Sequence and practical reasoning in accounts episodes

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When problematic events arise persons often account for their actions (i.e., offer an excuse or justification) in order to repair or modify potentially negative meanings. The main research question here is, How are accounts episodes organized as a communicative practice? Accounts episodes involve minimally a three-part sequence: problematic event—accounts—evaluation. To go beyond a sequential model, accounts may be seen as a local solution to the problematic based on persons’ practical reasoning to prevent the loss of face. Naturally occurring accounts episodes collected by field notes are used in the analysis and construction of this account model.

KEY CONCEPTS Accounts, excuses, justifications, episodes, problematic event, evaluation, sequential models, practical reasoning, field notes, discourse analysis.

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Human action is all too susceptible to error, unfulfilled goals, and unintended consequences. As such, persons need some way to repair discrediting meanings—to right wrongs, qualify mistakes, and redefine the nature of their actions in order to avoid losing face (Goffman, 1967). Two of the most common forms of face-saving practices are excuses and justifications—which taken together have been called “accounts” (Scott & Lyman, 1968; 1970). Accounts are a particularly interesting face-saving practice because they are common-sense ascriptions about the evaluative significance and responsibility for one’s actions. Accounts are used to attempt to repair or mitigate the offensive or discrediting dimensions of the event. As such, accounts may be seen as a corrective mechanism for meanings in human communication systems.

Scholarly interest has tended to conceive of accounts in terms of their functions for protecting and saving face. For instance, accounts function to manage problematic situations (Scott & Lyman, 1968) or restore social equilibrium (Goffman, 1967; Semin & Manstead, 1983), such as by neutralizing deviance ascriptions (Sykes & Matza, 1957; Marsh, Rosser & Harré, 1978; Atkinson & Drew, 1979), or responding to social embarrassment (Petronio,
1984). Also, accounts function as a form of impression management (Goffman, 1959; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981), allow persons to align actions (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976; Morris & Hopper, 1981; Ragan, 1983), and facilitate decision-making (Geist & Chandler, 1984; Tompkins & Cheney, 1983).

A second major focus in the accounts literature has been the construction of accounts typologies. For instance, "excuses" have been distinguished from "justification" (Austin, 1961). Excuses are a type of account in which one concedes that one's action was wrong in some sense, but one should not be held fully responsible for the action due to mitigating conditions. Justifications, on the other hand, are a type of account in which one accepts full responsibility for the action, but denies the discrediting nature of the action. Scott and Lyman (1968), Schönbach (1980), and Tedeschi and Reiss (1981) have provided various typologies of accounts. For a review and the most systematic treatment of accounts typologies, see Semin and Manstead (1983, pp. 80-95). This research emphasis on types and functions provides a valuable first step in mapping out how accounts can change or modify the meanings of actions. As a next step in this research program we need to consider how accounts episodes are organized as a communicative practice. To pursue this issue we need to, first of all, get clear on what counts as an account. How do we distinguish accounts from related communicative acts? Secondly, we need to examine accounts at the episodic level and not merely at the speech act level. What are the parts and how are they related in accounts episodes? Thirdly, how can this organization of accounts episodes be explained? Various explanations are examined: accounts as a repair of non-violations; accounts as one's reply to a reproach from another; accounts as a response to a problematic; and accounts as a form of practical reasoning. This practical reasoning explanation is found to be most useful for understanding our original question of how accounts episodes are organized as a communicative practice.

Data Collection

The method used in this study was participant-observation. The researcher recorded naturally occurring accounts by a note-taking procedure. The accounts were recorded from (1) a first-person perspective—accounts offered by the author to others, (2) a second-person perspective—accounts given to the author from others, and (3) a third-person perspective—accounts observed, that is, accounts offered by others to others. The accounts were noted as soon as possible after their occurrence. The accounts were collected from a variety of settings: in stores, offices, in the home, among friends, family members, married couples, work acquaintances, students, professors, and strangers.

