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CHAPTER 6

*Fun on the Phone: The Situated Experience of Recreational Telephone Conferences*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

How do we know when we are having fun? A psychological approach can tell you what it feels like or how it is perceived; a sociological approach, on the other hand, can show how, as active participants in structures of social relevance, members of society *have fun together.*

We take the view that ‘having fun’ is a *situated and interactional experience*. By which we mean that identifiable social arrangements encourage, allow for, or engender a collective sense of enjoyable engagement. That they are identifiable means they are available for empirical observation. We have therefore a specific notion of fun in mind that might contrast with others (Blythe and Hassenzahl, this volume).

Goffman’s notion of ‘situated experience’ is enlisted as a theoretical and conceptual basis, and Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) as a methodology in our investigation of technologically mediated interaction. CA is a form of detailed ‘naturalistic observation’ that seeks to understand structures of meaning generated sequentially through interaction between individuals – typically in ‘talk-in-action’. The combination of CA and Goffman – what we might call directed or applied CA – is seen in Hopper’s (1992) analysis of play on the phone. Our contribution builds on this example in the situation of recreational telephone conferences, and aims to provide a viable approach for product development. Our efforts are preliminary, and offer only exemplars of analytic findings, but start to build a case for an empirical sociological account of technologically mediated experience.

# 2. FUN AS SITUATED EXPERIENCE

Erving Goffman is credited with bringing the individual into sociology and developing, according to Williams (1998), ‘a distinctly sociological account of the person’. He does this by moving attention away from the individual’s ‘inner’ life and toward ‘externally observable forms of conduct’ (ibid). He builds his notions of fun on the related area of play.

In sociology, play has historically been contrasted with work (Slater, 1998) or conceived as meeting a range of social functions: from the socialisation of children to the large-scale development of culture (Bruner, 1976; Huizinga, 1949). By contrast, for Schwartzman (1978) play is a ‘context of activity rather than a structure’ (Sutton-Smith 1988:xi). Play is the product of action, creates its own context, and is freed from specified space and time.

Sociology’s ‘linguistic turn’ in the 1960’s (Lemert and Branaman, 1997) brought an emphasis on the individual and an acceptance of communications-based notions of play. Stephenson (1967) sees media consumption as a form of play in which potential ‘communication pleasure’ involves complete and effortless engrossment. Bateson (1972) conceives of ‘metacommunicative’ cues that ‘frame’ behaviour beyond what is actually said or done; an example being the cue ‘this is play’, seen in the play fighting of animals. In what might be seen as a combination of these ideas, Goffman (1961) conceives of fun in terms of mutual engrossment in a social ‘encounter’ or ‘focused gathering’. He says, ‘When an individual becomes engaged in an activity … it is possible for him to become caught up by it, carried away by it, engrossed in it - to be, as we say, spontaneously involved in it’ (Goffman, 1961:38). Fun is the sense of euphoria possible when there is ‘spontaneous co-involvement’, when all are engrossed in a commonly understood encounter.

Goffman therefore looks to identify the social propensities of experience: not as cognitive processes, but as *situated experience* within sociological arrangements*.* He does this by developing Bateson’s idea of frames to cover all social meaning. Frames become ’principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them’ (Goffman, 1974:10-11). Goffman defines frame analysis as an examination of ‘the organization of experience’ (ibid:11). Individual experiences in socially organized frameworks of meaning are more than mental emotions:

‘frameworks are not merely a matter of mind but correspond …to the way in which an aspect of the activity itself is organized…Organizational premises are involved, and these are something cognition somehow arrives at, not something cognition creates or generates. Given their understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this fitting. These organizational premises – sustained both in the mind and in activity – I call the frame of the activity.

…activity interpreted by the application of particular rules and inducing fitting actions from the interpreter, activity, in short, that organizes matter for the interpreter, itself is located in a physical, biological, and social world’ (Goffman, 1974:247).

