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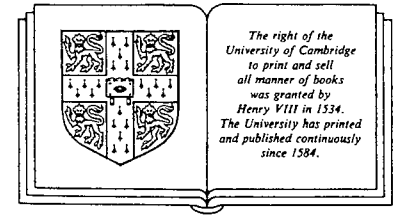
Structures of Social Action

Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson *and* John Heritage



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Preface

This book is the result of a collaboration that began when, as co-convenors of the Sociology of Language Study Group of the British Sociological Association, we organized the Social Science Research Council/British Sociological Association International Conference on Practical Reasoning and Discourse Processes, which was held 2–6 July 1979 at St. Hugh's College, Oxford. All the contributors to the present book, with the exception of the late Harvey Sacks, were among those who participated at the conference, and earlier versions of Chapters 5, 8 and 14 were originally presented there. Although the book is not a full collection of the proceedings, it is the result of a cooperative endeavor that began at the Oxford conference.

In acknowledging our debt to all those who helped to make the conference a memorable intellectual experience, we would like to record our thanks to the Sociology and Social Administration Committee of the (British) Social Science Research Council (SSRC) for the award of a grant that made it possible. Our gratitude to SSRC also extends beyond this grant to a longer-term appreciation of the active and constructive part it has played in facilitating the development of conversation analytic research in Britain. For it may be noted that no fewer than eight of the twelve contributors to this book have, at one time or another, had the benefit of financial support from SSRC, as research students, as recipients of project grants, or as members of its research staff. It is never easy to establish new approaches to social science research, especially if the concerns of those approaches are perceived as being "pure" or "fundamental," rather than "applied" or "policy-oriented." Where the number of active researchers is relatively small, funding even on quite a modest scale can have a major impact on the extent to which it is possible to develop such work. Conversation analysis in Britain has benefited greatly from the flexibility and responsiveness of SSRC funding policies,

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ciology's serious and long-standing neglect of the study of naturally oganized everyday activities, his own work was marked by a determination to find ways of cutting into the problem that would establish the viability of such a research program beyond doubt. In order to do that it was necessary not just to articulate an analytic approach to the phenomena of everyday life, but to do so in such a way that it could be learned, applied, and expanded on by others. Conversation analysis has certainly developed in recent years, and one particularly noticeable feature of recent work is that it has tended to become more detailed and more technical. Research reports typically concentrate on the identification and explication of particular interactional devices and practices, and less attention is given to discussions of the sociological rationale for doing such studies, or of the broader implications their findings may have. In part, of course, this approach is responsive to the problems of excessive length and repetition that would otherwise be involved. More importantly, however, the sustained focus on the details of interaction is sensitive to the fact that participants themselves observe and analyze each other's actions in extraordinarily detailed and systematic ways. Minimally, then, any empirically adequate approach to research into social interaction must presumably seek to come to terms with the phenomena in a no less detailed fashion than is routinely done by participants themselves.

Such a focus does not therefore mean that conversation analysts have somehow lost sight of or become less committed to the originating aims of the research tradition within which they are working, even though they may not be rehearsed by every author of every single paper that is ever written. Were this to be done, however, it is likely that one theme that would continually recur would be the claim contained in the following chapter by Sacks – namely, that it is through the deployment of techniques and practices of the sort described in this book (and elsewhere in the literature of conversation analysis) that everyday activities are produced, recognized, and treated as orderly phenomena. In other words, devices, techniques, machineries, and the like are viewed as analytically interesting only insofar as and to the extent that they can be shown to be usable and used by real-world people for the living of real-world lives.

16. On doing "being ordinary"

HARVEY SACKS
Late of the University of California, Irvine

Usually I start the course by doing what I do in the course, without any programmatic statements and without any indication of why it should be of any interest to anybody. Now – and this may be unfair – the course will turn out to be much more severely technical than most of you could possibly be interested in, and some good percentage of people will drop out, and usually that has the consequence that they get nothing out of the class. So I decided to spend the first session telling people something that I take it could hardly *not* be of interest to them. Then, when they drop out, they would at least have heard what I figure would be worth the price of the course. I guess I should say that if this is not absorbing to you, you could hardly imagine how unabsorbing the rest will be.

Now, in this course I will be taking stories offered in conversation and subjecting them to a type of analysis that is concerned, roughly, to see whether it is possible to subject the details of actual events to formal investigation, informatively. The gross aim of the work I am doing is to see how finely the details of actual, naturally occurring conversation can be subjected to analysis that will yield the technology of conversation.

