria have started to move their books down to the table, and the teacher orients to them by jerking her head back and up, resulting in the scene depicted in Figure 5.

The second cluster of movements begins 12 frames (one half second) later. Rosa and Maria move their bodies down to the table, a move they will build on in the next two clusters of movements. For the time being, however, the stunning movements are performed in concert by Perry and the teacher. In Figure 5, the teacher has just oriented to the fact that Maria has stopped reading in the middle of her turn, and it can be seen that Perry is looking out elsewhere. It becomes apparent, however, that Perry has kept a careful feeler out for developments in the reading group. On exactly the same frame, both Perry and the teacher start to move their heads toward each other. The culmination of their actions, with Perry turned to the teacher, and eyes gazing downward, is depicted in Figure 6.

The third cluster of movements occurs 12 frames after Perry and the teacher start to move towards each other. At this time, on the same frame, Maria stops her movement forward, Rosa starts to move back, and the teacher begins to move her head away from Perry to her right. Only two frames later, Perry begins to collapse his posture into more of a slump. These developments should be clear in Figure 7.
The fourth cluster of movements starts 12 frames after the previous cluster. Maria and the teacher start to move their heads up and in the direction of looking at each other. On the same frame as these two developments, Rosa starts to move to her right, down and away from the teacher. Again, about 2 frames later, Perry begins to further slump in his chair. The result of these movements is depicted in Figure 8.

In the last cluster, starting 8 frames later, Ted starts to reorganize his posture for reading. On the next frame, the teacher starts to move her head toward Maria. In turn, Maria stops moving and looks intently at the teacher. The result is a group recalibrated for reading the book (Figure 9). When they are all back together, the teacher says only, *A little louder, please*, as if the problem with the group was that Maria had not been reading loudly enough.

It is important to be clear what all this is about. We are trying to substantiate the claim that the positioning units or contexts listed in Table I are actually the contexts attended to and used by the members of the two groups in their dealings with each other. In order to prove this, we are trying to show that the order apparent in different positionings is formulated, oriented to, and used by the members to hold each other accountable. In the example just detailed, the order in the members' behavior is not obvious. The teacher calls on a child to read, no one pays attention to the reading, and the child stops reading in the middle of the assignment. Although the order is not apparent to the uninitiated, we are suggesting that there is much order in the ways the children and the teacher deal with one another. Although the attentional structure of the group seems to spread around the classroom, in this case the members of the group keep a careful watch on each other. As it is a reading
positioning for which they have formulated and organized themselves, the members are quite sensitive to certain kinds of movements. During a waiting positioning (IV) Maria could put her book down, and no one would notice, or the teacher could turn to Perry, and he would not attend. But in the reading positioning (I), because the members understand what it is that they are doing with each other, even if they are not doing it in its idealized version, the fact that Maria stops reading or that the teacher turns to Perry takes on meanings to which all respond, meanings to which they all hold each other accountable. These interpretative grids frame or contextualize the members vis-a-vis each other.

In the members’ behavior, in this example, we have a display of how contextualizing work is done and how the contexts for activities are used to regenerate a particular social order. Maria stops reading and gets the teacher’s attention. The teacher brings Perry back into the group. Rosa moves with the teacher, as she is wont to do, in a way to keep her as part of the group, but unavailable for reading or mutual gaze with the teacher. All this brings Ted back into the reading positioning. With the group reorganized in this reading positioning, Maria can once again start to read.

Interestingly enough, in less than a minute from this sequence, at the end of Maria’s turn to read, the group members go through an almost exact replica of this sequence of behavior and achieve the same result, that is, everyone comes back to the reading positioning after an elaborate recalibration dance. These examples should show how the members actually understand a great deal about what it is they are doing with each other and how they use these understandings to contextualize their communication with each other. It should also make clear how we can use the understandings they exhibit in situ about their contexts to judge the adequacy of our own descriptions of their behavior and the organizational contexts in which it occurs.