The limitations of this method are that there are undoubtedly errors in recording the exact wording of each utterance. Secondly, the sample is limited to the researcher's circle of contacts. Despite these limitations, this corpus has the advantage of being naturally occurring accounts used in everyday situations. In addition, the sample is not limited to only college sophomores, but ranges from college-aged to middle-aged participants.
**What is an Account?**

Ordinarily one's actions are self-explanatory and taken-for-granted (Schutz, 1946). The use of accounts arises in the context of problematic events when one wants to correct or mitigate unfavorable impressions and attributions. One problem with the literature on accounts is getting clear on, What counts as an account? The term “accounts” has been used to indicate a report about one's meanings (Garfinkel, 1967) or as a form of data collection which is solicited by a researcher (Harré, 1977). Here, accounts will be used in the tradition arising from Austin (1961) and Scott & Lyman (1968) as a naturally occurring explanation about one's meaning in the context of a problematic event.

To clarify this concept, it will be useful to examine the structural dimensions of accounts. As we have seen, Austin (1961) conceives of accounts as comprised by the two communicative acts, excuses and justifications. Excuses and justification presuppose two dimensions: the negative character of the event and the actor's responsibility for the event.

An *excuse* is structured such that the event is recognized as negative in some sense, but the actor denies full responsibility for the event due to mitigating conditions. For example:

1. (Setting: A waiting room in an optician’s office; the exchange is between the optician's assistant (OA) and a client (C).

   OA: If you want to wait a few minutes Susan can adjust your frames.
   C: Will it be a few minutes?
   OA: Yes she's with a patient right now. I haven't had experience with frames otherwise I'd do it.
   C: What about the big boss? Or doesn't he do it?
   OA: He's with a patient right now.
   C: Okay.

   In this episode we can see the two structural dimensions of excuses. The event in question is negative—having to wait, but OA is not fully responsible for the occurrence of the problematic. OA denies responsibility by citing lack of "experience with frames." Also, OA gives an excuse for Susan and the "big boss" by indicating that each is "with a patient right now."

   A *justification* is a structure such that the actor assumes responsibility for the event in question, but denies that the event has a negative character.

2. (Setting: A check-out line in an art museum shop; the exchange is between the clerk (CK) and three customers (C1, C2, and C3).

   CK: (Addressing C1) You don't have to wait in line just come up here.
   C2: I was here before her, I was in line here.
   CK: She was here before.
   C3: (Addressing C2) She was in front of me and then she went to get some things.
   C2: Oh okay.

   Here we can see the structural dimensions of justifications. CK denies the
untoward nature of the event (i.e., calling a customer to the front of the line) by indicating that “she was here before.” Also, C3 justifies CK’s action by elaborating upon the circumstances to clarify the event to C2.

In order to clarify the boundary conditions of accounts, we will contrastively analyze accounts to other communicative acts which can be used in problematic events. For instance, in response to a problematic event, one can concede that one is in the wrong, what may be called concessions. Structurally, a concession involves a recognition that the event is offensive or discrediting and that one is responsible for it. Concessions are typically accompanied by apologies, and if serious enough, offer reparation (Owen, 1983). For instance:

3. (Wife and husband).

H: Don’t leave that refrigerator door open.
W: You’re so wound-up from that coffee you’re bossing me around!
H: ...You’re right, I’m sorry.

Here H combines a concession with an apology. A concession is similar in structure to an excuse because each admits the negative character of the event, but an excuse, unlike a concession, involves some qualifier or mitigating condition which attempts to redefine the event. Perhaps apologies typically accompany concessions as the actor’s way “to offer” the offended party a recognition of indebtedness (Coulmas, 1981; Goffman, 1971).

Another type of response to the problematic is a denial of agency for committing the act in question. For instance:

4. (Mother and daughter).

M: What did you do with my brush?
D: I didn’t take it.

A denial is similar to an excuse in that each act involves a recognition of the negative character of the event. But a denial disavows responsibility because the actor did not commit the act, while an excuse attempts to qualify responsibility by citing background conditions and constraints.