The idea is to take singular sequences of conversation and tear them apart in such a way as to find rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims (a collection of terms that more or less relate to each other and that I use somewhat interchangeably) that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversations we examine. The point is, then, to come back to the singular things we observe in a singular sequence, with some rules that handle those singular features, and also, necessarily, handle lots of other events.

So, what we are dealing with is the technology of conversation. We

This chapter was compiled by Gail Jefferson, and is an edited transcript of lecture 1, spring 1970; with additional materials from lecture 2, winter 1970; lecture 4, spring 1970; and lecture 1, spring 1971.

are trying to *find* this technology out of actual fragments of conversation, so that we can impose as a constraint that the technology actually deals with singular events and singular sequences of events – a reasonably strong constraint on some set of rules.

The way I will proceed today is, in many ways, nothing like the way I will proceed throughout the rest of the course. In this lecture I will not be attempting to prove anything, and I will not be studying the technology of telling stories in conversation. I will be saying some things about why the study of storytelling should be of interest to anybody. And the loosest message is that the world you live in is much more finely organized than you would imagine. Now the pileup of evidence about that would only serve to give a great deal of flesh to that assertion, and you do not have to stay around after today to have caught that message, and to have been armed with some materials that would permit you to wander around noticing things that you might not have noticed, and find them ghastly.

A good deal of what I will say has its obscure intellectual source in a novel called *Between Life and Death* (trans. Maria Jolas, 1970) by Nathalie Sarraute. (I say obscure because if you were to read the book it is not likely that you will find that it says what I say, but with some consideration you might see how it is that I owe what I am saying to this source.) The book is absolutely not assigned reading. I am just citing a debt.

A kind of remarkable thing is how, in ordinary conversation, people, in reporting on some event, report what we might see to be, not what happened, but the ordinariness of what happened. The reports do not so much give attributes of the scene, activity, participants, but announce the event's ordinariness, its usualness. And if you think of literature or poetry you can perfectly well know that out of any such event as is passed off as, for example, "It was a nice evening; we sat around and talked," really elaborated characterizations are often presented.

This brings me to the central sorts of assertions I want to make. Whatever you may think about what it is to be an ordinary person in the world, an initial shift is not think of "an ordinary person" as some person, but as somebody having as one's job, as one's constant preoccupation, doing "being ordinary." It is not that somebody *is* ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one's business is, and it takes work, as any other business does. If you just extend the analogy of what you obviously think of as work – as whatever it is that takes analytic, intellectual, emotional energy – then you will be able to see that all sorts of nominalized things, for example, personal characteristics and the like, are jobs that are done, that took some kind of effort, training, and so on.

So I am not going to be talking about an ordinary person as this or that person, or as some average; that is, as a nonexceptional person on some statistical basis, but as something that is the way somebody constitutes oneself, and, in effect, a job that persons and the people around them may be coordinatively engaged in, to achieve that each of them, together, are ordinary persons.

A core question is, how do people go about doing "being an ordinary person"? In the first instance, the answer is easy. Among the ways you go about doing "being an ordinary person" is to spend your time in usual ways, having usual thoughts, usual interests, so that all you have to do to be an ordinary person in the evening is turn on the TV set. Now, the trick is to see that it is not that it *happens* that you are doing what lots of ordinary people are doing, but that you know that the way to do "having a usual evening," for anybody, is to do that. It is not that you happen to decide, gee, I'll watch TV tonight, but that you are making a job of, and finding an answer to, how to do "being ordinary" tonight. (And some people, as a matter of kicks, could say, "Let's do 'being ordinary' tonight. We'll watch TV, eat popcorn," etc. Something they know is being done at the same time by millions of others around.)

So one part of the job is that you have to know what anybody/ everybody is doing; doing ordinarily. Further, you have to have that available to do. There are people who do not have that available to do, and who specifically cannot be ordinary.

If, for example, you are in prison, in a room with no facilities at all; say, it has a bench and a hole in the floor and a spigot; then you find yourself doing things like systematically exploring the cracks in the wall from floor to ceiling, over the years, and you come to have information about the wall in that room which ordinary people do not have about their bedroom wall. (And it may be that prison walls are more interesting than other walls, since among other things prisoners are occupied with is leaving information on the wall that they have been there, so there are things to read on the walls.) But it is not a usual thing to say, well, this evening I am going to examine that corner of the ceiling.

