Moving in and out of framings: activity contexts in talks with young unemployed people within a training project

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with talk activities in and through which parties simulate another talk activity. Data are drawn from a social and vocational training project for young unemployed people involving talk activities of multiple ambiguous kinds. In particular, we analyze simulated job interviews in which the young people are supposed to learn how to behave in real job interviews, but the parties seem to orient to several other goals simultaneously. Participants do not sustain a unified definition of what is going on and activities involve complexities and hybridities on several planes. This allows us to probe issues having to do with concepts like context, frame, activity type, and genre. In terms of theory, we challenge some approaches to context as developed within Conversation Analysis.

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1. Introduction: contexts of discourse

Notions of context and contextual resources have been extensively discussed in discourse theory and across a range of disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, social psychology, sociology, and artificial intelligence. The term context originally

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comes from theories of literature, where context is basically regarded as what co-
occur with the text but is outside the text itself, and/or what is necessary as a complement in order for anyone to make sense of the text. Participants in communication are not isolated senders and receivers of messages coded in written or spoken language, pictures, body language, or any other sign system. Instead, knowledge and situations surrounding the text or discourse are necessary for anybody to assign coherence or 'sense' to it. Here, we shall mainly discuss contexts in relation to talk-in-interaction.

Contexts have often been understood in terms of surroundings and coherence-making. A traditional conception of contexts takes them to be pre-existing and stable environments which are used by actors or analysts for explaining and understanding texts and communicative events. Current theories, however, treat contexts both as partly pre-given and as constructed or reconstructed on-line, i.e. as situationally accomplished. Within research, there has been a development from a stance of considering contextual conditions as stable preconditions to a position in which all relevant contextual conditions are assumed to be dynamically activated and/or accomplished in situ. The latter position is perhaps most clearly articulated within ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (CA) (Schegloff, 1991, 1992, 1997, 1999).

Contexts can be very divergent in character. Schegloff (1992: 195) distinguishes between proximate (intra-interactional) contexts and distal (external) contextual variables. Other terms for this distinction are situational vs. cognitive contexts, and immediate vs. mediate (abstract) contextual resources (Linell, 1998a: 128ff). The proximate or immediate dimensions include the prior discourse context as well as features pertaining to the concrete physical surrounding. The abstract contextual resources include various types of background knowledge and assumptions about the ongoing or upcoming communicative activities, the persons involved, the topics treated, the language used, the institutions engaged, and so forth, which participants or analysts bring to bear on interpreting the activities, interactions, and utterances encountered. We will be especially concerned here with one type of abstract contextual resource which has been discussed under rubrics such as activity types, activity contexts, frames, and situation definitions (see Section 2).

First, however, we need to review some other properties commonly ascribed to contexts, in particular those having to do with dynamics. Duranti and Goodwin’s (1992) collection of articles is a particularly important work in this regard (cf. also Tracy, 1998). Many of these articles, as well as scholars in the recent debate at large, argue forcefully that contexts, far from being stable environments, must be seen as dynamic processes that are brought into existence, constructed, and achieved in, and...

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1 In addition, contexts were often understood as “nuisance variables” (Rogoff and Lave, 1984), unobservable factors that cause subjects to behave in partly unpredictable ways.

2 The triple of co-textual, concrete-situational, and abstract-cognitive contexts or contextual resources is recurrent in the literature. They are intricately interrelated, but appear to have been used by researchers to highlight partly different aspects of context, such as coherence and cohesion (mainly co-text), focus vs. background (mainly situational context), and typified activity of the interaction, recurrent practices, traditions, rituals etc (mainly abstract contexts).
through, talk-in-interaction itself. Contexts are endogenous rather than exogenous to interaction (Heritage, 1984: 108–109). Schegloff (1991) argues that contexts must be defined in terms of their relevance and procedural consequentiality for the unfolding discourse and its understanding. The concept of context is further developed along such lines by Goodwin (2000), who sees it as a dynamic, temporally unfolding process accomplished by the simultaneous use of multiple semiotic resources and through the ongoing rearrangement of structures in talk, participants' bodies, relevant artifacts, the built environment, and other spaces and features of the material surroundings. Goodwin talks about contextual configurations and about elements from different contextual fields that are updated on a moment-to-moment basis.

Thus, one aspect of the dynamic account of contexts is that it assumes an intrinsic relationship between discourse and context. Rather than being extrinsically caused by contextual factors, discourse has an intrinsic dialogical and conceptual relationship to context: the two co-constitute each other. Accordingly, the notion of ‘recontextualization’ is fundamental in the theories of communication, cognition, interaction, and discourse (Linell, 1998a,b); every utterance is a recontextualization device, an instruction to alter the dialogically established moment-to-moment focus of the interaction and to add to the coherence of meaning in the situation.

