Territory, Identity, and Conflict in a Public Meeting: A Natural History Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the natural history of a public meeting, recognizing the importance of the unfolding of events as key to understanding the relationships and issues germane to human relating. As a method, the natural history approach is employed through reducing permanent records of interaction to a statistical record in order to examine the relative involvement of participants in a public meeting. The statistical presentation of data points to a particular moment of interaction that stands out in the meeting structure as unique. This moment is analyzed and an approach to understanding a conflict based on identities of place is developed.

Keywords

T his paper has a dual-purpose. First, it explains a methodology for quantitative identification of interesting interaction features, and secondly it employs these quantitative directions to examine a brief interactional exchange in a public meeting. It thus demonstrates the unique possibilities that quantification of qualitative data can provide for the study of language and social interaction.

Theoretically, this methodological approach to interaction grows out of the work of Norman McQuown (1971) and his colleagues in their work *The Natural History of an Interview*. Gregory Bateson, writing the initial chapter of *The Natural History*, comments, "we call our treatment of such data a 'natural history' because a minimum of theory guided the collection of the data" (p. 6). Thus, the theoretical orientation to understanding the data is to attempt to do so without a preconception about expected outcomes and interaction qualities. It is nevertheless the case that social situations cannot be approached without preconceptions – this is one of the primary tenets of qualitative and naturalistic inquiry that is so attractive to many of its practitioners – the recognition that all knowledge is political, perspectivist, and socially constructed through our cultural and socio-economic milieu.

Bateson's point, however, was that prior to making any assumptions about how or why people are acting the way they do, it is first quite productive to examine the natural contours of the interaction. That is, how does a meeting unfold? Who speaks, and when? And, finally, what can these micro-level details tell us about the macro-level concerns of human beings?

The Video

In order to examine the participation in the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) meeting, I captured an MP4 video file and placed it into IMovie on a Macintosh computer. Using IMovie, I removed the audio track, placing this new MP3 into ExpressScribe, a free download transcription program. Transcription with a foot pedal in standard English orthography rendered a document of 888 lines in length, consisting of 124 turns at talk, taken by at least 27 different participants. There are seventeen turns at talk during which the speaker is not visible on the screen. Of those non-visible participants, one is male, and 16 are female. It is therefore not possible to say whether or not these women were unique speakers. The length of a person's turn at talk is measured in the number of lines of the transcript that his/her talk occupies.

The Meeting: Description and Expectations for Participation

We have some basic presuppositions about how people participate in meetings where power and access to the floor are relatively shared (Goldberg, 1975). In a meeting whose transcript is 888 lines long, one would expect, if 27 people shared 124 turns, we would see people taking on average 4.59 turns each, and that each turn would be approximately 7.2 lines long (See Table 1, below). These might of course be our expectations if we were attending, for instance, a committee meeting in which every person had equal opportunity to speak, or if attending a book discussion group at a local library.

This is a meeting run by a few, presented to many (estimated at roughly 100 people in the audience), and then opened up to the many for questions, mediated by the few powerful people in the front of the room. One's expectations for such a meeting, in which a presentation is followed by question and answer from the audience, would be that turns at talk would generally be short, and that members of the audience, in particular, would speak only once, and briefly. What happened in the North Omaha Development Project meeting is quite unlike what our expectations tell us.

The Natural History

To create the natural history of this meeting, I reduced the transcript to an SPSS file, numbering each turn and identifying its speaker and length. The approach creates a "birds eye" view of the meeting structure, and it allows for the examination of interesting contours of interaction that might not be as visible if the transcript were the only record. Obviously, the transcript is already a data reduction method, as it is not as complex as the video, which, again, is a reduction of the actual situation, as the cameraperson's account is in itself "inferential rather than descriptive, and selective rather than inclusive" (Pittenger, Hockett, and Danehy, 1960, p. 5). Thus, the reduction of the transcript to a set of descriptive statistics further removes us from the situation; at the same time, it gives us the opportunity to examine participation structure and the unfolding of the meeting in a manner that ethnographic or conversation analytic methods (two common methods for the study of social interaction) would not render visible.

Each turn at talk served as a unit of analysis in this mapping of the meeting. Thus, I associated with each turn the following information: who was the speaker, when did the turn take

place, how long was the turn, and was the turn produced in the presentation or the Q&A portion of the meeting. Table 1 summarizes the meeting.

