**SOC 3120 Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 14.1: Aligning Actions:**

In the last class we spoke about role making and role taking in routine situations, and the forms of knowledge that make us possible for us to do this. However, we also pointed to the importance of problematic situations. Today we will discuss these in more detail, and relate how various aligning actions come into play to facilitate conduct and make it understandable in problematic situations.

To begin, the fundamental task people face as they interact is to coordinate their lines of conduct. Each person must fit his or her conduct with that of others through the processes of role taking and role making. Assuming that there is a shared definition of the situation and a shared stock of knowledge, this may seem like a relatively straightforward procedure. By focusing on the social act to be completed, each person should be able to predict and interpret the conduct of others, know what to expect, and thus make an acceptable performance of his or her role.

Yet the process is more complex than what appears at first glance:

1. People perform acts that others do not expect;

2. The self is an object in every interaction (i.e. each act is relevant to personal goals/identity/self-esteem);

3. Culture and its objects constrain every social encounter (i.e. acts acceptable to self and certain others don’t always meet ideal cultural objects such as truth, duty, etc.)

These three sources of complication in social interaction give rise to *aligning actions.* These are essentially verbal efforts to create a correspondence between the substance of social interaction, the selves of those involved, and the culture that they share. These are a form of talk that pervade everyday life, including the accounts, explanations, apologies, disclaimers, and other techniques people use as they talk about unexpected and problematic behavior, seek to protect or defend themselves from accusations, and attempt to make their conduct appear sensible and desirable in cultural terms.

Social psychologists have identified and studied a number of forms and features of aligning actions, such as motive talk, accounts, disclaimers and apologies. Each represents a discursive technique for maintaining coordinated interaction while also maintaining the self and defining conduct in culturally acceptable - or at least meaningful - terms.

**Motive Talk:**

Talk about motives - requested and offered explanations of why someone acted in a particular way - is both a key organizing feature of everyday life and a major way in which potential or actual problematic occurrences are handled. (Remember, motivation refers to internal states that govern impulsive responses to stimuli, which are generally inaccessible to the observer; motives are accessible statements about conduct). People, in everyday conversation, are continually avowing and imputing motives: explaining why they and others did what they did - or will do.

What are the circumstances where motive talk occurs? C. Wright Mills argued that the issue of motive arises when someone interrupts a line of conduct with a question, which may be raised either by the behaving person or a partner in interaction. Behind that question lies someone’s view that what is taking place is questionable (i.e. unexpected, unclear, undesired or untoward). An imputation of a motive, a call for another to avow a motive, or an unquestioned announcement of a motive are ways in which people respond to such anticipated or actual questions. The goal of motive talk is to explicate the consequences of a particular line of conduct - to clarify the object toward which it is proceeding (e.g. A parent asking “Why did you drop out of trade school on the first day? Because I want to be a lawyer. Why would you want to be one of those weasels when you can do an honest job?”).

What is taken as problematic when motive talk arises is a line of conduct that is either unexpected or, from the questioner’s viewpoint, has a more desirable or more likely alternative. The parent above had a certain career in mind for their child and so raises a question about their decision to major in law. It is the *atypical* behavior of a child previously interested in electronics and machinery that acts as the basis for raising such questions.

Questions about motives challenge identity as well as the relationship between the act and culture. To question a person’s hairstyle or body piercing, for example, is not only to express doubt about the appropriateness or good sense of the conduct, but also about whether one is acting from an appropriate role perspective. How will this affect their job chances? Their advancement? Similarly, to question one’s choice of study is to question one’s identity: will this enable him or her to become the kind of person s/he has wanted to? Questions about identity raise doubts about the self that must be resolved.

The motives that people offer are designed to explain an unexpected act so that it seems less problematic, to repair the person’s identity in his or her own eyes or in the eyes of others, and to find cultural support or justification for the conduct in question (e.g. “I’m going into law so that I can help people while earning a good living”). By attaching a positive cultural value to the decision to go into law (helping and material success), the motive talker hopes to make the conduct seem sensible to his parents and thus to make a positive impression on them - to induce them to identify their child as someone who wants to do socially worthwhile things.