The point of this contrastive analysis is to show that offering an account is the selection of a strategy, among other strategies, in response to a problematic. Accounts seem to be intermediary on a continuum of blameworthiness between concessions (accept full blame and responsibility) and denials (reject any blame or responsibility).

**Accounts Episodes**

**Problematic Events**

We have seen that accounts presuppose two structural dimensions: the negative character of the event and the actor’s responsibility for this event. The former of these, the negative character of the event, is crucial for understanding accounts as a communicative practice. The negative character of the event—whether it is offensive to others or discrediting to oneself—
opens up the call for an account; it creates a problematic for persons by threatening the face of one or more of the interactants (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1967). Problematic events emerge from a threat to face. The concept of “face” is an underlying structural dimension of the individual which reflects one’s wants and claims about the self. Two aspects of face can be distinguished:

(a) negative face: the basic claims to territories, personal preserves, right to non-distraction—i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
(b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or “personality” (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated or approved of) claimed by interactants (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 66).

When these implicit claims about the self are contradicted or challenged by one’s own or other’s actions or the course of events, the one’s face is threatened and some remedial response is necessary to change, or at least modify, the threat. One’s own and other’s face is continually attended to during interaction. In general, communicators prefer not to threaten face; but when face is threatened, an attempt will be made to alleviate the threat (often by these of accounts) and restore routine interaction.

**Three-part Pattern of Accounts Episodes**

In our analysis, we have seen that accounts presuppose a problematic event as an antecedent (in a logical, if not temporal, sense). In functional terms, accounts are used to manage the antecedent problematic. What, then, is the consequent of accounts? Since accounts address the evaluative significance of an act, the receiver of an account may agree or disagree with what has been offered. Accounts may be accepted or rejected or questioned further.

The organization of accounts episodes has at minimum a three-part pattern: problematic—accounts—evaluation. This three-part pattern represents the minimum number of moves for an accounts episode. It may be expanded upon in various ways.

**Evaluation**

The third-part in an account episode is the evaluation of the offered account. An evaluation is necessary to let the individual know that the account is “sufficient” (Semin & Mastead, 1983), that the individual is “reestablish(ed)...as a person” (Goffman, 1971, p. 119), and that “ritual equilibrium” has been restored (Goffman, 1967, p. 19).

Evaluations can take various forms: the account may be honored or accepted:

5. (setting: cafeteria line).
   Customer: Could I have a raisin bagel?
   Worker: Ah you’ll have to wait until his is done because the other will burn it.
   Customer: Okay.
Accounts may be accepted without any verbal evaluation:

6. (Setting: Riding on a bus, A’s sweater falls off his seat onto the floor. B picks it up and puts it on the seat next to A, which attracts A’s attention.)

(1) (sweater falls on the floor)
(2) (B picks it up and places it on the seat next to A)
(3) (A looks toward B)
(4) B: It fell on the floor.
(5) (A nods head)

Accounts may be negatively evaluated and rejected.

7. (Setting: Late night talk among friends. A’s in-laws are visiting and are sleeping in an upstairs bedroom. C reproaches B’s comment which is potentially offensive to A’s in-laws.)

A: I’m kinda hung-over.
B: That’s the only way you could make it through the evening.
C: Shhh! You’re so loud, you don’t know how your voice carries.
B: They can’t hear me.
C: Keep it down.

C shows that she does not accept B’s account by restating her reproach, “Keep it down,” following B’s account.
It is probably more common to reject accounts in an indirect fashion.

8. (Discussion of B’s weight)

A: Why don’t you go to one of those health clubs?
B: Naw, it’s too much bother, you have to buy gym clothes and you get all sweated up.
A: That’s replacing a bad habit with a good habit.

In this example B’s account is not accepted, but instead of directly rejecting the account, A makes a contrary statement. A indirectly rejects B’s account by invoking a kind of moral maxim (which B had used previously in the conversation).