However, the methodologically motivated CA claim (Schegloff) that contexts must always be proved to be relevant in order to be justifiably assumed—that is, proved to have been made relevant by actors in the interaction itself—has not remained uncontested. The critique that we have in mind here shares with CA a dynamic, interactionist understanding of discourse, but argues that CA has, in practice, a narrow conception of context in at least two ways. First, critics have argued that the exclusively situationally-defined understanding of context works better for proximate than for distal contextual dimensions. Actors and analysts make use of situation definitions (or frames) and knowledge schemas that extend far beyond the situated interactions; this holds for all communication but becomes especially salient when we are concerned with institutional discourse, as opposed to what CA takes to be ‘ordinary conversation’. The other critical point has to do with the researcher’s analytic activities. While CA practitioners have been encouraged, if not exhorted, to take the actors’ perspective in analyzing interaction, critics have argued that an analyst can never be in the same predicament as the actor. Moreover, the analyst should have another aim than the participant in the naturally occurring communicative activity under study, i.e. the analyst should provide a theoretical, systematic account of the objects of study. This also implies that analyst and participant must, to some extent, rely on contexts, and on different contextual resources, in different ways. Also, even if they sometimes bracket it in the pursuit of the particular research task, researchers start out with various kinds of assumptions which are not

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3 This contextualist critique has been aired by many, e.g. Cicourel (1981), Hester and Francis (2000), Wetherell (1998), Billig (1999).

4 Note, however, that Schegloff (1992: 195) mentions “genre of interaction” (cf. our ‘situation definition’ or ‘activity context’) as belonging to proximate contexts. A few sentences later, he concedes that proximate and distal contexts “need not be disjunct”. 
always made explicit, and rely, often tacitly, on previous experience, intuitions about what is relevant, and knowledge accumulated from other analyses.\textsuperscript{5}

2. Activity contexts

The focus of this paper will be on activity contexts, which, incidentally, is a contextual dimension that Goodwin (2000) does not deal with. The notion of activity type was introduced into discourse studies by Levinson (1979) (but cf. Allwood, 1976)\textsuperscript{6} and has since been elaborated by many, including Allwood (2000) and Sarangi (2000). Related terms are situation definition and frame. The latter term was perhaps first used by Bateson (1972), and was later extensively elaborated by Goffman (1974). In the words of Tannen and Wallat (1999 [1987]: 348), "[the interactive notion of frame refers to a definition of what is going on in interaction, without which no utterance (or movement or gesture) could be interpreted". Some commentators, for example MacLachlan and Reid (1994), have suggested that because the term frame comes forth as fairly static, framing should be preferred.

A communicative activity is understood in terms of its framing. For example, what is said in a doctor consultation is understood with reference to how the situation is implicitly defined or framed by the participants, i.e., by what is expected to be 'going on' in such a setting. The activity type entails certain activity roles or identities to be enacted by the parties, such as doctor/medical expert and patient/advice-seeking lay person (Zimmerman, 1998). However, many analysts of authentic communicative activities have pointed out that there may be several competing framings in the same talk. Different framings have their behavioral counterparts in parties' different footings, a concept which was introduced by Goffman (1981). A change in footing, which may be the interactional enacting of a frame shift, is described as 'a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance' (Goffman, 1981: 128). For example, Tannen and Wallat (1999 [1987]) analyze a pediatric examination/interview, in which a doctor examines a cerebral palsied child in the presence of her mother, and they point to shifts between frames within this interaction. Coupland et al. (1994) demonstrate how parties move between institutional (i.e., medical) and socio-relational frames in geriatric consultations. Activity types are seldom pure; Sarangi (2000) emphasizes that many of them, e.g., genetic counseling, are characterized by hybridity. Issues of hybridity and frames-within-frames were pre-empted by Goffman (1974), who went back to Schutz's notion of multiple realities. Another example is Clark's (1996) theory of layering of discursive activities. Finally, Fairclough (1992) discusses activity hybridities in terms of 'interdiscursivity'. Elaborating on his concepts a little, we can make distinctions among

\textsuperscript{5} This point, too, has been raised by many. An illuminating discussion took recently place in the journal Discourse and Society between Schegloff (1997, 1999) and his critics Wetherell (1998) and Billig (1999).