CONCLUSION

People achieve order in face-to-face behavior by formulating a working consensus of what they are doing with each other, by orienting to and holding each other accountable for the proper ordering of their behavior, and by doing it in such a way as to allow for the sequential proposal and possible confirmation of their consensuses. Ethnographies which do not take into account the interactional com-

plexity of the order achieved in face-to-face behavior is likely to have an inadequate descriptive foundation for making replicable and generalizable statements about the organization of behavior in different groups. To remedy this situation, we have suggested that the ways people have of managing their own sense of what it is that they are doing with each other should be used to judge the adequacy of any description of behavior and its contexts. Thus, we have suggested that it is necessary to determine the adequacy of any description of the form and content of concerted behavior in terms of whether it is (1) formulated, (2) posturally positioned, (3) oriented to, and (4) used to hold members accountable for certain ways of proceeding. In the development of an example to illustrate these criteria, we have claimed to demonstrate ordered behavior where others saw chaos.

NOTES

1 Ethnographers often call for descriptions which could be evaluated by readers according to a set of criteria of the type we are suggesting, but every year we are offered a new set of statements of apparent defeat to the effect that nothing can replace the personal intuition and insight of the ethnographer (for a recent collection from a variety of points of view cf. D’Andrade 1976, Slater 1976, Witherspoon 1977). We are not trying to replace the good sense of the fieldworker. Adequate description depends heavily on the practical knowledge and deep feelings of the ethnographer. But in celebrating the intuitive flash of the fieldworker, we must not lose sight of descriptive clarity and rigor as goals. We simply are asking for some standards for judging the behavioral accounts which must form the basis of any ethnographer’s display of sensibility and insight.

Most ethnographers share our concern, although Geertz’s (1973) influential call for “thick description” and thin criteria for the evaluation of a description has sparked a number of claims that ethnographers can only assert and never display enough data to make replicable descriptions consistent with the natives’ interpretations of their own activities. This position can force ethnographers to embrace good literature as the only goal for their descriptive efforts. We differ to the extent that we want to encourage both literary and more replicable approaches to ethnographic description, and we offer the following criteria as one way of distinguishing the two kinds of efforts.

Although the specifics of this program are adapted primarily from the programmatic work of ethnomethodologists (Cicourel 1974, Goffman 1967, Goffman and Sacks 1970, Mehan and Wood 1973) and the empirical work of conversationals (Sacks 1972, Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977, Schegloff and Sacks 1973) and context analysts (Birdwhistle 1970, Keaden 1977, Scheff 1973, 1976), the problems to which this paper is addressed run deep in such supposedly diverse schools of anthropology, as the interactionalist (Arendt 1977, Garrison and Arensberg 1976), the cognitive (Black 1974, Conklin 1964, Frake 1964b, 1977), the ethological (Bock 1976a, Chance and Jolly
The term working consensus originally was used by Goffman (1959:9-10) to refer to a "kind of interactional modus vivendi. Together the participants contribute to a single overall definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored". The term has been used by Kendon (1976:322) in much the same way we have been using it: "A central problem in the investigation of interaction ... will be to see how, in terms of the functioning of observable behavior, the 'working consensus' for a given behavioral system is established and maintained. In particular, this means that we must identify those aspects of behavioral function which serve to control or regulate the behavior of the participants in relation to the currently established pattern of relationship. This requires that we look for regularities in behavioral relationship, but also that we look closely at places where these regularities change."

Although Kendon uses the term to refer to behavioral regularities and functions, the fact that thinking is involved in the process of forming agreement and consensus suggests that a more cognitive reading of the term is possible. We will play off both senses of the term, although it is important to point out that we are never referring to what might be going on in any one person's head. A working consensus is public, and the term refers only to the minimally precise definition of what is going on that members need to continue in interaction with each other. For example, for two people to walk away from the same interaction with two quite different accounts of what they did together. For example, one participant in a transaction may be courting, while the other was unaware of this. At another level, however, they had to have shared some consensus of what they were doing together, in order to carry on the basis of their conversation. A working consensus is publicly cognitive in the sense that people can be taken to task for displaying that they are not thinking that they are doing a particular thing together (Frake 1977).

As an expository device, we are going to use a number of terms to refer to different aspects of the contexts people use in their organization of concerted behavior: environment, working consensus, and formulated order. Where it is necessary to do so, we will attempt a rigorous discussion of these terms. For the most part, they should be read as they would be in everyday English. Their function being to highlight the different aspects of context which we hope to emphasize, but very loosely, at any point in our discussion. We use environment to suggest the more general aspects of the contexts people use to organize their behavior, working consensus to suggest the more cognitive aspects, and the formulated order to suggest the more normatively guided aspects of contexts.