In general, a distinction can be drawn between accounts which are acceptable and accounts which are not acceptable. The acceptability of accounts is, in part, a function of the account’s sufficiency. That is, is the account “sufficient” to explain, qualify, or redefine the problematic event? What counts as sufficient is based on the taken-for-granted knowledge of persons’ evaluative and moral conception (Shotter, 1981). For instance, an account for missing an appointment based on “forgetting” may be initially acceptable, but if a person continually uses such an account its acceptability will likely be diminished. “Forgetting to do X” is an easily drawn upon account, but for that reason it is less convincing when repeated. “Forgetting” is generally believed to have the character of an accident—something which happens rarely or occasionally. The repeated use of forgetting in accounts will likely have reflexive implications for the person as absent-minded, insincere, or even pathological.
Unlike a court of law, in everyday life, the standards for evaluating actions are not coded and systematically scrutinized and questioned. Persons’ accounts draw upon materials such as one’s motives, intentions, background knowledge, perception of the act, and the like. The sufficiency of an account which uses these materials cannot be ascertained a priori. Evaluating an account is not merely a disinterested application of general rules to a particular event. Rather there seems to be a preference to accept an account, even when it is deemed insufficient. Accounts which appear insufficient may nonetheless be acceptable (Buttny, 1985). For instance, accounts offered by the more powerful are likely to be accepted by subordinates (at least publicly if not privately (Semin & Manstead, 1983)). In everyday accounts persons are more interested in maintenance of the relationship rather than in questioning the legitimacy of the account. For instance:

9. (Friends talking over the telephone)

A: I was wondering if you’re going to that Japanese movie at the State Theatre tonight?
B: Should I say that I’m going and then not show up?
A: Well, that’s not exactly comparable to the movie last night.
B: Oh, okay.

B’s initial turn is a projected action-sequence which functions as an indirect reproach of A, because B believed A said he was going to the movie the previous evening but did not show up. A’s account attempts to distinguish his actions last night from B’s projected actions. B apparently accepts A’s account even though A never indicated how last night’s actions are different from B’s projected actions. This example shows the preference to accept accounts, even when accounts may appear insufficient, in order to maintain the relationship.

EXPLANATIONS OF ACCOUNTS EPISODES

Accounts as the Repair of Non-violations

When actors deviate from social norms, they may be blamed and called upon to give an account for their behavior (Backman, 1976; Blumstein, 1974; Scott & Lyman, 1968, 1970; Semin & Masfield, 1983; Sykes and Matza, 1957). Accounts function in this perspective to redefine or modify the blame associated with the deviant act. Deviance here includes both the strong and weak sense of the term: the strong sense refers to attributions of legal deviance, such as criminals or juvenile delinquents, while the weak sense refers to norm violations which are not illegal, usually minor transgressions, such as failure to keep an appointment, being caught in a lie, flirting with another in the presence of one’s spouse, and the like. The concept of a norm includes both prescriptions and proscriptions for or against certain behaviors, and secondly the usual or typical forms of behavior. One’s actions can be said to deviate from each of these senses of a social norm. The main point here is that accounts are explainable as the actor’s attempt to mitigate against the negative impact of norm-violations.

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One criticism of the normative perspective is that actors frequently do not follow the norms. For instance, turn-taking rules (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) are frequently violated in mixed-sex conversations (Zimmerman & West, 1975), initial-interaction norms (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) are often circumvented by competent interactants (Cronen, Pearce & Harris, 1982) and speech acts within families have been found to be highly idiosyncratic (Kreckel, 1981). It seems to be the norm not to follow the norms.

Additionally, it is doubtful whether accounts invariably follow norm-violations. That is, norm-violations may become problematic events, but not all problematic events are norm-violations. In other words, problematic events are a broader class than norm-violations. Accounts may be offered when no norm has been broken. For instance:

10. (Two sisters)

A: I'll make some coffee for us.
B: We'll all be real nervous.
A: It's a different kind of coffee.

This episode can be glossed as: proposed action-indirect negative evaluation-justification. B's indirect negative evaluation is not a breach of a norm, but a disagreement with A's proposal. B's disagreement, not a norm-violation, leads to A's justification for her proposal. Another example of a disagreement leading to accounts without a breach of norms is as follows:

11. (Father and son conversation)

A: Would you like to come with me to Uncle John's tomorrow?
B: Yeah, if you're going in the afternoon.
A: I have to go in the morning.
B: I usually work in the morning.

