Cheering Practices: Methods for Organizing Collective Support and Mockery in Sports Crowds

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What does it mean to be a "good crowd"?

Interaction research has addressed this question in various contexts: politicians needing applause to make them seem popular (Atkinson, 1984), teachers needing students to raise their hands and wait to be called upon (Mchoul, 1978), stage actors needing quiet during their dialogue (Broth, 2011). In these contexts, we can discuss the good crowd as a good audience, good listeners, good recipients of talk that has been designed for them. But what about crowds that must take the initiative? Those who are expected to request effort, inspire excellence, and disrupt opponents? What makes a sports crowd good at their unique role?

This talk presents findings from a PhD thesis on collective cheering by sports crowds, particularly "Student Sections" at university ice hockey games in the northeastern United States. Student Sections are informal supporters' groups created by students sitting and cheering together in the stands. As current students, they carry a social expectation to be especially active and dedicated during games. To be a "good crowd" in their context requires encouraging their team, discouraging and distracting opponents, and generally maintaining an entertaining in-arena atmosphere. This often requires that they operate as a collective social actor, one that must be able to self-select and perform first-actions rather than waiting to be prompted to cheer. Inactivity marks these crowds as "dead" and only reacting to success makes them "front-runners" or "fair-weather fans" who lack the skill or dedication to truly support their team.

In order to meet all those social expectations a Student Section needs to solve an immediate practical problem: How do you get hundreds of strangers to say the same thing, in the same way, at the same time, without outside help? That challenge is what this talk will address as we use ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA) to explore Cheering Practices. These are shared structural expectations - such as applause, songs, and chanting - that form the unspoken instructions that Section members must orient-to in order to participate. The intention is to provide a fuller understanding of
cheering as a form of talk by focusing on the interaction skills that underlie its co-construction and the sequential contexts that a Section must engage with to be a good, active crowd.