\textsuperscript{6} There are of course important theoretical forerunners, e.g. Wittgenstein (1958), Schutz (1962) and Goffman (1974).
intertextual links at the level of discourse genres ('orders of discourse') between sequential and embedded kinds, and mixed or merged kinds, of interdiscursivity (1992: 118). In this paper, we will examine competing framings within one complex type of activity, in and through which actors try to simulate other activities. These display, as we will see, both sequential and merged types of interdiscursivity.

Activities consist of participants' doing specific things, including solving certain communicative tasks, as they do, for instance, in a court trial, a doctor consultation, or in work-related talk during a surgical operation. But in many activities, people do something other or something more than just carrying out the core activities. For example, people often do the core activity, and at the same time demonstrating and commeriting verbally on how and why they do it the way they do it. Such situations often involve teaching, inquiring about what is going on, and rehearsing, evaluating, and making meta-comments on activities and happenings. We will be interested in the analysis of such activities in which, in addition to the core activities, teaching/learning/education is taking place, and we will be particularly interested in the communicative analysis of (what might be) a subclass of such activities that could be called simulated activities: mock, feigned, or ludic activities—or activities that are not quite real, genuine, authentic, or fully being what they pretend to be.

Our objects of empirical investigation are simulated job interviews within the specific social context of a Swedish youth project (described in Section 3.1). These simulated interviews can be compared to real job interviews, as described by e.g. Adelswärd (1988), and to the role-played job interviews analyzed by Auer (1998).

3. Data and analyses

3.1. The youth projects

Moving on to the empirical part of our paper, we will now look at a corpus of simulated job interviews collected during fieldwork in three Swedish municipalities in 2000–2001. We focus on youth projects, which are unconventional public training projects designed to give support and guidance to unemployed young people, or to young people who show signs of becoming marginalized in society. Such projects are aimed at giving the young people social and vocational training and preparing them for the labor market. They are part of the youth welfare services organized and run by the local municipal administration, and they are led by specially appointed project leaders with differing vocational backgrounds. A single youth project of the kind we studied lasts for 6–12 weeks and is highly talk-based (although other activities occur as well, such as sports, individual work at computer work stations, etc.).

The overall youth project includes many kinds of talk: group discussions, personal guidance talks between the project leader and individual participants, project follow-up talks between participant, project leader, and administrator (so-called 'three-party conversations', Sw. trepartssamtal), etc. There are also school-like activities, such as lectures and lessons. Interestingly, there are several activities that involve role-plays or simulated activities (referred to as such by the project leaders): within group
discussions, for example, the young people simulate municipal council debates, and another regular activity type is simulated job interviews (SJIs) (so-called 'job-seeking talks', Sw. jobbsökeringtal) accompanied by evaluations. We will focus here on these SJIs.

However, before going into the details of the SJIs, we note that there are also surrounding talk activities which can be relevant for understanding what is going on within the youth projects and their constituent talk activities. These include (cf. Fig. 1) employment agency talks (cf. Mäkitalo, 2002), social welfare office talks (cf. Cedersund, 1992; Linell and Fredin, 1995), and various school-like activities (education often organized by the local municipalities). The existence of these neighboring talk types will play a role for the SJIs themselves, we will argue.

Our corpus of SJIs consists of 12 audio-recorded simulated job interviews, nine of which come from a single municipality (Oldborough). There appear to be two different ways of carrying out the interview and evaluation phases of SJIs: (a) consecutively, first conducting a simulated interview and then evaluating it, as in excerpts 1a and 1b below, and (b) integratively, inserting evaluative utterances into the job interview itself and thus integrating the two talk activities, as in excerpt 4.

3.2. Examples and analyses

How do participants perform and orient themselves to their interactional roles as participants, respectively, in: (a) a job interview, (b) a simulation, and (c) an evaluation, counseling, and learning situation? Do they shift framings between episodes and phases, or is the activity rather enacted as a mixture of several kinds of talk? Is this whole thing one communicative activity, or a mixture of many?

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The whole research project comprises three youth projects in different municipalities in Sweden (cf. Persson Thunqvist, 2001).
3.2.1. Opening an encounter of an ambiguous activity type

In general, the introductory phase of a talk activity usually provides some kind of explicit or implicit definition of the situation. In our corpus, however, the definition is typically equivocal:

(1a) (Temak.V:SAISa:1)\(^8\)

I'M CALLED DIVISION MANAGER, RIGHT? (Municipality of Old- 
borough: M(att), the project participant, a young unemployed man, 
enters the conversation room, where the project leaders S(arah) 
and R(oger) have been for a while. Also present is Dan, the 
researcher, who is supposed to play the role of the union repre- 
sentative at the employing company.