To Goffman frames of meaningful experience are cognitive (‘a matter of mind’), social (organized activity) *and* material (physical, spatial, temporal). What’s more they are contextual and temporal: worked out in ongoing social activity.

*2.1 Schemata of frame analysis*

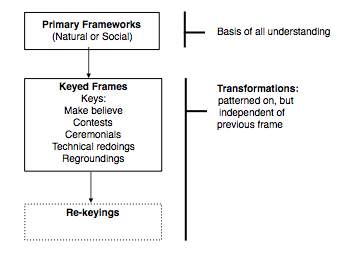
All social experience is made meaningful by frames, the most fundamental being ‘primary frameworks’. There are two kinds of primary framework: *natural* and *social*. The first set of frameworks define situations in terms of physical contingencies that are not controlled by humans, such as the weather (Goffman, 1974:22); the second make sense of situations in terms of human intervention, activities, motives and the like. A barbecue, in which friends talk chat and eat, can be understood in terms of a social frame. Success or failure of the event might similarly be decided through a social frame of interpretation: people might not get on with each other, for example. On the other hand, a sudden downpour that sends guests scurrying inside without eating could be explained in terms of a natural frame, beyond the control of human actors.

Figure 1. *A schemata of frame analysis*

These primary frameworks however can be transformed into a new meaning. For example, the host of the barbecue might be held responsible for organising the event on the particular day if he or she was a professional weather person. The failure of the event might then be a matter of poor planning. Goffman says the meaningful experience can be ‘re-keyed’.

A key is,

‘the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription [or transformation] can be called keying’ (Goffman, 1974:43-44).

Goffman identifies five basic keyed frames: make believe, contests, ceremonials, technical redoings, and regroundings (Goffman, 1974:48). The first of these the *make-believe key* playfully transforms a serious frame into a non-serious one and is normally for the benefit of an audience. Daydreaming is an example of when the person employing the key and the person understanding the meaning are the same. Radio, television and theatre are examples of make believe keys because they involve ‘dramatic scripting’ according to Goffman. According to Manning (1992:214) ‘Make-believe [keys are] only sustained by a considerable collective engrossment in the transformed frame, and as a result, spontaneous make-believe keys are likely to be short-lived’.

An important point to be made about keys is they can also be transformed into new meaning - they can be *re-*keyed. Each re-keying is a transformation, a new frame patterned on the one preceding it. A situation may have many layers of meaning, or ‘laminations’,

‘… the outermost lamination of a frame of a [theatrical] play tells us that what is happening is make-believe, even though an inner lamination tells us, perhaps, that Romeo and Juliet are very much in love’ (Manning, 1992:126).

The potential confusion possible with multiple layers of meaning is avoided through clear frame ‘anchors’; one example being ‘brackets’, which denote when a frame starts and ends. Like mathematical formula, brackets can be ‘internal’ or ‘external’: external brackets are not formally part of the activity to be framed, e.g. the raising of the theatrical curtain; internal brackets mark off ‘strips’ of the ongoing frame as having a separate meaning.

*2.2 Frames as interactional achievements*

An element that is underdeveloped in Goffman’s frame analysis, is the *interactional achievement* of frames, specifically through the negotiation of bracketed meaning. When talking about playfulness, for example, Glenn and Knapp (1987) see ‘a series of framing signals *mutually negotiated* by the participants’ (emphasis added, p. 52). Frames of meaning are produced in real time interactive behaviour.

One way to extend Goffman’s conceptual apparatus is to apply Conversation Analysis (CA), which is interested in the sense people make in sequences of action, as a temporal and emergent feature of people’s interaction.

*2.2.1 Thick external bracket*

Jason Rutter analyses comedy compéres’ introduction talk in the ‘Framing of Response’ of the audience, which engenders ‘alertness’ and ‘involvement’ (Rutter, 2000:471). In this way, the comedy routine is framed as a comedic strip of experience,

‘The introduction sequence is invariably a feature of stand-up openings and holds a position as forerunner to the entrance of comedians and their first joke. It provides a foundation for the performance and prepares the audience by establishing stand-up conventions, expectations and situation for the comedy to take place’ (Rutter, 2000:482).

