“I Don’t Want to Burst Your Bubble”: Affiliation and Disaffiliation in a Joint Accounting by Affiliated Pair Partners

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Abstract. This paper examines an excerpt from a larger (televised) interview, wherein various married couples are asked to characterize their living situations in the aftermath of job loss and on the work of description and assessment by interview parties. It thus focuses on features of affiliation and disaffiliation and analyzes how both procedures work, particularly within an environment in which affiliated parties are engaged in attempting to figure out an “unpredictable” outcome of some (mutually experienced or experienceable) situation. In the excerpt, there are instances of both affiliation and disaffiliation. Using such conversation analytic structures as topic organization, story organization, preference structures, and distinguishing between content and structural affiliations, the interview excerpt is shown to contain a series of story stages, each of which is an element of the overall work of collaborative assessment. Within this assessment, parties make use of “content affiliations,” wherein they reference their lived affiliation with one another, while at the same time, structuring their talk so as to disagree and disaffiliate with one another’s stance. In contrast to such classical theorists as Durkheim, Simmel, Toennies and Cooley, who viewed affiliation as resulting from internal, emotive sources, or as Durkheim put it, saw this as being a non-directly measurable condition of “primary group” relationships, this report argues for the possibility of seeing affiliation as a performed, or achieved, activity. In this latter conception, one made evident through ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, affiliation – along with its counterpart, disaffiliation, are indeed external and measurable actions.

Introduction

This paper begins with the following excerpt (derived from a 1995 episode of the PBS series Frontline entitled “Living on the Edge” about the effects of economic downsizing and restructuring; the transcriptions are my own). This excerpt is part of a larger (televised) interview, conducted by host Bill Moyers, wherein various married couples are asked to characterize their living situations in the aftermath of job loss. What takes place here is that Tony, an interviewee, is describing a recent experience of having been interviewed for a construction work training program and is, with input from his wife Terry, attempting to decide whether or not to follow through with this possibility. We
can call this the “uncertain job” case. We can also add that Terry and Tony
can both correctly and relevantly be characterized as a husband-wife pair and
that the case can be glossed as a free-flowing, semi-structured interview of the
pair by the interviewer.

1. To: I went ... and got an interview ... and I’m waiting to
2. hear some time by the end of the month if I
3. have the job or not.
4. Int: [to Terry] and that doesn’t make you happy?
5. Te: . . . . it makes me happy . . . . cause it’s really what he
6. wanted, I told him he had to make the decision and if-
7. that’s what he wanted to go ahead and do it
8. Int: But?
9. To: it’s a cut in //pay rate
10. Te: //it’s a cut in pay . . . they do have good
11. benefits
12. Int: How much dj’you lose if you take it?
13. To: Oh probably //t-
14. Te: //three
15. To: Two and a half- three dollars an hour//
16. Te: //Yeah
17. To: But the thing is . . . four years down the road . . .
18. I’ll be making more money . . . than I’d ever . . . dream
19. of making here . . . .
20. Te: . . . . . . But is it going to be there when he gets out?
21. [smiles at interviewer] They promise you that it’s
going to be there
22. To: Four years- they’re gon- // They’re gonna
23. Te: //I know-
24. To: gonna stick you through school, they’re gonna train
25. you on the job for four years . . . Now-if(‘)s gonna
26. cost them a lot of money to put you through school
27. To: and train you and . . . . why would they do all that
28. and wanna kick you out?
29. . . . . . .
30. To: If they do kick me out after years I would have a
31. journeyman’s card and you can pretty much //anywhere
32. Te: //Right
33. To: once I get a journeyman’s card
34. Te: I know . . . I don’t want to burst your bubble
35. To: OK
36. Te: And what happens if they can’t compete with a neighbor?
37. Int: And you say it happ- it happened twice to Tony?
38. Te: Right . . so I’m - I’m really reluctant . . I mean I’m
39. happy for him because he’s excited about this job but
40. still . . . you know - I’ve seen it- a company can just
41. can just pick up and move.