We will sometimes refer to the problem of delineating what is going on in terms of a question people might ask of themselves and each other, namely, What is it that is going on here? (Frake 1977, Goffman 1974). This is not to suggest that we will limit our description to well-framed questions and answers, although we find that the systematic study of What's going on? question-answer frames has given us some of the most ethnographically adequate descriptions of activities and their contexts. Cognitive anthropologists interested in events (Agar 1973, 1975, Fiske 1968, Frake 1964a, 1969, 1976, Metzger and William 1966, B. Spradley 1970) have worried about the descriptive adequacy of people's answers to such questions, and, on the assumption that the proper questions would elicit the proper answers, they have tried to control for the relevance of people's answers to such queries by the careful use of eliciting frames. In this way, they have offered some excellent accounts of the terms people have available for talking about what it is that can go on in their lives. However, a taxonomy of terms people use to describe their participation in everyday life does not adequately describe what it is that they are doing any given time or how it is that whatever they are doing comes to be agreed upon and named. Adequate framing for a What's going on here? question is considerably larger than any elicited frame could possibly be (Bateson 1972, Wootton 1975). As Frake (1977) has pointed out, the methodological difficulties of cognitive anthropology "have arisen from a failure to fully exploit the interactive aspects of the frame model, to widen the frame so as to capture a context that more fully specifies how human behavior comes to have meaning". This paper uses and develops the interactive aspects of the frame model. One unfortunate aspect of many of the frame analyses of most anthropologists is evident in the cognitive language used to describe the interaction between two or more people; the problems natives had to solve with each other were problems of cognition, of not knowing enough, of not having enough of a mutual understanding. The language of the more interactional approach called for here is, to borrow Bentley's (1954) insightful term, more muscular. In addition to sharing knowledge about each other, and whatever it is they are doing together, actors in this paper will struggle to make sense of each other and do work to help generate the kinds of recognizable contexts for common sense to be achieved from one moment to the next. As Garfinkel (1963, 1967) has pointed out often, the problem facing people in interaction is never simply one of shared knowledge or overlapping interpretive grids. No matter how much people know in common, they must still work at constructing the environments that their mutual knowledge leads them to expect, and any trivialization of this effort can have disastrous consequences. People never know exactly how to make sense of each other. Rather they must do interactional work to create the kinds of environments which members can recognize as suitable environments for displaying whatever it is that they know how to do with each other.

This reflexive relation between knowing and doing in social interaction has been discussed by Goffman (1974:247) in his account of how people organize their behavior by way of contexts or frameworks. "Frameworks are not merely a matter of mind but correspond in some sense to the way in which an aspect of the activity itself is organized — especially activity directly involving social agents. Organizational premises are involved, and they are something cognition somehow arrives at, not something cognition creates or generates. Given their understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and usually find that the ongoing world supports this fitting. These organizational premises — sustained in both mind and in activity — I call the frame of activity."
Although we want to specify our units of analysis in terms of the procedures we use to define them, we are reluctant to invoke the term operationalizing because of the way it is used frequently in contemporary social science. Unfortunately, operationalism has become a rallying cry for the study of the statistical interaction of decontextualized units of analysis. The problem is as follows. Assume that we need a rigorous description of a banana in order to proceed in some investigation. Suppose there is a well-defined sugar solution which acts in a particular way only in response to what are generally called bananas. A banana can now be defined operationally as an object which causes particular reactions to a well-defined sugar solution. This is a useful measure of analysis only if we want to study bananas in sugar solutions. The consequence of the operationalist logic is that what natives call bananas are no longer bananas once they are removed from the defining conditions. The lesson to be learned here is that the procedures we use to operationalize our units of analysis must be empirically related to the kinds of generalization we wish to make from our findings. If we want to make conclusions about bananas in other than sugar solution contexts, different operationalizing procedures are necessary. If we want to say something about bananas in the naturally occurring systems in which bananas appear, perhaps we would have to develop units at the genetic level in terms of the chromosomal mechanisms which allow for bananas on banana trees rather than on pear trees, or at the ecological level in terms of how other organisms respond to the growth of bananas in a particular niche.