1. S: hej hej [''hallo''] welcome
2. M: ja hej
4. M: → jaha [''oh''] tjenatjena [''hi there'']
5. (3,5)
6. S: mm. ja [''yes''], my name is Sarah Anderson and I am 
managing director here at Alfons. um I think it's 
important this thing with who we employ since we 
are y'know like a big family here (. ) we work a 
lot in teams and, yes and such. and then we have 
your publicity manager here then.
7. R: yes, at your division, yes, where you apply if 
8. → one says so, division head. yes, I am called

\(^8\) The excerpts are given here in English translations of the Swedish originals. Admittedly, translation of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction is a difficult task, and it is impossible to make the transcriptions match the originals at all points. However, we have tried to adapt the translations as closely as possible to the originals, while at the same time approximating a reasonably idiomatic English. A few response particles are also given in Swedish. The originals are available from the authors. Although our observations and results are reported here by reference to the English translations, the analyses were of course carried out on the basis of the original tape-recorded data and the corresponding transcripts.

The transcriptions follow a simplified version of the conventions adopted in Conversation Analysis. Note, however, the following special points:

- THAT (uppercase letters) = emphasis or loud volume
- talk enclosed by these signs is spoken at a faster rate than the surrounding talk,
- talk surrounded by degree signs is said in a low volume,
- * * =talk enclosed by asterisks is said in a laughing voice,
- % % = talk surrounded by these signs is said in English in the original,
- ' ' indicates that the enclosed spoken material is prosodically marked by the speaker as a quote, as someone else's, i.e. the interlocutor's, voice.
- ↑ = a sudden increase in volume and pitch.
division manager, right.

[mm]

yes (xx) precisely, at the publicity division

function as division manager

The first point to attend to is the parties’ use of greetings (given in Swedish here). The two project leaders Sarah and Roger use the rather neutral ‘hej’ (lines 1, 3), which can be used in many situations. For example, it could be used on a daily basis when the project participants (here, Matt) and their tutors (project leaders) meet in the mornings. In (1a), however, Roger marks the formality of the SJII by introducing himself as “Roger” (line 3), although, in fact, he and Matt know each other very well. Matt does not respond to this cue; his “tjena” in line 4 is too intimate for the semi-formal job interview and instead serves to index his acquaintance with Roger. (On the other hand, his “jaha”, which is usually a news receipt token corresponding roughly to English “oh” or “I see”, might be heard as a response to Roger’s self-introduction.) That this greeting exchange is strange can be gleaned from the opening phase of the evaluation talk that takes place after the SJII proper (see excerpt 1b). Here, Roger reciprocates Matt’s informal “tjena” (lines 5–6):

NOW IT’S ROGER WHO’S HERE, THE PROJECT LEADER

(Immediately after the termination of the simulated job interview, Matt enters the same room, again meeting Sarah and Roger.)

1. S: how tired I am (laughs) I’m completely
2. finished.
(M enters the room)
3. R: hej hej, now it’s Roger who’s here. the project
4. leader.
5. M: → jatjena tjena
6. R: → tjena
7. S: now we’ve stepped out of our roles (. ) I think.
8. (laughs) I’ve been the boss all day so I’m
9. awfully tired (laughs) will be nice, it’ll be
10. tough when I get home and take on other roles
11. (laughs)

(parties go on talking about how they felt about role-playing an interview)

Returning to excerpt (1a), we can say that the opening sequence exhibits some uncertainty on the part of participants regarding what is going on in the situation. The
confusion is further sustained when Roger later reveals that he is not certain which role
he is supposed to play in the SJI (lines 13–14). His utterance shows that he is orienting
himself to the role-playing aspect of the activity rather than to the job-interview aspect.
The parties’ awareness of the role-playing aspect is also revealed in the ensuing eval-
uation talk, as evidenced in Sarah’s remark in excerpt (1b) (line 7).

Let us now look at another opening, with a different applicant but with the same
leaders Sarah and Roger:

(2) (TemaK.V:SAI3:1)

I WAS JUST KIDDING

(From the beginning of a simulated job interview with project
leaders Sarah and Roger and participant Dan)

1. S: yeah, usually we always start this way that you
tell us a little about yourself, we are a bit
curious about that. there are many who have
applied and so I want to know a little about
what kind of person you are
2. D: → (laughs) *yea(h)(h)* (.) mm-hm
3. (2.0)
4. D: well, I am twenty-four years old and my name is
5. Dan Andersson and well (.) I guess that’s all
6. → (laughs) *hehe no(h) I(h) wa(h)s ju(h)st
7. kidd(h)ing*
8. (.)
9. 13. D: um (.) I’m fairly good at playing instruments
10. R: → instruments, which then, when you were with us9
11. → you played the guitar, I know
12. D: mm-m
13. R: → coz I recognized him from the center when he came
14. → there and played music then
15. S: mm yeah mm. (.) is it easy for you to teach
16. others?
17. 19. 20.