Of course it is perfectly available to anybody to spend an afternoon looking at a wall. You could choose to do that. If you take drugs, you are permitted to do that. But unless you take drugs you would not find yourself allowed to do it, though nobody is around. That is to say, being an ordinary person that is not a thing you could allow yourself to spend the day doing. And there is an infinite collection of possibilities, of things to do, that you could not bring yourself to do. In the midst of the most utterly boring afternoon or evening you would rather live through

the boredom in the usual way – whatever that is – than see whether it would be less or more boring to examine the wall or to look in some detail at the tree outside the window.

There are, of course, people whose job it is to make such observations. If you were to pick up the notebooks of writers, poets, novelists, you would be likely to find elaborated studies of small, real objects. For example, in the notebooks of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, there are extended naturalistic observations of a detailed sort, of cloud formations, or what a leaf looks like, looking up at it under varying types of light, and so on. And some novelists' notebooks have extended and detailed observations of character and appearance.

Now, there is a place in Freud's writings where he says, "With regard to matters of chemistry or physics or things like that, laymen would not venture an opinion. With regard to psychology, it is quite different. Anybody feels free to make psychological remarks." Part of the business he thought he was engaged in was changing that around; that is, cojointly to develop psychology and educate laymen, so that laymen would know that they do not know anything about it and that there are people who do, so that they would leave such matters to the experts, as they learned to leave chemical and physical matters to the experts.

My notion is that as it is for chemistry and physics, so it is for making distinctive observations about the world and its persons. It is just a thing that, in being ordinary, you do not do. For whole ranges of things that you might figure to be kind of exciting, something like the following talk will be offered (this is not made up, but is actual). Somebody talking about a man she met the night before says:

> He's just a real, dear, nice guy. Just a real, real nice guy. So we were really talking up a storm, and having a real good time, had a few drinks and so forth, and he's real easygoing. He's intelligent, and he's uh, not handsome, but he's nice looking, and uh, just real real nice, personable, very personable, very sweet.

You do not get, from somebody doing "being ordinary," a report of the play of light on the liquor glasses, or the set of his eyebrows, or timbre of his voice.

I think it is not that you might make such observations but not include them in the story, but it is that the cast of mind of doing "being ordinary" is essentially that your business in life is only to see and report the usual aspects of any possibly usual scene. That is to say, what you *look* for is to see how any scene you are in can be made an ordinary scene, a usual scene, and that is what that scene is.

Now you can plainly see that that could be a job; that it could be work.

The scene does not in the first instance simply present itself, define itself, as insufferably usual, nothing to be said about it. It is a matter of how you are going to attack it. What are you going to see in it? People are regularly monitoring scenes for their storyable possibilities. I give you a gruesome instance of it, from a book called *An Ordinary Camp* (1958) by Micheline Maurel. She reports the first day in a concentration camp. The first hours are horrifying. Then there is a lull. "Little by little conversation sprang up from bunk to bunk. The rumors were already beginning to circulate. Luckily, the news is good. We'll be home soon. We'll have an unusual experience to talk about." A way in which this event was dealt with while it was taking place was that in the end it will turn out to have been a good story. An experience that might leave one utterly without hope you can see as wonderfully relevant for being able to survive it. And plainly enough, you have experienced being in scenes the virtue of which was that, as you were in them, you could see what it was you could later tell people had transpired.

There are presumably lots of things that, at least at some point in people's lives, are done just for that; that is, it seems fair to suppose that there is a time, when kids do "kissing and telling," that they are doing the kissing in order to have something to tell, and not that they happen to do kissing and happen to do telling, or that they want to do kissing and happen to do telling, but that a way to get them to like the kissing is via the fact that they like the telling.

So it seems plain enough that people monitor the scenes they are in for their storyable characteristics. And yet the awesome, overwhelming fact is that they come away with *no* storyable characteristics. Presumably, any of us with any wit could make of this half-hour, or of the next, a rather large array of things to say. But there is the job of being an ordinary person, and that job includes attending the world, yourself, others, objects, so as to see how it is that it is a usual scene. And when offering what transpired, you present it in its usual fashion: "Nothing much," and whatever variants of banal characterizations you might happen to use; that is, there is no particular difference between saying "Nothing much" and "It was outta sight."