Here A and B each offer accounts to justify their preference, and to mitigate disagreement. Also, example (1) is a case of problematic which gives rise to excuses, but is not a breach of a norm.

A more fundamental criticism of the normative perspective is that it is unclear how general norms are applied to a specific situation (Cicourel, 1972). Invoking a norm is not a simple procedure of applying a general rule, because norms are often indeterminate and negotiable (Wootton, 1975, p. 55). In addition, norms "crystallize in the process of their application to particular people in particular circumstances" (Sabini & Silver, 1982, p. 43). For instance:

12. (Setting: family members)

A: Dick has to work.
B: You're not going to play with Carrie?
C: I'm going to take breaks.
B: You're on vacation.

From a normative perspective, B's question can be glossed as a reproach to C for violating the norm that an uncle should play with his young niece when he
is on vacation. The limitation of this normative approach is that other norms could be invoked, such as work before play. Norms can be in conflict in a particular situation. The case of conflicting norms suggests the necessity for some application procedure for instantiating norms.

The most important criticism of this normative approach from the point of view of accounts theory is that interactants are more concerned with aligning actions with each other than with following societal norms (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976; Morris & Hopper, 1980). That is, interactants are primarily interested in aligning conduct so to coordinate joint actions (Cronen, et al., 1982). This alignment can be accomplished by normative or non-normative procedures. So an account is not so much an explanation for failure to follow the norms as it is an explanation to affect alignment between interactants. For instance:

13. (Setting: A party. A and B are graduate students; C is a professor and host of the party. A is leaving the party and thanks B and C for the invitation. A was invited to the party by B, rather than by the host, C).

A: Thank you for inviting me to your party. I really had a nice time. Thank you too, Gloria, for inviting me.
B: I didn’t invite you, Ann, Winston invited you.
C: No, no, no, Gloria invited you. I just heard about it after the fact.
A: Well, I had a good time. You have a nice house.

B’s account can be seen as based on the norm that the host invites guests to his or her party. Consequently, B denies having offered the invitation and claims that the host made the invitation. C’s account, in response, does not adhere to this norm, but rather gives B credit for inviting A to the party. In other words, C is more concerned with aligning actions with A and B in this episode of leave-taking from a party than with invoking norms based on the host’s rights. Consider a second example of preference for aligning actions over alignment of action under a norm:

14. (Student (A) and professor (B) run into each other while walking across campus).

A: See these (pointing to a pair of sunglasses he is wearing).
B: Ohh, yeahhh.
A: Do you still have em?
B: I don’t know, we changed offices.
A: It doesn’t matter, I have these.

In this case, the norm is invoked of returning one’s found property, the sunglasses. When B expresses some doubt about being able to adhere to the norm, A minimizes the request, thereby aligning actions and allowing the conversation to move on to other matters.

In sum, accounts involve much more than the repair of violated social norms. Invoking norms as an explanatory principle does not seem sufficient.

Accounts are Expected

The sequencing of accounts is patterned, such that interactants expect accounts to be offered to repair the problematic. The occurrence of a
problematic event makes an account "conditionally relevant" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), such that if an account is not forthcoming, its absence would be noticed. For instance:

15. (Setting: A and B are professors; A enters the doorway to B's office).

A: What's all these students taking make-up exams?
B: (B averts eye contact and returns to paper work).
A: (After a moment, A leaves).

In this example A attempts to initiate an account from B by asking a question. A's question functions a "priming move" (Owen, 1983) for an account. In other words, A's question cites a potential problematic event for which B is responsible, and thereby makes a response by B relevant. An account is expected in this case, as evidenced by the fact that A waits a moment for B to respond; when no account is offered A leaves.