The introduction to this SJI is also ambiguous with respect to parties’ frame
adherence: here, it is mainly signaled by Dan’s laughter (line 6) and his answer in
lines 8–11, which are also spoken laughingly, indicating that he does not take the
talk seriously as a real job interview.10 Subsequently, Roger also deviates from his

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9 i.e., “were with us at the youth center”.
10 Laughter can function as a method of resolving the clash between contradictory demands or expec-
tations in a situation (cf. Adelswärd, 1989).
role, disclosing that he knows the applicant personally from another environment—the youth center where he has been a social worker (lines 14–18). He communicates this in a remark to Sarah referring to Dan in the third person (line 17), but Sarah only minimally acknowledges this, before returning (line 19) to the job-interview framing which she initiated in lines 1–5.

In other cases, the peculiar ambiguity of the SJI as an activity type is seen in explicit references to it in the introductory sequences, such as in the project leader Chris’s meta-comment in excerpt 3 below (line 10).

(3) (TemaK:V:SAI10:1)

Then we do this as a hypothetical employment Interview

(Municipality of Newborough. Parties: Chris, project leader and work supervisor (Sw. kommunal arbetsvägledare), and Ken, project participant; the very start of the interview)

1. C: → okay then, then we will set off with an
2. interview
3. K: you haven’t got that phone number, > just as well
4. asking right away <
5. C: no I haven’t
(about 15 lines omitted)
6. C: → okay, “fine”
7. (1.0)
8. C: → all right, shall we set off with the interview then
9. K: mm
10. C: you are well prepared. then we do this as a
11. → hypothetical employment interview so it is aimed
12. → at your seeking a job (0.5) in Hotspot let’s say
13. K: mm
14. C: that is with computer animation, obviously. and
15. this is then a a what-can-one-say a small
16. introductory interview then continuing with a
17. little more deep-going, but we start with these
18. most important questions that one will sometime
19. have to face, you have been to an interview
20. before I understand, right <
21. K: yes but that was just a quarter of an hour, see.
22. C: a quarter of an hour, yes
23. K: yeah

(C goes on to talk about different kinds of employment interviews, what questions are usually asked, the importance of being properly dressed, being on time, etc.; about 40 lines omitted)
24. C: if I start then-- (. ) well of course I have, I
25. → say welcome here then
26. K: yeah
27. C: to this prepared interview and then it would be
28. → very interesting that if I put the question then
29. what do you know about us as a company?
30. K: about Hotspot then?
31. C: → we can say that, if I then am sitting in Hotspot’s
32. chair or some other company (. ) but we take that
33. coz you know perhaps something about it
34. K: yeah
35. C: → if I then put the question tell me a bit, what do
36. you know about our company?
37. K: I know that you are into (. ) among other things
38. 3D animation, and virtual reality and and programming,
39. (. ) doing uh animated snippets for various (. )
40. commercial films and (. ) similar things.
41. C: when did you hear about our company for the first
42. time?

(interview goes on within the interview frame)

Note that in excerpt 3, Chris’s meta-comment on starting “a hypothetical
employment interview” (line 11) is preceded by two instances where he refers to
“setting of” with the interview (lines 1 and 8) without using the epithet “hypothetical”.
The following sequence shows that it is rather difficult to get this interview started.
Chris, to some extent in collaboration with Matt, slips out of the frame of
the job interview many times: see, for example, the insertion of “let’s say” in line
12,\(^{11}\) and of “I say welcome” in line 25, as a kind of half-descriptive meta-comment
instead of a straight-forward performative welcome. Moreover, this line is preceded
by a spate of advice-giving (after line 23, not shown here), which is inserted before
the interview has actually started. Later, Chris goes on to make several ambiguous
ttempts to start the interview (lines 28, 31 and 35), and it is not until line 41 that he
formulates his first substantial question within a clear job-interview frame.

The ambiguity of the activity context is thus shown right at the beginning of the
SJJIs. Our data show, however, that the same applies to subsequent parts of the SJJIs,
although the means for cuing the frames may be a bit different there. Let us now
move on to some examples of this.