I suppose you have all heard the usual characterizations of "our Protestant society," or "our Puritan background," which involve that ordinary people/Americans/Europeans are built in such a way that they are constrained from doing lots of experiences that they might do, were they not repressed. We think of the kinds of repressions that people have that are sociologically based; that is, the Puritan Ethic involves spending most of your time working, holding off pleasure, which we

think of as definitively what it means to be a usual person in Western Civilization. Though that is manifestly important, it misses an essential part of the thing, which is, whether you were to have illegitimate experiences or not, the characteristic of being an ordinary person is that, having the illegitimate experiences that you should not have, they come off in just the usual way that they come off for anybody doing such an illegitimate experience.

When you have an affair, take drugs, commit a crime, and so on, you find that it has been the usual experience that others who have done it have had. So we could perfectly well remove the Puritan constraint, as people report it is being removed, and the ordinary cast of mind would nonetheless be there to preserve the way we go about doing "being ordinary." Reports of the most seemingly outrageous experiences, for which you would figure one would be at a loss for words, or would have available extraordinary details of what happened, turn out to present them in a fashion that has them come off as utterly unexceptional.

My guess is that you could now take that point with you, and, watching yourself live in the world – or watching somebody else, if that is more pleasant – you could see them working at finding how to make it ordinary. Presumably, it would be from such a sort of perceived awareness of, for example, the ease with which, after practice, you see only the most usual characterizations of the people passing (that is a married couple and that is a black guy and that is an old lady) or what a sunset looks like, or what an afternoon with your girlfriend or boyfriend consists of, that you can begin to appreciate that there is some immensely powerful kind of mechanism operating in handling your perceptions and thoughts, other than the known and immensely powerful things like the chemistry of vision, and so on.

Those sorts of things would not explain how it is that you end up seeing that, for example, nothing much happened; that you can come home day after day and, asked what happened, report, without concealing, that nothing happened. And, if you are concealing, what you are concealing, if it were reported, would turn out to be nothing much. And, as it happens with you, so it happens with those you know. And, further, that ventures outside of being ordinary have unknown virtues and unknown costs. That is, if you come home and report what the grass looked like along the freeway; that there were four noticeable shades of green, some of which just appeared yesterday because of the rain, then there may well be some tightening up on the part of your recipient. And if you were to do it routinely, then people might figure that there is something odd about you; that you are pretentious. You might find them jealous of you. You might lose friends. That is to say, you might want to check out the costs of venturing into making your life an epic.

Now, it is also the case that there are people who are entitled to have their lives be an epic. We have assigned a series of storyable people, places, and objects, and they stand as something different from us. It may be that in pretty much every circle there is a somebody who is the subject of all neat observations, as there are, for society in general, a collection of people about whom detailed reports are made that not merely would never be ventured about others, but would never be thought of about others. The way in which Elizabeth Taylor turned around is something noticeable and reportable. The way in which your mother turned around is something unseeable, much less tellable.

The point is that it is almost everybody's business to be occupationally ordinary; that people take on the job of keeping everything utterly mundane; that no matter what happens, pretty much everybody is engaged in finding only how it is that what is going on is usual, with every effort possible. And it is really remarkable to see people's efforts to achieve the "nothing happened" sense of really catastrophic events. I have been collecting fragments out of newspapers, of hijackings, and what the airplane passengers think when a hijacking takes place. The latest one I happened to find goes something like this.

> I was walking up towards the front of the airplane and I saw the stewardess standing facing the cabin and a fellow standing with a gun in her back. And my first thought was he's showing her the gun, and then I realized that couldn't be, and then it turned out he was hijacking the plane.

Another, about the hijacking of a Polish plane, goes like this. The plane is now in the midst of being hijacked, and the guy reports, "I thought to myself, we just had a Polish hijacking a month ago and they're already making a movie of it." A classically dramatic instance is, almost universally, that the initial report of the assassination of President Kennedy was of having heard backfires.

Just imagine rewriting the monumental events of the Old Testament with ordinary people having gone through them. What would they have heard and seen, for example, when voices called out to them, when it started to rain, and so on. Indeed there is one place in the Old Testament where we find such an occurrence. Lot is warned of the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, and is permitted to bring his daughters and sons-in-law out. "And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, 'Up, get you out of this place;

for the Lord will destroy this city.' But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons in law." And they stayed behind.

Let us turn, now, to some fragments of conversation, from tape-recorded telephone calls, in which events that are dramatic, in their way, are being reported. Looking at these reports, we can begin to pick out some of the work involved in doing "being ordinary."