Table 1

Statistical Descriptions of Participation in a Public Meeting

	Number of turns	Turn length (lines)
Mean	4.59	7
Median	3	3
Mode	1	1
SD	4.9	15
Top Quartile	≥ 6	≥ 8

As shown in Table 1, if the turns were shared equally among all members of the audience and the NODP, each "active participant" (or, person who spoke) should have spoken between four and five times. Additionally, if most turns at talk were similar, each turn at talk would be approximately seven lines long. Because in Table 1 we see that the standard deviations of number of turns and turn lengths were so great, use of the mean as a measure of central tendency is less meaningful than the median. Most importantly, I examined the top quartile measurements. That is, what people (measured in number of turns) are most active and what turns (measured in length) are longest?

As related to the number of turns taken by an individual participant, the top quartile figure is six or more turns. Thus, any participant who took at least six turns is considered a very active participant. Additionally, as evidenced by the quartile rankings of turn lengths, any turn of eight lines or more is identified as a very long turn.

In Tables 2 and 3, heavy participation measures are displayed as associated with the unique participants who took these turns. These identifications were rendered through examination of the two sets of data that ranked in the top quartile of this meeting's unfolding.

Table 2

Meeting Participants Taking Six or More Turns

Participant	Membership (NODP or AUDIENCE)
Gary	NODP
Tony	NODP
Frank	NODP
Non-visible Women	AUDIENCE[1]
Dave	NODP
Dick	NODP
W21	AUDIENCE

The first obvious feature of the information contained in Table 2 is the observation that there was only *one* person in the audience (i.e., not a member of the NODP) who took a large number of turns. One would expect that the presenters at a meeting would take more turns than the individual audience members, and so these figures are not surprising. However, the one woman (W21) from the audience who took multiple turns at talk gives reason for pause. Why might she have taken so many turns? What was happening at the time that she took those turns? Examination of the transcript further reveals that W21's turns took place in succession – her talk was a sort of conversation within the meeting – indicating that she held the floor for a considerable period of time.

Herein lies the advantage of a natural history approach to dialogue and interaction. What fascinating information lies behind this flurry of activity from one person, and why might she have spoken so much in such a short period of time?

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[1] Note in Table 2 that, as mentioned, because some turns were taken by people out of the camera frame, these may or may not have been the same speaker. Thus, ten turns are taken by women who cannot be identified by sight. I do *not* consider this in the analysis as there is no way of knowing how many unique speakers are included in this figure.

Table 3

Meeting Participants Who Take Long Turns

Participant	Membership
Gary	NODP
Bob	NODP
Tony	NODP
Frank	NODP
W7	AUDIENCE
Dave	NODP
M15	AUDIENCE
W16	AUDIENCE
W13	AUDIENCE
Dick	NODP
W5	AUDIENCE
W21	AUDIENCE
M23	AUDIENCE
M27	AUDIENCE

In Table 3, we see that the long turns are shared more equally between members of the NODP and the audience. All presenters from the NODP take long turns at talk, most likely due to the monologic nature of presentations. However, a number of people in the audience take long turns, and these then become of interest. The remainder of this analysis focuses, therefore, on one person, W21, as she was the only audience member whose participation ranks in the top quartile on both measures of participation. Thus, because she is an audience member who participates heavily in the meeting, her activity might lead to some very interesting insights into the meaningful engagement of participants in a public meeting.

Microanalysis of Talk: Who is W21 and What is the Talk Content?

It is, of course, impossible to examine the interaction of one person without an examination of the context created as she speaks. This analysis therefore takes into account the participation of W21 and those with whom she speaks, as well as what those people say. W 21's turns at talk

are successive. That is, they happen in one short span of time during the meeting, and, additionally, they happen quite late in the meeting. W21's first turn is turn number 80. Relative to the meeting content in number of turns (124 total) this extended series of turns commences after roughly 75% of the meeting has transpired. Additionally, as measured in lines of transcript, W21's turns begin at line 666 – again, after roughly 75% of the 888 total lines of transcript have been spoken. Thus, after the participants had been engaged for almost forty minutes, having heard nearly eighty different things said by dozens of people, W21 begins. W21's first turn comes directly on the tail of Dick Davis's acceptance of the problem that the NODP faces, given a woman's argument that the problem lies in the fact that area businesses have "for our whole lives" "never hired a black person." Her comments are met with loud applause and agreement from the audience. Dick Davis, described to us from field notes as the "richest black man in Nebraska" ostensibly "takes the heat" from this woman, and the following begins, as uttered by W21, an African American woman.