3.2.2. Shifting frames within the core of the interview

As we pointed out earlier (Section 3.1), there are interviews in our corpus, such as
SJI #5a, which stay, with some exceptions, well within the job interview frame.
These interviews are then typically followed by a separate evaluation session (see

\(^{11}\) In a real job interview, the employer would undoubtedly know the name of his own company.
excerpts 1a, 1b). We could characterize such interviews as instances of *sequential interdiscursivity*, in Fairclough's (1992) terms. Many SJIs, however, contain frame shifts and frame ambiguities throughout and correspond to Fairclough’s notion of *merged interdiscursivity*. In excerpt (4), for example, the parties are well into the interview:

(4)  (TemK:V:SAI10:5)

**WEAKNESS**

(Participants the same as in excerpt (3); about 15 min into the conversation; K has repeated several times that if he thinks he is right, he will insist on his opinion, also if he meets with objections from his work-mates and superordinates)

1. K:  if it’s (1.5) *how should one put it* (3.0) if it
2. seems that they are just so-to-say playing with
3. me, tossing me here and there an’ so on (. ) I can’t
4. stand such [coz I don’t like people handling me
5. C:  
6. K:  like a glove so-to-say
7. C:  [so it’s for thi-
8. K:  [yeah it’s for this reason
9. C:  
10. K:  it’s for this reason that I talk back to them so
11. they will understand that they cannot do that (. )
12. to me
13. C:  but on the [oth—it can of course be interpreted
14. K:  [(xxx) they can show a bit of respect
15. for people so-to-say
16. C:  yeah yeah. (. ) but perhaps you don’t have that
17. much to play with on the other hand the first time
18. or right in the beginning of an appointment but
19. there it is very much about keeping out of the way
20. and about seeing how the land lies for this can be
21. just a way for them to test you
22. (. )
23. K:  
24. C:  quite simply and there it’s a matter of thinking
25. tactically, one accepts it for a while until YOU
26. get THEIR respect.
27. (. )
28. C:  for you won’t get THAT (. ) until you really show
29. them what you can do
30. K:  yes
31. C: and this is a terribly easy way to throw you off
32. your balance. (. ) if directly if they discover
33. that you think in this way, that don’t boss me
34. around coz I’ll get angry. (. ) then they have
35. found precisely a weak spot that you don’t want to
36. demonstrate. (. ) it it like %everybody got a rock% 
37. as we say, right; (. ) and this weakness you must
38. not demonstrate that fast but that you must
39. somehow hold back or camouflage (. ) coz it’s a
40. weakness that you’ve got that can be difficult
41. to avoid when it has happened on one occasion.
42. K: yes
43. C: → an’ that is something to think about a little
44. extra.

(15 lines omitted; more talk on how K should conceal his ‘‘weak-
ness’’)

60. (2.5)
61. C: → now we have left the interview a bit, but this was
62. a bit of pep talk coming in instead, right; (laughs)
63. [*it’s just that—* (. ) for one doesn’t sit after all
64. K: he he he
65. C: all go—going polemic on an interview
66. K: |no no
67. C: |but when you, that is to say, this is why, I
68. could have said it later but you took it up now
69. you should beware a little for [um it’s just a
70. K: |yeah
71. C: pure follow-up that you must, in an interview you
72. must not be so honest in the beginning but put the
73. lid on a little bit and think carefully >coz these
74. questions I’m asking, I try to get you started a
75. a bit an’ so I got you now—when we got into this
76. topic
77. K: yes
78. C: → so there we have lesson number one for today then.
79. (0.5)
80. C: → let’s move on then, now we are back in the
81. interview then. then my question is, (. ) you have
82. mentioned one weak side and that is that you are
83. fairly impatient
84. K: yes
85. C: obviously. do you have any other weak sides;
86. C: → and now I wanna intervene an’ say directly here,
87. try now to turn (. ) what’s negative into
88. something positive
89. (2.0)
90. C: try to circumvent the problem now.
91. (0.5)
92. C: okay, your weak sides;
93. K: um (3.0) well, when one is to recall them then
94. one doesn’t find any quite obviously.

In excerpt (4), we find the project leader Chris beginning to glide away from the interview frame, starting at about line 16ff. That frame has been left behind at least by lines 37-38, and the frame shift is retrospectively recognized in line 61. Note that Chris’s laughter (line 62) may be interpreted as a way of resolving the frame clash (see excerpt (2) above). Chris also makes several meta-comments that seem to belong to a teaching or coaching frame, for example, “that is something to think about” (line 43) and “there we have lesson number one” (line 77). He retrospectively constructs the prior talk as educative in nature. Equally explicit is his proactive meta-statement “now we are back in the interview” (line 79), which is followed by a return to the interview frame. However, before the young simulated applicant has thought up an answer, Chris intervenes again, this time after only a two-second lapse, with a modalized performative—“and now I wanna intervene” (line 86)—followed by a piece of advice that once more breaks the interview frame. The advice-giving episode is marked as terminated in line 92, where Chris uses the resumption marker “okay” as a preface to repeating his question about “weak sides”.