Jean: Hello,
(0.4)
Ellen: Jean.
Jean: Yeah,
(0.4)
Ellen: Well I just thought I'd re-better report to you what's happened at Cromwell's toda:y=
Jean: =What in the world's ha:ppened. [hhh
Ellen: [Did you have the day o:ff?
Jean: Ya:h?
(0.3)
Ellen: Well I: got out to my car at fi:ve thirty I: drove arou:nd and of course I had to go by the front of the sto:re,=
Jean: =Yeah?=
Ellen: And there were two (0.2) police cars across the street and leh-e colored lady wanted to go in the main entrance there where the si:lver is and all the [( ),](things).
Jean: [Y e a h,]
(0.4)
Ellen: A:nd, they wouldn't let her go i:n, and he, had a gu::n,
(0.2)
Ellen: He was holding a gun in his hand a great big lo:ng gu::n?
Jean: Yea:h?
Ellen: And then over on the other si:de, I mean to the right.of there, where the (0.2) employees come ou:t, there was a who:le, oh:: must have been ten uh eight or ten employees standing there, because there must have been a:, it seemed like they had every entrance ba:rred. I don't know what was goin [g o:n
Jean: [Oh my] Go:d,

Let's look at the materials keeping the events in mind, thinking out what was happening, and playing around with the talk by reference to some way of considering what was happening. I have in mind something like this. When this lady interprets the events, she interprets them

so as to find how the police being there involves that they were legitimately there.

We can notice, at least nowadays, that the legitimate presence of the police has become a kind of distributional phenomenon; that is, whereas this lady is able to use the presence of the police to find what was going on, taking it that the police belonged there, others might see the same scene with the same parties taking it that the police were doing something that they had no business doing. That is, if this action took place in a black neighborhood, watched by black people, then "the very same scene" would perhaps turn into, for the perception of the parties, an altogether different phenomenon.

There are places where the police can count on the presence of two of their cars to provide for their visible, legitimate presence, such that others will then search the scene to find what the police might be doing that they should be doing, and, for example, pick up on that someone is trying to get into the entrance where the silver is. Whereas there are others who will not at all see the events in that way, but, seeing two police cars on the scene, may now look to see what kind of bother the police, by being on the scene, are producing, as compared to what kind of bother they are properly responding to.

That sort of differential organization of the sheer perceiving of an event is of considerable importance for the way in which the fact of the police on the scene tells people that although there is a trouble, things are okay. For example, that this lady can drive right by the scene knowing that things are more or less well in hand, that something is happening but that the police will take care of it, rather than that something is happening and the police are making it happen.

That sort of phenomenon has become a markedly distributional one, and you ought to learn to appreciate the difficulty involved in groups talking to each other where each of them figures that all they did was to see what was happening. That is, the notion of distributional issues involved is unavailable to either group by virtue of the fact that all they are doing is scanning a scene to see what is happening. They are not arguing anything, they are not imagining anything. They are seeing the scene in some organization. And to tell them that they are imagining it, or that they are making a case, since you perfectly well know what was there to be seen by virtue of what *you* saw, is to put them in a position where they could not really come to understand what you are talking about.

That turns on the fact that each group is specifically committed to a

trust of vision, without any conception of what they understand by "vision." We can move from here to a discussion of the sorts of utter puzzlement that people have about the kinds of claims that others make about, for example, the police and what they are doing, when each group figures that all they are doing is reporting what they saw and not making a case for anything, being perfectly willing to be fair. This lady is not designing a right-wing report. All she is doing is reporting what she saw. To tell her that it is not what happened is to attack a kind of trust that she has, and should have, in what she simply sees; to propose a situation that would be quite uncomfortable for her to live with; to undermine something that an enormous mass of, in some ways Western, ideology has led her to believe she should, in fact, trust.

The point is, roughly, that it is a culturally and temporally distributional thing that people do or do not trust their eyes. Even such people as those academics who figure that they are attuned to "the ideological foundations of perception" may not use that sort of attuning to come to appreciate the distrust of vision that some cultures have. The academics see it as a kind of anti-empiricism, where it may not at all be anti-empiricism, but that, in the light of the kinds of troubles that people get into when they take a culturally ordered orientation to vision seriously, a focus on other senses might seem to pay off better. The fact that people systematically distrust what they see might well not be approached as, "How in the world do they survive with that magical view of things?" but as a perfectly empirical position.