He makes a point about the keyed nature of jokes, in relation to the broader bracketed comedy routine when he comments,

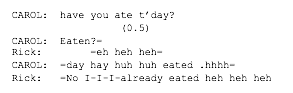
‘Given this organization, jokes performed by stand-up comedians cannot be seen as isolated texts. They cannot be seen as being hermetically separated from the ongoing performance, as they are located within, and part of, the developing interaction of stand- up’ (Rutter, 2000:481).

While compéres’ introductions have a conventional nature, Rutter notes an introduction sequence by Johnny Vegas – himself a comedian – that completely undermines these conventions. In a Goffman sense, the introduction-keyed frame is itself re-keyed.

Compéres’ introductions are sequences of interaction (between compéres and audience) that we might think of as ‘thick’ brackets. Goffman details such a thick bracket in a description of a radio broadcaster introducing a live concert (Goffman, 1974:263). The framing work is achieved over a period of time, and may itself include internal brackets. The jokes are themselves transformed frames within the comedic episode based upon the compére’s external bracketing.

*2.2.2 Internal brackets as an interactional achievement*

In an explicit combination of Conversation Analysis (CA), Hopper (1992) uses the ideas of meta-communication and frames to understand the *interactive* nature of play on the phone. He underlines interactional achievement when he says ‘Parties must … work out the course of play-in-progress’ (Hopper, 1992:176). He notes that after ten years of looking for the ‘elusive beginning bracket carrying the message ‘this is play’’ he has instead come to the conclusion that it is misleading to think in terms of a single ‘keying message signal’ (p. 175). Instead, he says, telephone play takes the following form,



Transcript 1*. Telephone play, Hopper, 1992:175-6*

Rather than a specific cue, the extract is shot through with ‘play-relevant keying’ in the form of a *speech error* in the first line, *laughter* after the error is corrected and *repetition* in the last two lines. Hopper concludes ‘The play frame is created and sustained through each of these interactive details. There is no single front bracket for play in this episode, but rather play’s interactive management occurs across this entire fragment’ (Hopper 1992:176).

In short, ‘Meta-communicative framing comes about not through individual message units that accomplish bracketing, but by interactive displays across speakers’ turns. Each such indication of play’s possible relevance may be confirmed, denied, ignored, or transformed by what happens next’ (Hopper 1992:177).

The example of CA and frame analysis allows for an appreciation of a number of specific interactional details such as episodic bracketing which may involve ‘thick brackets’ of interaction, and the play relevant keying of activity in a series of interactional turns. In each instance, successful framing is a transformation of the underlying frame.

3. ANALYSING FUN ON THE PHONE

Goffman’s concepts of fun and frame analysis and their application to real instances of activity through Conversation Analytic method inform our analysis of fun on the phone. This analysis is part of the ethnographic stage of work carried out at York University in an initiative investigating the ‘good recreational experience’ in technologically mediated interactions funded by PACCITi.

The Friendship Links schemeii provides telephone conferences for isolated older people in London. Groups of four to eight people come together for an informal half hour chat each week and a trained coordinator or ‘facilitator’ encourages a friendly and lively atmosphere. With the consent of participants, several calls were recorded, transcribediii and analysed. This analysis involved combing the concepts in frame analysis and ‘directed’ Conversation Analysis. Rather than a one-way methodological process (i.e. concept informing observation), there developed a ‘mutual elaboration’ of concept and analysis (Reed, 2002), wherein the concept of frames motivated looking at the data in a particular (directed) way and at other times CA provided the lead for conceptual development. Indeed ‘analysis’ and ‘conceptual basis’ developed together in a continual circular manner, i.e.,

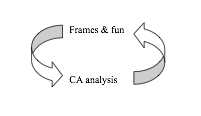


Figure 2. *Mutual elaboration of conception and analysis*

For purposes of narrative integrity the following section contains exemplar ‘findings’ from this process that necessarily simplifies this relationship.