Other examples of parties moving in and out of framings can be seen in excerpt (5):

(TemaK.V:SAI10:7)

I WENT COMPLETELY BLANK

Participants the same as in excerpts (3) and (4)

1. C: (…) so then I must put the question why we should employ you?
2. (4.0)
3. K: “now I went completely blank”
4. C: → take a rhetorical pause of one minute. FOR THE MINUTES; I will take one pinch of number one
5. (8.0)
6. C: that question you must think about
7. 12 “Number one” is a brand of snuff.
K: "now I am completely blank in my head," I can't recall anything.

C: but think of it, your personality (.) think of that. bring up everything but bring up that thing with the archery again, take that thing that you are full of initiative, […]

(C goes on suggesting positive things that K could bring up; 14 lines omitted)

C: that's the way you must think, now I must just have a pinch of number one. think for one more minute

K: (9.0)

C: is the technically responsible person gonna have one more pinch of snuff?

D: already done he he

C: → it goes well, I think

K: nja:

C: jo. what do you think? (to D)

D: well, I think it's exciting, you know

C: yes

K: I am completely blank in my head (.) that's the thing

C: mm

K: it stays here and doesn't come out here

C: → no but that's what we should practice now (.) that's why we are doing like this. this is about just letting the water run on (0.5) verbally (.) a lot of verbal %bullshit% but you see, some times you must (.) like accepting the rules of the game and here it's about talking coz here it's about a job. and the thing is if we say like this now that you have no other income (.) at all an' your chances are that you get this job, when you are exposed then you behave in a different way when you are str-pressed an' pressed coz you are gonna fix something, then you DO it.

(C draws an analogy with a Swedish down-hill skiing star, Anja Pärson, who was at her best when she most needed it, i.e. in the world championships; 17 lines omitted)

C: → that is the parallel I wanna draw only that one should think (.) that way. it's now or never and
76. this is after all true of your whole life.
77. (0.3)
78. K: yeah
79. C: it is NOW or NEVER and it's this second which is
80. the most important in my life (. . . ) if you think in
81. that way instead [think this way not a devil must
82. ] (yeah
83. K: rap me over the knuckles
84. (5.0)
85. C: it can be quite good to pep oneself up with this
86. (8.0)
87. C: well, once again then
88. (5.0)
89. C: yes, why after all should we employ you taking
90. into consideration that you lack (. . . ) certain (. .
91. ) you lack relevant education within this field, you
92. you lack working life experience (. . . ) you have some
93. practice that you yourself (. . . ) have been behind to
94. some extent (. . . ) you have taught yourself, but we
95. invest a good deal of money in you (. . . ) so are you
96. really the right person for us to bet on, an’
97. WHY should we employ you, what kind of unique
98. competence do you have, is there anything we are
99. looking for that we have missed maybe?
100. (5.0)
101. K: I go blank in my head again, I don’t rem-. it
102. makes no difference even if you said it, I forget
103. it right away
104. C: well then we do like this, we take that question
105. later, then you may go on (. . . ) in that case (. . . ) for
106. that question
107. K: this is this is what I hate coz if I get pressed,
108. >blank in my head, I don’t recall anything,
109. know nothing<

(C goes on suggesting things for K to bring up)

This excerpt begins with a virtual time-out when the project leader advises the applicant to take a “rhetorical pause” (line 5: Sw. konstpause), i.e., a planned pause. This transition point occurs right after Ken’s resigned “now I went completely blank” (line 4: Sw. helt nollad, literally “completely zeroed”), an utterance which can in itself be heard as breaking away from the interview. Chris starts giving advice and information from line 11 onwards, but later, there is a time-out from this activity too, when Chris, on line 29, repeats his need for a pinch of snuff. This episode leads up to the clear meta-comment “it goes well” (line 36), referring to the main activity
from which participants are taking a time-out. There follows some external evaluation of the ongoing exercise, and then more advice beginning at line 45. Drawing an analogy to a female skiing champion’s achievements (omitted from the excerpt), Chris acts here like a sports coach, a role he has in fact had in real life. Only in line 87 does Chris finally come back to the job interview frame; the question he asks (line 89) is a follow-up to the question asked in line 1. The utterance marking the transition point (line 87) is cued both prosodically (by increased volume and pitch) and lexically (by a Swedish counterpart of the discourse marker “well”), and occurs after a long pause. In what follows, seemingly within the job-interview frame, Chris gives a pretty murky picture of Ken’s capabilities and competence, which results, in line 101, in Ken’s once again admitting having “gone blank”. This utterance is, as we noted earlier (see line 4), ambiguous with respect to framing. What follows (lines 104ff) seems again to break the job-interview frame, and Chris later proceeds to more advice-giving (not shown here).