Another thing – again getting into these kinds of tender problematic areas – this lady is perfectly comfortable as a witness to the scene. And yet you can perfectly well imagine how she would not see herself as a witness at all. In her report there is, for example, no hint of any interest in stopping and helping out, or of getting worried about what is going to happen.

More importantly, there is no hint that she had any fear that somehow, for example, that policeman was about to turn to her and ask her what she was doing there. The massive comfort in her innocence, and in the legitimate audience status that she has, is something that we should give real attention to, in at least this way. It is the kind of thing that we know can be readily shaken. There are times and places where someone would not feel all that comfortable passing such a scene, and – you can readily imagine it – would figure, "Oh my God, here I am, the first thing that happens is they're going to figure I'm involved."

That never dawns on our lady. And until it dawns on her, she can have no sense of an empathy with, for example, a kid in the ghetto. And

nonetheless I suppose you could bring her to see that; that is, you could show her how her whole sense of innocence affects the whole way she sees the scene. There is no fear on her part at all that anybody is going to mistake her for a party to the scene, though she is perfectly willing to assign others a nonwitness, party-to-the-scene status.*

Again, there is no feeling on her part that she ought to do anything, and nobody would pretty much figure that she ought to feel that she should do anything. That sort of trust in the ability of the police who are there to handle whatever needs to be handled, and that they will handle it well, is another aspect of the way in which, being a witness, she can sheerly be a witness. One might consider, when one is doing "being a witness to a scene," the conditions under which your witness status could be transformed in a series of different ways, one of them being into someone who could be seen by others, for example, the lady in the car next to yours, or the man across the street, not as a witness, but possibly as "a car moving away from the scene"; as "the escaped robber." Or, not that you are a witness to a scene that is being ably handled, but that you are somebody who is callously passing it by.

I raise these possibilities because if you read the story you can feel utterly sure that no such issues crossed her mind, and you can then think of scenes in which you have been involved, or others have been involved, in which you see whether or not such issues do emerge, and then focus on what the conditions are that would lead somebody like this lady here to at least have it cross her mind that when the policeman turns around with his gun he is going to shoot her, or tell her to halt; or that somebody else might see her and wonder what in the world she is doing there.

Let us turn, now, to the second fragment. This one occurs at some distance into a telephone call.

*That the "colored lady" who "wanted to go in . . . where the silver is" was herself a bystander, comes out in a subsequent conversation, between the recipient of the report and someone who was there [GJ].

Jean: We:ll she said that there was some woman that the- that they were: b-uhh ha:d he:ld up in the front the:re that they were pointing the gun at and everythi:ng, (0.2) a k-nigro woman,
(0.6)
Penny: ·hhh No:::: ↓no::.
Jean: What.
Penny: That was one of the employee[s.
Jean: [Oh.=
Penny: =He ran up to her and she just ran up to him and says what's happened what's aa- well the kids were all lau::ghing about it.

Madge: Say did you see anything in the paper last night or hear anything on the local radio, ·hh Ruth Henderson and I drove down, to, Ventura yesterday.
Bea: Mm hm,
Madge: And on the way home we saw the -- most gosh awful wreck.
Bea: Oh:::
Madge: we have ev- I've ever seen. I've never seen a car smashed into sm- such a small space.
Bea: Oh:::
Madge: It was smashed, -- ·hh from the front and the back both. It must have been in- caught in, between two car::s,
Bea: [Mm hm, uh huh
Madge: [Must have run into a car and then another car smashed into it and there were people laid out and covered over on the pavement,
Bea: Mm
Madge: We were s-parked there for quite a while. But I was going to, listen to the local r-news and haven't done it.
Bea: No I haven't had my radio on either.
Madge: Well I had my television on, but I was listening to uh the blast off, you know.
Bea: Mm hm,
Madge: The uh ah- [astronauts.
Bea: [Yeah.
Bea: Yeah,
Madge: And I, I didn't ever get any local news
Bea: Uh huh,
Madge: And I wondered.
Bea: Uh huh, no, I haven't had it on . . .

Earlier, I was talking about the constraints set on experiences by "the ordinary cast of mind." I want now to focus on entitlement to have experiences. I want to suggest that, in having witnessed this event, and having suffered it as well, in some way (for instance, having had to stop on the freeway in a traffic jam by virtue of it), she has become entitled to an experience. That she is entitled to an experience is something different from what her recipient is entitled to, or what someone who otherwise comes across this story is entitled to.