*3.1 From formal to fluid interaction*

General observation of the telephone conferences revealed an interesting feature: facilitated calls started out stilted and formal, but at some point became a relaxed interaction between the whole group. The move from one to the other was highly relevant to us; the question being how it occurred. What became apparent was that we could understand this move in terms of particular interaction that framed the behaviour in different ways. We began to talk about this in terms of the move from ‘formality’ to ‘fluidity’.

*3.1.1 The primary frame of the telephone*

One way in which CA helped the conceptual development was in understanding the primary frame of the telephone conference. There has been a great deal of work on telephone conversations in CA that recognises the limitations of the audio channel and the consequences for behaviour. Emanuel Schegloff (1986), for example, shows that there is a ritualised sequence of interaction – what he calls the ‘canonical telephone opening’ - at the beginning of a two person telephone call, to deal with questions about who is speaking to whom, about what, and who gets to speak next.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ((Telephone ring))  R: Hello  C: Hello Ida? R: Yeah  C: Hi, =This is Carla  R: Hi Carla.  C: How are you. R: Okay:.  C: Good.=  R: =How about you.  C: Fine. Don wants to know…. | Summons/Answer  Identification/Recognition  Greetings  Initial inquiries or ‘how-are-you’s’  Caller’s move to first topic |

Figure 3*. Canonical opening of telephone call – adapted from Schegloff, 1986*

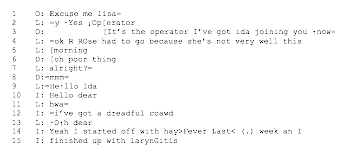
The need to deal with such issues as ‘access’, ‘recognition’ and ‘turn ordering’ are emphasised within telephone conferences when there are more people involved in the call. In face-to-face conversation, the more people in an interaction the more difficult a conversation is. Atkinson (1982:97) explains that ordered conversation is based upon ‘solutions being found to what can be characterized as the problem of achieving and sustaining the shared attentiveness of co-present parties to a single sequence of actions’. The greater the number of people in a group the more difficult shared attentiveness is to generate, and the greater the likelihood of formal methods of coordination (ibid.). So, for example successful classroom interaction often depends upon rules about who gets to speak when. Wayne Beach suggests that facilitated group discussions lie toward the formal end of a continuum of formal and informal talk, what he calls a ‘casual-institutional continuum’ (Beach, 1990:201). All of which goes towards explaining why business meetings and telephone conferences have formal agendas.

Recreational telephone conferences have a natural frame of meaning based upon the physical (visual) limitations of the technology. From this *natural* frame, there needs to develop a *social* frame of socialising. This is achieved through particular social rituals.

*3.1.2 Framing the call –Introductions as thick external brackets*

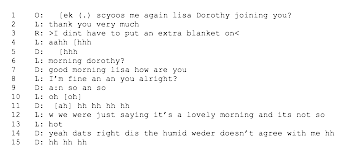
Given the primary frame of the telephone conference, several issues have to be addressed immediately upon the arrival of each new participant. Rituals have developed between switchboard operator, in group conversation facilitator, and new participant to do this.

In the calls we examined, an operator gains access to the ongoing call and introduces each new participant by directly addressing the Facilitator. This ‘direct introduction’ leads to a ‘directed welcome’ segment between new participant and Facilitator, which follows many of the ritualistic elements of a two-person call (greetings, how-are-you’s, move to first topic). In the following example the call has been going for some time,



Transcript 2*. Friendship links*

In the above example the Facilitator Lisa gives the merest hint of a how-are-you ‘hwa’ (line 11) and Ida immediately replies with news about her health (denoted by the latching convention ‘=’). What follows is a small conversational sequence between the operator and Ida, which ignores the remaining group already on the line. This conversation introduces a particular conversation topic – that of Ida’s health. In the next example, it is the Facilitator who formulates the current topic at the end of the ‘access/directed introduction/directed welcome’ sequence with ‘we were just saying it’s a lovely morning…’ (line 12),