How do people know what to say when questioned? What makes the difference between an acceptable and an unacceptable motive? C. Wright Mills’ concept of *vocabularies of motive* provides one way of approaching these questions. People learn to use certain words to explain their acts, but these words are neither shared by all members of society nor used indiscriminately or at will. Rather, they are differentiated along at least 2 dimensions. First, particular sets of motives are regarded as appropriate to specific situations or classes of situations (e.g. use of religious language as an explanation is often only considered socially appropriate - and treated as legitimate - in very specific circumstances). Secondly, particular sets of motives are treated as more or less legitimate by people of various social groups and categories (e.g. Conservatives favor lowering taxes to boost the economy: “a rising tide raises all boats.” Liberal opponents will argue that such an avowed motive is really a deception: “they’re favoring their friends at the expense of the vulnerable”).

The existence of vocabularies of motives that are specific to situations or categories of situations helps explain how people are able to compartmentalize their lives by separating motives important in one sphere from those important in another (e.g. gangsters and corporate executives often lead double lives: ruthless at work but tender at home). This is possible because each of their separate worlds has its own set of objects and acts, as well its own distinct vocabulary of motives. Thus, conduct that would be unthinkable in one context can be seen as desirable - or at least necessary - in another.

This differential distribution of vocabularies among various groups helps explain how various groups attract and hold the loyalties of their members, and also how they come into conflict with each other. For example, the more a group provides and supports motives that accord with a person’s established or desired lines of conduct and self-conceptions, the more it is able to bind the person to it. Families, organizations, social movements, workplaces, and other groups provide contexts where people talk about their reasons for conduct and have these validated by others (e.g. AA, business executives, unions). This is made clearer when you consider that expressing motives acceptable to these groups in other contexts may lead to amusement, rejection, hostility, etc.

Motive talk is thus a common feature of everyday life. It arises whenever people are uncertain of the meaning of others’ acts or of how others will interpret their own acts. Other forms of aligning actions also arise in response to problematic conduct.

**Disclaimers:**

John Hewitt and Randall Stokes describe one of these: the *disclaimer*. This is a verbal device people use when they want to ward off the negative implications of an impending act - something they are about to do or say that they know - or fear - will be seen as undesirable or discredit them in the eyes of others. For example, prefacing a comment with “I’m not prejudiced, but...”; or “I’m no expert, but...” Each phrase introduces an act or statement that contradicts the premise of the disclaimer. Thus, a person claiming not to be prejudiced may make a racist statement, and a self-proclaimed non-expert may make a statement only an expert could be trusted to make.

Disclaimers are addressed to a central fact of human conduct. Any act is imbedded in a situation which it either does or doesn’t fit, and in the actor’s identity, for which it has either positive or negative implications. A prejudicial statement, for example, typically arises during a conversation and may be quite in place as far as the definition of the situation is concerned (i.e. it may fit with the theme of the conversation, be in proper sequence, and express a commonly held sentiment). Yet, those who hear the racist remark are likely to interpret it as relevant to the identity of the speaker. Because people are aware that their acts typify them in the eyes of others, they are frequently careful to disclaim the implications of those acts that they feel will get them typified in a negative light.

Thus, disclaimers are efforts to carry out an intended act while avoiding any damage to identity in the eyes of others. The implicit theory seems to be that one who knows an act could be discrediting, and who disclaims the identity implied by the act, should not be discredited. If a disclaimer is accepted, it allows conduct to proceed and situated identities to remain unchallenged. It also aligns conduct with culture, since it establishes that those present are not acting inappropriately - at least in their own eyes.

Disclaimers are thus prospective aligning actions, employed when, through role-taking, the individual anticipates how others will respond to a contemplated act. In effect, they are attempts to control in advance a definition of the situation and the identities of those present.