In part, I am saying that it is a fact that entitlement to experiences are differentially available. If I say it as "entitlement," you may think of it as not having rights to it, but that is only part of it. It is also not coming to feel it at all, as compared to feeling it and feeling that you do not have rights to it. The idea is that in encountering an event, and encountering it as a witness or someone who in part suffered by it, one is entitled to an experience, whereas the sheer fact of having access to things in the

world, for example, getting the story from another, is quite a different thing.

A way to see the matter is to ask the question, what happens to stories like this once they are told? Do stories like this become the property of the recipient as they are the property of the teller? That is, the teller owns rights to tell this story, and they give their credentials for their rights to tell the story by offering such things as that they saw it, and that they suffered by it. Now the question is, does a recipient of a story come to own it in the way that the teller has owned it; that is, can the recipient tell it to another, or feel for it as the teller can feel for those events?

For example, you might, on seeing an automobile accident and people lying there, feel awful, cry, have the rest of your day ruined. The question is, is the recipient of this story entitled to feel as you do? I think the facts are, plainly, no. That is to say, if you call up a friend of yours, unaffiliated with the event you are reporting, that is, someone who does not turn out to be the cousin of, the aunt of, the person who was killed in the accident, but just a somebody you call up and tell about an awful experience, then, if the recipient becomes as disturbed as you, or more, something peculiar is going on, and you might even feel wronged – although that might seem to be an odd thing to feel.

Now one reason I raise this whole business, and a way that it is important, is that we could at least imagine a society in which those having experienced something, having seen and felt for it, could preserve not merely the knowledge of it, but the feeling for it, by telling others. That is, if they could feel for it, then anybody they could tell it to could feel for it. Then, plainly, that stock of experiences that others happened to have would not turn on the events that they happened to have encountered, but could turn on the events that anybody who ever talked to them happened to encounter – as we think of a stock of knowledge that we have.

That is to say, if I tell you something that you come to think is so, you are entitled to have it. And you take it that the stock of knowledge that you have is something that you can get wherever you get it, and it is yours to keep. But the stock of experiences is an altogether differently constructed thing. As I say, in order to see that that is so, we can just, for example, differentiate how we deal with a piece of knowledge and how we deal with someone else's experience, and then come to see that experiences then get isolated, rather than that they are themselves as productive as are pieces of knowledge.

Now that fact obviously matters a good deal, in all sorts of ways.

Among the ways it comes to matter is that if having an experience is a basis for being aroused to do something about the sorts of things it is an instance of; for example, the state of the freeways, the state of automobiles, the state of whatever else, then plainly the basis for getting things done is radically weakened where those who receive your story cannot feel as you are entitled to feel.

Of course there is no reason to restrict the matter to misery. Plainly, it holds for joy, as well. Plainly it is specifically an attendable problem that joy is not productive, but that those having such an experience as entitled them to be joyful, telling it to others, they can feel "good for you" but there are rather sharp limits on how good they can feel for themselves for it, and also, even sharper limits on the good feeling that they can give to a third party with the story.

Again, if we think about it, we can perhaps just see that limited entitlement is not intrinsic to the organization of the world, but is a way we somehow come to perceive and feel about experience, or the way we were taught to do that, which is altogether different from the ways we think about knowledge. I presume, if one wanted, one could develop some historical discussion in which, somehow, knowledge was able to achieve a status for itself that is different from experience, though one could presumably find bases for attempts to do that for experience, which have failed. Obvious instances are, for example, attempts at universal religion, which are attempts to preserve a kind of feeling that somebody once had, encountering something or somebody, and where the whole history that we have is that it has not worked. It is extremely difficult to spread joy. It is extremely easy to spread information.

Now that is one order of thing – the distributional character of experience and the import of its distributional character for, say, troubles and joys in the world, in, say, sharp contrast to knowledge and its distributional character. You might figure it would be a severe enough kind of fact with regard to people's rights/abilities to have experiences, if they were restricted to those events that they took part in or witnessed, but that is not yet the full story of the kinds of constraints that are set on the possibility of having an experience.

The second sort of constraint is that if you are going to have an entitled experience, then you will have to have the experience that you are entitled to. You could figure that, having severe restrictions on your chances to have experiences, which turn on, for example, something, in some fashion important, happening to cross your path, or your happening to cross its path, that having happened, well, then you are home free. Once you got it you could do with it as you pleased. No. You have

to form it up as the thing that it ordinarily is, and then mesh your experience with that.