In situations in which accounts are expected, but not forthcoming, their absence will be noticed by others. That is, if one is silent when an account is expected, that silence itself will convey meanings. The absence of an account may lead others to make ascriptions such as the following: that one is not cooperating for some reason; that one is too flustered to offer an account; that one does not recognize the problematic event; and so on. The point here is that persons are "caught in a web of inferences" (Levinson, 1983, p. 321) in the sense that whether an account is offered or not, others will evaluate it as a response to the problematic. It is, on the one hand, this want to avoid negative ascriptions and, on the other hand, this want to maintain face that leads persons to offer accounts.

The noticeable absence of accounts shows that account sequences are expected. This expectation for accounts can also be demonstrated by the fact that one can offer an account for other. For instance:

16. (Student-teacher exchange in teacher's office).

A: You seemed to fade towards the end of last semester.
B: Yeahhh.
A: Well, I guess it was springtime.
B: And lacrosse season and student government.

17. (Family members)

A: (Addressed to B) Did you go to the eye doctor?
C: He didn't want to wait for the doctor.
B: I was there a half-hour and there still were people ahead of me; so I told the receptionist that I couldn't wait and left.

18. (Dinner table conversation among family members).

A: If you're not leaving until Monday, you can wait another day and go Tuesday, so you can be here for the Mass.
B: (Coughing while eating).
C: She's choking on her excuses.
   (Laughter).

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In each of these cases, one makes an account for other: in (16) to help B save face, in (17) C tells A of B's account to indirectly challenge its legitimacy, and in (18) C makes a meta-communicative remark indicating the placement of B's account. This ability for one person to make an account for another at just the right moment in the sequence shows that interactants are oriented to, and expect accounts to explain problematic events.

The expectation to this last statement is when other is not aware of one's problematic event; under such conditions, there would be no reason to expect an account. So this claim will be qualified as: if interactants are aware of the problematic event, then they will expect the offering of an account.

Accounts as a Reply to a Reproach

The offering of an account has been explained as one's reply to a reproach from other (Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; McLaughlin, 1984; McLaughlin, Cody & O'Hair, 1983; McLaughlin, Cody & Rosenstein, 1983). The rationale behind this conception stems from the notion of a "reply." A reply is an answer to the functional content of a previous utterance, i.e., the answer to a reproach. The "reply pair"—reproach/account is similar in structure to an "adjacency pair" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). The reply is the "second-pair part" of a "reply pair" in which the reproach is the "first-pair part." The reproach is said to create a "sequential implicativeness" (McLaughlin, Cody & Rosenstein, 1983) for the relevance of an account as a reply.

The problem with this "accounts as reply" explanation is that accounts episodes need not contain a reproach—the first-pair of the reply pair. There are clear-cut counter-instances to the "reply pair" model. For instance, an offended person may pass from reproaching the offender, and allow the offender the opportunity to initiate the account.

19. (While visiting friends, the visitor overhears the host making plans for that afternoon over the telephone, thereby disrupting the visitor's expectations for the afternoon).

A: (After returning to the conversation) We're making such a big fuss over Steve's birthday because we're the only friends he's got.

B: (head-nod of agreement).

Secondly, a reproach would not precede an account when one is unaware of the problematic event until informed by other's account. For example, a child's informing his or her parents about breaking a window while simultaneously accounting for it. A third type of counter-example, in which reproach would not likely occur, is for accounts used to explain why an offer, invitation, or request cannot be accepted, i.e., an accounted denial—what has been called a "dispreferred second part" (Levinson, 1983, pp. 333-336). For instance:

20. (Levinson, 1983, p. 308)

A: Um I wonder if there's any chance of seeing you tomorrow sometime...morning or before the seminar?
B: Ah um...I doubt it.
A: Uhm um.
B: The reason is I’m seeing Elizabeth.

These counter-instances imply that a reproach is not a necessary condition for account sequences.

Given an offense, the offender can be said to be “blameworthy” (Blatz, 1972) which may or may not lead the offended party to verbally blame or reproach the offender. Accounts are retrospective explanatory statements about some aspect of the problematic event. Accounts are a response to the problematic event rather than a reply to reproach.