Turn 80:   *W21: Okay, with all due respect Mr. Davis, cause I do respect you. The issue is that I've sat in I don't know how many of these same type of meetings and it's always solution oriented. And what happens to the solution is. I'd just like to ask one question. All of these committees that have been formed? How many of those people, those committee members live in north Omaha in the defined areas, besides possibly Frank? Who else? Who else?*

Initial investigation clearly indicates that identity concerns are at play in W21's participation, demonstrated in three conversational moves that she makes in this opening turn at talk. First, we observe W21's very feminine but very powerful move: "with all due respect," calling attention to the crowd that she is aware of her status, and of Mr. Davis's status. This, coupled with the different mode of address she uses for "Mr. Davis" and "Frank" – also a member of the presentation team, but a local politician who lives in the area, is an interesting self/other orientation (Mokros, 2003). Here, she behaves toward "Mr. Davis," with a form of what Goffman calls "presentational deference" (1967) or a polite term of address. However, she follows this up with a reference to "Frank" in a familiar way – that of the first name. At first blush, one might interpret this reference to Mr. Davis as feminine and deferential. However, it appears, as we read on in both this turn and others, that this is indeed not a deference move – *I'm*

lower than you – but an aggressive use of face work (again, Goffman's (1967) term) – *I belong and you do not.*

The additional clues to the conceptualization of self as member or other are noted throughout both W21's first turn at talk, when she says, "How many of those people, those committee members live in North Omaha in the defined areas, besides possibly Frank? Who else? Who else?"

Of special interest here is that "Frank" is included as a personal, familiar, member of the community, different from Mr. Davis. However, important to W21 was to learn whether or not members of the community *other than* Frank – non-elected officials, perhaps – had been invited to direct and steer the deliberation. Thus, we learn that although Frank ranks higher than Mr. Davis in his "membership" in the community, he is still viewed as an "other" from the perspective of this one individual (Mokros, 2003). As we see, before she is even responded to, W21 has positioned herself as an "us" and a number of others (Mr. Davis, Frank – sometimes – and others who do not live in the community) as "them." The interaction goes on:

Turn 81   *W22: and when was that proposal for those jobs even went out*

Turn 82   *W21: If you live here. If you're on a committee and you live in north Omaha in the target area, Hands.*

In turn 82, we see W21 asking people to specifically identify and mark themselves as participants in the project and members of the "us" that she attempts to define. The interaction proceeds:

Turn 83   *W17:   I I live outside the target area*

Turn 84   *W21:   okay you're not in this then*

Here, we see W21 again defining who may be counted as "us," and in response to W17, she says "you're not in this then." W17 protests, as we see below in turns 85 and 87, essentially claiming that the development project *does* concern her despite her not living in the area, because, first, of economic and retail opportunities and second, her feelings about the area.

Turn 85   *W17:   wait wait. I live farther north and a little bit to the west of it but I'm just as much [inaud] because there's not a grocery store within five miles of my house*

Turn 86   *W21:   Okay but I'm talking about the target area*

Turn 87   *W17:   I care about north Omaha*

Although W17 claims to "care about North Omaha," above in turn 87, W21 delivers the ultimate blow in turn 88, with her response,

Turn 88   *W21:   Well, I'm sure you do*

With this comment, W21 effectively shuts down the participation of W17 who is never heard from again during the remainder of the meeting. It is noteworthy that W17 had spoken prior to this interaction, at turn number 46, much earlier in the meeting. Thus, we can infer that W21's behavior and strategies toward W17 were actually the words, sharp enough, that shut this person down, effectively closing off her ability to participate.

Still, however, W21 is not finished, as she specifies to Dick Davis in turn 90, and continues.

Turn 89   *DICK: let me let me let me respond to that cause I wanna*

Turn 90   *W21:   Well let me finish*

Turn 91   *DICK: alright*

Turn 92   *W21:   That's the first problem*

Turn 93   *DICK: alright*

Turn 94   *W21:   We got what five people maybe. So this is not the community input. The very fact that you had cards rather than having people stand up and raise their hands so you could screen the the questions*

Turn 95   *DICK: well we're*

Turn 96   *W21:   And why you know the gentleman's point about why we don't trust. This goes on every year. Every year we have a meeting we have all these people and I asked another question. Were there not any brains in Omaha that could've worked this out that we need to go to Chicago, New York or wherever and pay them that astronomical amount of money to do study what we already know to be true?*

Turn 97   *DICK: let me try to let me try to answer those questions in sequence. The first one quite frankly is that there are gonna be some African Americans uh*

Turn 98   *W21:   I mean people who live in the area*

In the above sequence of turns we again see a number of personhood concerns (Cockett, 2000; Mokros, Mullins, & Saracevic, 1995; Stephenson, 1998) surfacing as W21 continues to position herself as a particular kind of person: a person who belongs, a person who is a "true" member of the community that matters in this meeting. In turn 94, she says, "this is not the

community input" and again, in turn 96, says, "were there not any brains in Omaha that could've worked this out?"