In the study of complex behavior, if we are to draw any conclusions about human interactionism our studies, we need procedures which are appropriate to the phenomena under analysis; we need ways of specifying units of analysis which are consistent with the units of analysis apparently in use in the naturally occurring systems in which interaction takes place. The requirement that we operationalize our units of analysis in the same way that they appear to be defined and acted upon by the participants to an interaction is seldom heeded in the social sciences and leads us to avoid the call for operationalism as an organizing device for this paper. If the reader must classify our approach in terms of operational procedures, we are trying to operationalize our units of analysis in terms of the procedures the natives use in their dealings with each other. Bateson (1977:146) has stated recently that we can never operationalize the physical dimensions of the world, but only the descriptions of those dimensions; enlightenment comes with the realization that descriptions are the only phenomena for us to study. "And when you realize that, then you realize that it's possible to be wrong in how you organize your descriptions, and it's possible to be wrong for this reason: the creatures we talk about—people, sea urchins, starfish, beetles, plants, cabbages, whatnot—all these creatures themselves contain description." Our task is to identify units for the analysis of human communities which are consistent with the naturally occurring descriptive systems used in those communities.

Most units of behavior have multiple functions in the way that people organize concerted activities. What is most intriguing, but seldom realized, is that a single piece of behavior can function to integrate, comment upon, and regulate itself. This is crucial in two ways. One is that ethnographers traditionally rely on literal or other kinds of single function interpretations of the behavior they take to be exemplary of a particular cultural complex. In this way, single patterns of behavior are isolated, but how these patterns are themselves used in the organization of next activities, with some exceptions such as work on metacommunication by Bateson (1956, 1972) and Scheflen (1973, 1974), is generally ignored in accounts of how social organizations in fact get organized. There is another reason for stressing the multifunctional nature of any human behavior. In specifying the relation between the different aspects of behaviors, where members are immersed in the most problematic dimensions of behavioral interpretation and organization, we can gain insight into the workings of play, creativity, mystification, and other important aspects of the human condition which are left out of most accounts of social structure.

Readers well versed in the tradition of context analysis will notice that we have avoided the question of the logical typing of our data. This is not because we have found behavior to be all of a class, but because it has been our effort here and elsewhere to show that phenomena usually thought to be individual in nature have in fact social organizational properties. In so doing, our effort has been tactical, for there is in fact no simple dichotomy between change on the individual level (or learning) and communication. Specifying the different kinds of change and their organization is in fact the concern of analysis founded on logical types. Our criteria assume such a relationship without ever systematically displaying it.

7 The following passage from Sacks (1970) helped to orient us to the importance of this criterion: "since we are looking for orders of achieved organization ..., we might first look for such features ... as 'organization' might be directed to 'preserving'. A way of locating such features is to find those which participants are 'oriented to' the preservation of." This criterion for a description of what a person might be up to with other persons in a social situation is strikingly similar to a criterion used to establish the logic of relations between an organism and its environment in neuroepistemology (Pribram 1971, Sokolov 1969). For an application of work on neuronal models and the orienting reflex to the social sciences, the work of Beck (1976b) is essential.

8 These idealized examples of the three positioning offer a considerable simplification of behavioral realities. In an extended effort on some of these same materials, McDermott (1976) has displayed portions of the larger analysis, worked out with Gospodinoff, which gives us some warrant for reducing the group's behavior to these three positioning. The case for the fourth positioning (unfortunately, numbered positioning III on the original scheme is less clear, and we have chosen to leave it out of the analysis for present purposes only. No matter how much data analysis we claim to be elsewhere, by limiting ourselves to three seconds of film, we no doubt are risking oversimplification and misunderstanding. Expository devices for reducing the risk have been points of much disagreement among the authors.

9 As the point of this paper is methodological, we will not, in the body of this paper, discuss why we came to this analysis or why we think it is important. The children in this group are understood as generally unruly and disabled in school. We were driven to this level of analysis to show that their behavior was indeed well ordered in response to the environments offered to them in school. This analysis has left us with the question of how it is that we (adults in this case, the institutionally enfranchised in general) consistently offer children environments in terms of which they can produce orderly and sensible responses to
which we are systematically blind. The answer to this question links the kind of
analysis called for in this paper, sometimes referred to with the diminutive
‘micro’, with more traditional forms of social theory. Some of these links are
discussed in McDermott and Roth (1978).

Now that linguistics, psychology and sociology have rediscovered the need
for context sensitivity in theoretical statements about human behavior, we can
look forward to some attempts at detailed description of people in relation to
their world. The criteria developed here, and in other forms of context analysis,
as pioneered by Scheflan (1973) and hailed most recently in a review statement
by Kendon (in press), should be of help in the development of each of these
disciplines.

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