This distinction between a “reply” and “response” may appear to be hair-splitting, but it redirects the focus of explanatory principles for accounts episodes. McLaughlin and colleagues explain the sequencing of accounts by two “reply pairs, reproach/account and account/evaluate” (McLaughlin, Cody & Rosenstein, 1983, p. 103). Instead of this dialogic format of statements chaining together by replies, essentially an adjacency-pair perspective, a more interactional approach is needed. Goffman’s interactional view seems more useful for explaining accounts:

What is basic to natural talk might not be a conversational unit at all, but an interactional one, something on the order of: mentionable event, mention, comment on mention—giving us a three-part unit, the first part of which is quite likely not to involve speech at all (Goffman, 1981, p. 38; emphasis added).

Goffman’s three-part unit subsumes our three-part pattern of accounts episodes: problematic event, account, and evaluation. An account is linked to the problematic response.

**Accounts as a Form of Practical Reasoning In the Context of the Problematic Event**

Conceiving of accounts as a response to the problematic appears to be an advance of the accounts as a reply to a reproach conception, but both of these explanations are limited to being sequential models of accounts episodes. Given that we know the minimum three-part structure of accounts episodes, problematic event—account—evaluation, we are still left with the issue of how this sequence is generated. That is, what makes an account or evaluation the appropriate mode of response. In other words, are there more basic structures to explain this sequence?

If we conceive of accounts as a “language game” or communicative practice, we can raise Wittgenstein’s (1953) question: under what conditions would this language game lose its point or function? In a world without error, failure, offense, or unfulfilled expectations the need to account for one’s actions would not arise—the language game would be idle. In other words, error, failure, offense, and the like create a problematic event which opens up the practical necessity for accounts to prevent becoming discredited and losing face.

The above conjectures suggest that accounts as a communicative practice
are only possible due to problematic events. Accounts function as a response to a problematic in that *accounts represent a person's solution or answer to that problematic event*. The emergence of the problematic calls for a response, but *what type of response* one makes (e.g., an excuse, justification, denial, concession, apology) depends upon one's *practical reasoning* (Schutz, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967) in light of events in context. There is no objective structure to events such that one’s account reflects a report of what really happened. Rather, an account is a person’s reconfiguration of events designed to change or modify their potentially negative meanings. For instance:

21. (Telephone conversation).

A: I was out of town and I never received a couple of letters that weren’t forwarded.
B: I didn’t send them—it’s been a crazy couple of weeks.
A: Oh, I know the feeling.

B’s excuse may be seen as B’s local solution for managing the problematic. The problematic is why B did not send the letters like he said he would, and B’s solution, “it’s been a crazy couple of weeks,” excuses his (in)action by the constraint of being too busy. In addition, B’s excuse is formulaic—it does not go into a lengthy explanation, but relies on taken-for-granted knowledge. This shorthand presentation of an excuse represents B’s practical reasoning as to what is necessary to locally manage this problematic. This formulaic excuse may not be accepted in other contexts, but it appears to be in this case. *The general point here is that a problematic calls for a response, but what type of response one makes and how one produces the response depend on one’s practical reasoning.*

To offer an account represents a person’s local solution to a problematic event. This “local solution” or answer to the problematic needs to be seen as based on one’s practical reasoning in the context of events to avoid the loss of face. This practical reasoning explanation allows us to get at the point or function of accounts as a communicative practice. The practical reasoning explanation is a top-down approach rather than the bottom-up approach of sequencing models. Accounts episodes cannot be understood as merely the chaining together of adjacency-pairs, replies or responses. Rather the larger function of accounts as a communicative practice needs to be seen: accounts represent a person’s local solution to problematic events based on practical reasoning to prevent the loss of face.