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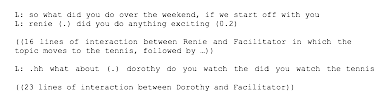
Transcript 3*. Friendship links*

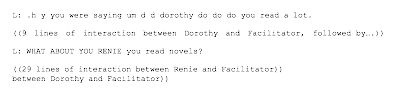
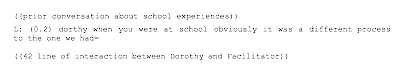
In both cases – and indeed on every occasion of new participant introduction in this tape – the access/directed introduction/directed welcome sequence led to a period of two person (Facilitator/new participant) conversation. At times these periods were extensive, leaving the remaining participants to just listen. The access/directed introduction/directed welcome sequence also impacts the ongoing conversation topic as mediated by the Facilitator.

*3.1.3 Two forms of internal brackets – formal and fluid*

Within the calls we identified two forms of framing activity, both aimed toward multiparty interaction. The first is a coordination effort on the part of the Facilitator; the second form of ‘frame breaking’ initiated by participants.

Part of the Facilitator role – engendered, as we noted, by the opening sequences of new participants - is the coordination of ongoing talk. A rather nice example of this coordination is a form of ‘next turn allocation’ we have called ‘participation in the round’. The following table shows some examples, the ‘in-the-round’ character being most apparent in the first example:

Example 1

Example 2

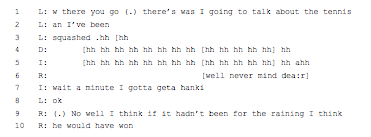
Example 3

Figure 4*. Participation in the round*

Evidently the Facilitator’s wish is to encourage talk from all; by allocating turns to each person their participation is ensurediv. With each new participant comes a period of two-person interaction. So, while geared toward equality of activity, in the first instance it does not encourage multi-person interaction. This form of framing through internal brackets leaves the interaction with a formal structure.

In some ways, these strips of formalised two-person interaction give way to more relaxed interaction. One way to understand how this occurs is to say that the current formal frame must be ‘broken’. An example of frame breaking is through the ‘flooding out’ of laughter (see Goffman, 1974: 350-9 for an account of ‘flooding out’).

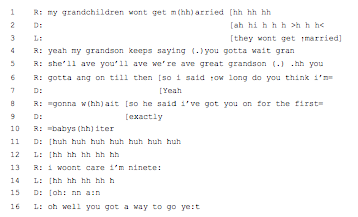
Laughter is an accountable matter if placed wrongly; even one turn distance brings questions such as ‘what’s funny?’ (Sacks, 1995 VI:746) and there is an imperative to ‘get the laughter in’ immediately upon its relevance. However, laughter is one activity that is available to people that, while ‘tied’ to the previous utterance, does not have to respect the general conversation rule of ‘one person [speaks] at a time’ (Sacks, 1995: V1:745).



Transcript 4. *Friendship links*

In the above extract, multi-person overlapping laughter (denoted by laughter tokens ‘hh’ in square brackets) appears to free up the interaction. This is one of the few occasions early in the interaction, for example, in which a participant jumps in to the conversation – or ‘self-selects’ - (Renie at line 9) when others have been speaking in a period of two party interaction.