**Accounts:**

But what about when something has already happened? Aren’t there ways to preserve identity when social interaction has been disturbed by problematic behavior? Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman argue that a process of demanding and giving *accounts* takes place here. In this process, someone who commits an untoward act is asked to account for it - to explain it to the satisfaction of others present. This demand may be explicit, requested indirectly or by implication. Indeed, accounts may be volunteered when actors perceive that they may be called to account for what they have done.

Scott and Lyman state that there are, in general, two types of accounts: *excuses* and justifications. Either or both are likely to be invoked when a person is accused of having done something that is "bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some other of the numerous possible ways, untoward." *Excuses* are accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility (e.g. “It was an accident”). Excuses are an important social lubricant, enabling troublesome situations to be passed over as unfortunate past history and preventing each and every untoward act from becoming a major argument. Since much does go wrong in everyday life, excuses make it possible for definitions of situations and identities to be maintained, as well as for people to see themselves and be seen by others in positive ways. Simultaneously, they preserve the rules, standards, and expectations by means of which people ordinarily judge one another’s acts. Excuses lay the blame for problematic conduct on someone or something other than the individual called to account, but also unmistakably preserve the definition of the conduct as undesirable.

Justifications, in contrast, are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it. A good illustration would be the denial of injury often used by offenders to account for their misdeeds (e.g. sure they stole from the victims, but they would be reimbursed by insurance so no harm was done in the end). The implicit reasoning is that since there is no loss in the end, no harm was done, so no violation has occurred - despite a wilful act taking place.

Justifications also lubricate social interaction and attempt to protect identity. Although social norms and laws forbid certain activities, the status of any particular act is never a matter of absolute certainty. There is flexibility - both in everyday life and in the law - in determining whether a particular act is or is not a violation. The existence of a vocabulary of justifications is one basis for this flexibility - a means by which people can decide whether particular acts constitute violations. This is also important for the kind of identity the person is able to claim. If an act is successfully justified, then the person’s identity will not be negatively transformed. If, however, it isn’t successfully justified, then a new, perhaps deviant identity may be in store for the person.

**Other Aligning Actions:**

Motive talk, accounts and disclaimers don’t exhaust the aligning actions people employ in everyday life. Another common form is the apology, in which the person who has committed a challenged act admits it was wrong, their responsibility, and expresses remorse. This pays homage to cultural values and attempts to maintain social interaction by assuaging the anger or irritation of those offended. It also attempts to restore the good identity of the offender by reminding the audience of his/her knowledge of the inappropriate nature of the act. Implicit in the apology is a suggestion that the person should not be retypified and given an undesirable identity - as one who neither recognizes the nature of their offence nor tries to make amends. This places their fate in the hands of the person offended: only the victim can bestow forgiveness and restore the offender’s identity in the social world.

It has also been pointed out by Chris Hunter that aligning actions can also focus on unexpected desirable acts - not just undesirable ones. For example, “going beyond the call of duty” may have been unanticipated, have to be assimilated to the definition of the situation, alter established identities, and contrast with assumed cultural objects (e.g. people intentionally going out of one’s way to help someone having a tough time at work may verbalize *entitling acclaimers*: “Remember I was there for you when others didn’t care”). There are also *enhancing acclaimers*, where such individuals stress the importance of their contribution (e.g. “You’d have been in real trouble with the boss without my help”). As with other aligning actions, acclaimers such as these are efforts to maintain the flow of interaction, to sustain or enhance identities, and to link conduct to important cultural objects.

Moreover, acclaimers illustrate how aligning actions are involved in negotiating meaning in the situation. Those who use acclaimers typically want to put the best face on their conduct, as do those who use accounts and disclaimers. But the audience may well resist such efforts to define the nature of the conduct or the identity of the actor (e.g. judges only give so many adjournments for accused who “need time to get a lawyer”). Similarly, the recipient of extraordinary help may find an interest in minimizing or downplaying the supposedly key role of

the helper: to accept the helper’s claims implies a debt that may someday be called in.

In the next class, we will conclude our discussion of social interaction and the formation of conduct by looking at emotions and constraints in social interaction.