**Accounts as a Local Solution**

Accounts are accomplished as a local solution by picking out aspects of the problematic event and reframing them along two dimensions: the negative character of the act in question or the actor’s responsibility for the act. Communicators accomplish this reframing process by picking out *unknown or unappreciated aspects of the event* and organizing them such that the negative character of the event of the actor’s responsibility can be seen in a different light. In addition to this “picking out” process, communicators often
avoid mention of aspects of the event which may be discrediting. Whether aspects of the event are picked out, avoided or even fabricated, these will be organized in the account so that some alternative frame (e.g., principle, intention, motive or cause) explains the event. In other words, an account reconfigures the context in which to see the event, and consequently, its meaning (Buttny, 1985). For instance:

22. (A professor arrives about five minutes late for his class. He enters the room and begins):

A: I'm amazed by the rapid speed of communications today. Driving in on Butterfield Road, I heard a story on the radio of an accident I was driving into and...

The professor's response represents a local solution for the problematic (arriving late). The professor picks out an aspect of the event's cause and raises it to a level of academic importance, namely, the impact of communication technology on modern society. This excuse allows him to simultaneously deny responsibility for being late (due to the heavy traffic from the accident), to frame the event as an academically relevant topic ("the rapid speed of communications today"), and to avoid mention of discrediting aspects of the event (for instance, he may have overslept and left late for work). This excuse is accomplished by organizing the event as beyond his control and as a matter of academic interest.

Consider another case in which an account represents a local solution to a problematic by picking out aspects of the event and reframing them.

23. (Clerk-customer at the checkout counter).

CUSTOMER: It's for the schools.
CLERK: Oops!
CUSTOMER: That's all right, you're having a bad day.
CLERK: No I'm not, my back hurts today.

Following the clerk's error in calculating the price, the customer offers an excuse for the clerk by framing the event as part of the pattern "having a bad day." Excuses often are based upon common-sense recipes for explaining action which everyone knows and can be readily accepted (Scott & Lyman, 1968). The clerk, however, does not accept this frame, and instead offers an excuse of her own. The clerk picks out as aspect of the event—"my back hurts today"—which works as a causal explanation for both her error and for her not being herself (which is implied by the customer's excuse for her).

CONCLUSION

The main contention here is that accounts serve as a local solution to a problematic event based on a person's practical reasoning to prevent the loss of face. Persons accomplish accounts by picking out aspects of the event in question to reframe it in order to diminish the actor's responsibility or the negative character of the event. This practical reasoning explanation appears more useful than sequential models because it provides a rationale for the
connectedness between the parts of the account episode. That is, the practical reasoning explanation gets at the point or function of accounts as a communicative practice.

This notion of practical reasoning needs development in future research. Practical reasoning involves the intersection of the parameters: the person’s interpretation of the problematic, its magnitude of offensiveness or discrediting character, and the amount of shared knowledge with others about the event. These dimensions will be reflected in the production of the account itself. A related issue is, how does practical reasoning enter into the evaluation of accounts? We mentioned that sometimes persons accept accounts which appear to be insufficient so as not to threaten the existing relationship. What we need is some notion of the multiple levels of context and functions surrounding the account episode, along the lines of the hierarchical model found in Labov and Fanshel (1977) or Buttney (1985).

Systems of human organizations appear to need some type of corrective mechanisms to restore equilibrium in light of (potential) threats to interaction. As we have seen, accounts offer one type of corrective mechanism. A fruitful area for future research on accounts is a cross-cultural comparison of corrective mechanisms. For instance, high-context cultures (e.g., the Japanese) tend to offer fewer accounts and with less elaboration than do low-context cultures (e.g., mainstream North Americans (Hall, 1976)). Along these lines, Godstein and Tamura (1975) found that North Americans seem to value an apology that is accompanied by an account which relates the problematic to the actor’s particular situation to offer a personal or individualistic remedial expression. The Japanese, on the other hand, can accomplish a sincere apology just by using the standard form, the equivalent of “I’m sorry”; no personalistic expression is necessary. The use of corrective mechanisms appears to reflect larger structures within the culture, such as the relation of the individual to the social order. We may speculate that in cultures where accounts are used with less frequency and with less elaboration that cultural members would be more circumspect in their actions, since corrective mechanisms are not as readily available. In addition, such cross-cultural study may reveal the bounds of accounts as a communicative practice, other types of corrective mechanisms, and how identity or face is structured across cultures.

REFERENCES


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