That is to say, the rights to have an experience by virtue of, say, encountering something like an accident, are only the rights to have seen "another accident," and to perhaps have felt for it, but not, for example, to have seen God in it. You cannot have a nervous breakdown because you happened to see an automobile accident. You cannot make much more of it than what anybody would make of it. So we can think of the way that you are entitled to an experience as: you borrow for a while that experience which is available, as compared to you now invent the experience that you might be entitled to.

But since you are so sharply restricted with regard to the occasions of having an experience, then presumably people are happy enough to take them as they come. That is, you are not going to get many surprising new feelings, or whatever, out of this experience, but it is the only experience that you have any chance legitimately to have, so you might as well have it. You might as well form up this automobile-wreck story as an ordinary wreck story rather than attempt to make it into something that would occasion that you are really reaching for experiences. Of course, people are readily seen to be reaching for experience with something that anybody knows is "just a wreck," "just a something," and that they make into a life's work.

In that regard, there are a whole bunch of ways that the teller of this story relays to us how she went about bounding this experience. That is to say, what she made of it is not just told in the story, but is told in other ways.

Among the ways that she goes about locating the kind of experience this event was is that she does not tell it right off in the conversation (and that is not available to you in the excerpt) but she tells it somewhere into the conversation. You will find that stories are specifically differentiated in terms of their importance to the teller by reference to where the teller places them in a conversation.

So, for example, among the ways a teller can make out a story as really important, is to tell it right off. And a way to make it even more important than that is to call to tell it when you figure the other is not available to hear it, for example, to call them up in the middle of the night. Stories are ranked in terms of, and express their status by, your calling somebody up and saying, "I know you were sleeping, but . . . ," where it is not that they happen to be sleeping, but you call them when they are sleeping, in that if you do not call them then, if you call them when they get up, you have already told them something about the story; that is, it

is not so important as you might otherwise want to make it out. So the placing of the story in the conversation and the placing of the conversation in the recipient's life are ways that you go about locating the importance of the story.

Then, of course, she also tells aspects of the story's importance in the telling itself. For example, while it was an important enough experience for her to say to herself, I am going to listen to the radio, other things got in the way of that. She is not embarrassed to say that, instead of that, she watched the astronauts, an action that obviously for some other story would be altogether perverse. For this story it is perfectly okay, and is a way to locate how the events matter, that is, to produce it while indicating that if it came down to trying to find out more, or watching the astronauts, she watched the astronauts.

Aside from that, she could go home and go about her business, as compared to, for example, she went home and went to bed, or, she had nightmares all night, or that it in other ways interfered with the life that she was engaged in when this happened. She was coming home, there was the accident, she was stopped for a while, and then she went home and watched the astronauts. That is plainly a way to locate how the story matters, and is plainly an appropriate way for this story. Had she said, it ruined the rest of my day, I was shaking all over, I went to the doctor, I had nightmares, then her friend could say, well, you're just oversensitive. So this business of the character of the experience fitting the conventional status of the event is something that is dealt with in the telling of the story.

At least the initially blandest kind of formulation we might make is that, although lots of people figure that experience is a great thing, and apparently at least some people are eager to have experiences, they are extraordinarily carefully regulated sorts of things. The occasions of entitlement to have them are carefully regulated, and then the experience you are entitled to have on an occasion that you are entitled to have one is further carefully regulated. Insofar as part of the experience involves telling about it, then the telling of it constitutes one way in which what you might privately make of it is subject to the control of an open presentation, even to what you thought was a friend.

That is to say, your friends are not going to help you out, by and large, when you tell them some story, unless you tell them a story in the way anybody should tell it to anybody. Then they will be appropriately amused or sorrowed. Otherwise you will find that they are watching you to see that, for example, you are making something big out of something that you are not entitled to make big, or something small that

should have been bigger, or missed seeing something that you should have seen, all of which could be deduced by virtue of the way you requiredly formed the thing up.

Now, I am not by any means saying let us do away with the ways in which we go about being ordinary, but, rather, that we want to know what importance it has. At least one tack we can take is to treat the overwhelming banality of the stories we encounter – in my data, in your own experiences – as not so much something that allows, for example, for statistical analysis of variation, or that makes them therefore uninteresting to study, but as a specific feature that turns on a kind of attitude; say, an attitude of working at being usual, which is perhaps central to the way our world is organized.

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