In the above example the Facilitator Lisa takes an in breath at line 3 (‘.hh’) that signals the onset of laughter. This is a minimal form of ‘invitation to laughter’. A clearer example can be seen in the following example,



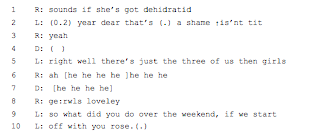
Transcript 5. *Friendship links*

Renie signals the humorous nature of her comment about her grandchildren not getting married with an inserted laughter token in line 1 with ‘m(hh)arried’, in what might be called a ‘laughter voice’ (‘hh’ denotes out breath). Renie goes on to explain the relevance of the comment in lines 4-10 and again signals with an inserted laughter tokens in ‘w(hh)ait’ and ‘’baby(hh)iter’. The ‘punchline’ comes at line 13 ‘i wont care i’m ninety:’. Instances such as these provide for the interactional achievement of playful keying according to Hopper,

‘The first laugh raises the question ‘is this play’ and the second laugh ratifies play as a live possibility. The play frame is keyed not by just the first laugh, but by the shared laugher’ (Hopper, 1992:180).

Interactionally achieved play frames are fragile and can easily be undermined with a serious comment (Drew, 1987). In the above extract Renie’s comment about her age is turned into a comment about longevity by Lisa the Facilitator. Alternatively, initial invitation laughter tokens may not be ‘picked up’ in the first place. Further to this, Hopper says that the play frame must ‘periodically be resustained’ (Hopper, 1992:180) with further laughter.

At times in the interaction the tension between the need for coordination and fluidity is marked by the first countering the second. In the following example, the ‘serious’ talk that signals the end of the play frame is a turn allocation of the Facilitator (lines 9-10). Another participant has been introduced into the group but is not feeling very well, she leaves immediately. To which Renie comments,



Transcript 6*. Friendship links*

The description ‘girls’ (line 5) is keyed as funny by Renie’s ‘invitation to laughter’ at line 6 (‘ah’) and ratified by Dorothy at line 7. Lisa’s ‘so what did you do…’ re-keys the interaction as a formal matter of coordination.

We see throughout the conference calls small segments of flooding out of the two party interaction at moments of shared laughter. At those moments it is possible for the formalized two-party interaction to be undermined and there occurs a momentary ‘free-for-all’, wherein any person can potentially talk. Segments of shared laughter and play-framing in combination with other elements can precipitate longer segments of fluidity in which the generic two party structure is turned to a multi-party interaction with much overlapping speech. These instances of spontaneous co-involvement are based upon these earlier moments of framing.

Summing up, these telephone conferences have a primary frame of seriousness due to the need for coordinated activity with the constraints of the telephone: opening sequences of telephone conferences along with coordination efforts, characterize them as formalized two-party frames of interaction. The ideal state for a recreational telephone conference is spontaneous co-involvement, which is worked toward through frame breaking activities such as shared and invited laughter.

4. CONCLUSION

Fun in telephone conferences is defined in this analysis in relation to what it is not: having fun is a matter of transforming the (necessarily) formal structured basis of activity into moments of triviality and playfulness. And as such it complements early sociological appreciation of play as not work. However, by understanding fun as the consequence of particular interpretive transformations in ongoing interaction, our sociology of fun becomes a dynamic conceptualisation: fun is always interactionally achieved by active social actors.

Our investigation of telephone conferences through applied or directed CA allows an appreciation of the interactionally situated experience of fun. A question might be how these insights benefit the future design effort. One way is that they can be recruited to inform experimental interventions. For example, we might ask how changes in the opening routines affect interaction patterns and see if fluidity can be reached more quickly.

On a more general note, we might ask how we can make telephone conferences more ‘fun’. Initial answers appear counter-intuitive: fun is tied to engendering structure, and allowing for its re-framing; to have fun, we must have seriousness first.

5. FOOTNOTES

1 People at the Centre of Communication and Information Technology

1 We would like to thank and acknowledge Community Network, the organisers of this scheme for their invaluable help.

1 An integral part of the Conversation Analytic method is the detailed transcription of talk. Rather than a ‘record’ of the talk, transcripts and their generation are viewed as an essential part of the analysis

process. However at all stages the original recording is regarded as the primary data and is re-turned to when reading the transcript.

1 Facilitator professionals characterise such turn allocation as a form of ‘ice-breaker’ that gets the

participants talking.

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