Of particular interest is the exchange in turns 97 and 98. That is, Davis says, "there are gonna be some African Americans…" and is quickly interrupted by W21 who responds again with geography rather than race. This is interesting and surprising, as so much of the contentiousness and mistrust in this meeting (as noted in other essays in this issue) has been race-oriented. This may clearly have been why Davis, an African American man, attempted to answer the questions – because the general tenor of feeling was that this meeting was a race-based series of questions and answers, or at least that is what it had become from the time that the "heat" had been turned up on the presenters.

However, W21 is concerned with place. And in her first ten turns at talk *place* emerges as central to a personhood orientation for this woman. This participant's remaining turns have been addressed in other articles in this issue, the "jack us around" comments in particular have been interesting to consider (Plummer, this volume). However, in these first ten out of her 13 turns at talk, this woman's orientation toward self/other, in-group/out-group is over and over again displayed as oriented to a geographical space or place. How is it that place can trump race – or at least coexist with it as an important identity marker – in a contentious identity battle?

Space and the Social Bond

W21's orientation toward space or place as a marker of identity might be fruitfully explored through consideration of the relational nature of human beings and human identities. In addition to the rich tradition of social constructionism (i.e. Berger & Luckman, 1967; Goffman, 1959; 1967; Mead, 1934/1967; Cooley, 1902/1922) as an approach to the self, Scheff (1990, 1994) and Retzinger (1991) both write about human social bonds as the motivating factor in interaction and social life. Scheff (1994) contends "pride and shame play an equal part with solidarity and alienation in determining the degree of social integration in a society, its capacity for cooperation and survival under stress, and its potential for fragmentation or violent disruption" (p. 54). That is, pride and shame, the most social of our emotions, which occur when the social bond is intact or threatened (or severed) respectively, function as markers of social belonging. When bypassed, shame – or the feeling of a threat to face or self experienced in interaction with another – turns into rage and leads to violence (Scheff, 1990, 1994; Retzinger, 1991). Scheff (1994) writes, "I

assume that the social bond is a real and palpable phenomenon and that in every type of human contact it is being either *built, maintained, repaired, or damaged*. In this context, we see alienation or damaged bonds as a basic cause of destructive conflict" (p. 1, emphasis in original).

How, then, is space or place that important marker of identity and so related to the anger expressed throughout the meeting – and exemplified by W21? Herb and Kaplan (1999) writing about national identity, argue "territory" is "an important … identity that helps to position the shared culture and the social bonds among members" (p. 2). This cursory examination of bonds and space might suggest, as I infer, that the threat to members of the North Omaha community lay not only in issues of race, but also in issues of their "neighborhood" – a term that was used throughout the meeting. Perhaps it is the case that when "outsiders" (NODP members) came to North Omaha to develop it and make it, ostensibly, *better*, this intrusion and evaluation signaled a threat to the social bond. In other words, "who are you to tell us that we lack anything? And further, who are you to think you know how to make things better here?" Pride in sense of place, and a threat to that pride could have served to bring about hostility toward the outsiders – those who bring to the foreground the community's need for change.

Conclusion

This consideration of one public meeting has demonstrated the fruitful perspective that a natural history approach to interaction can reveal. From the "naked" eye, anyone observing this meeting might say that the episode examined in this article was one of the two or three most interesting moments due to its contentiousness and W21's aggressive tone and relentless hold on the floor.

This then begs the question: why do the statistical reductions help if the cursory observation of a transcript would render this moment interesting? First, the numbers verify that our hunches – our feelings about interesting moments in content – are good hunches. Additionally, the quantification allows us to see that the complexity of interaction is displayed not only through *what one says* and *how we say it*, but when, how often, to whom, and how much. That is, *the structures* of our participation are equally important to the content of our participation. This then provides an interesting approach to the study of social networks in interaction research.

In addition, the usefulness of approaching the data quantitatively – and somewhat atheoretically in terms of the content initially – is demonstrated in the unique moment that

surfaced as structurally important. Clearly, this is a meeting about race, identity, and conflict in a small community. There is no question about the complexity and importance of race, racism, and the tensions between the NODP and the community. However, this moment of territoriality and the relationship between place, social bonds, identities and conflict, is both more subtle and therefore, in many ways quite interesting. It demonstrates the deep complexity of conflict and its occasional intractability, and it sheds light on identity in a different way than we might have conceptualized it otherwise for understanding this situation.

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