3.2.3. Simulation and counseling
Examples like those above amply display the intrinsic complexity of the hypothetical job interview. Numerous sequences (many of which are not shown here) are reminiscent of situations in which the project leader, rather than playing the part of a representative of a firm or any other kind of employer, acts out the role of a social worker advising or admonishing a young person. While trying to emulate a real job interview, the project leader is at the same time involved in counseling by supporting and encouraging participants in their long-term goals of seeking jobs. There are comments on both the young person’s conduct at the hypothetical work-place and on his self-presentation in the interview. The project leader is both involved in a polemic discussion in the interview, and in commenting on the exchange from outside (from an external framing, or an outer layer in Clark’s (1996) terms). Who is asking questions, Chris the employer or Chris the counselor?:

(6) (TemaK:V:SA110:10)
I DIDN’T NEED IT

(Participants the same as in excerpts (3), (4), and (5))

1. C: work and work practice, have you had any any job
2. that has that means that you’ve had a steady
3. income
4. K: no:
5. C: you haven’t
6. K: I haven’t
7. C: have you had any any form of work practice
8. (1.0)
9. C: in your life
10. K: no
11. (5.0)
12. C: not any summer work practice or anything,
14. (4.0)
15. C: okay, what’s the reason for that?
16. K: I didn’t need it plus that I (.) mm can like get
17. a summer job, yes (xxx)
18. C: insert insert insert ‘‘I did not need it’’
19. K: mm
20. C: not GOOD to say. NOT good to say
21. K: nähä (‘‘no, really?’’)
22. (4.0) "
23. C: everybody needs it for just what I asked
24. questions about (.) experience an’ work practice
25. an’ such (.) then you must walk around and say
26. that you on your own have supplied yourself with
27. some knowledge about things but not that you don’t
28. need it coz everybody needs it
29. K: a summer job you need if you need the money
30. C: yeah, precisely, it’s okay that you didn’t need
31. but you can still say
32. K: >that’s the thing, that’s why I said that I didn’t
33. need it< (.) so then I was honest
34. C: ja (‘‘yes’’) precisely, Jo (‘‘yes’’) precisely,
35. certainly you were honest but you have to think a
36. bit how honest one can be. what I mean that I
37. don’t need, that can sound awfully negative
38. sometimes. (.) you can’t try it, it’s good to be
39. honest but not super-honest.

In excerpt (6), lines 18 and 20 are pronounced by Chris in an emphatic, staccato style, which implies an explicit initiation of a change of footing. This seems to result from a clash between the general maxim “be honest” and a more specific rule for the job interview “be tactical” (“don’t be super-honest”). The dilemma, we will argue below, is internal to the job-interview frame. In fact, just a few minutes before this excerpt, Chris has advised Ken to be honest “on economical matters”, which explains Ken’s justification “so then I was honest” on line 33. At the same time, the incident might be interpreted as resulting from a conflict between an everyday understanding (“a summer job you need if you need the money”, as Ken says in line 29) and a norm that employers are assumed to hold (“everybody needs it, [...] experience and work practice”, as Chris says in lines 23–24).

The previous example shows a conflict between frames or knowledge bases that may be inherent in any normal job interview independently of the simulation aspect.
A job interview is, we must realize, often an encounter between parties with divergent outlooks on the world. A similar conflict is exemplified in excerpt (7):

(7)  (TemaK:V:SA15a:4)

BABBING

{Participants the same as in excerpt (1)}

1. S:  (... how do you function? do you talk a lot in groups or--)
2. M:  no I guess I am more goal-directed then on (. .) on what we should do
3. S:  =mm. (. .) okay.
4. R:  so you are more >if I understand you correctly then <this thing with the group, you don’t like
5.  → hanging around (. .) babbling at the coffee-table, (you want to get out to work, that is, sit by
6. S:  ["hh he"
7. R:  the machine working?
8. M:  yes you do one thing or the other [(you should try
9. S:  [yeah yeah
10. M:  that I think)
11. (. .)
12. M:  "yeah so that you"
13. S:  you want to have a goal all the time with what
14. R:  (you’re doing
15. M:  [exactly
16. (about 18 lines omitted)
17. S:  but babbling can-, BABBling for example, there can
18. be a goal in that too, that it - only being, only
19. talking, there can be (. .) a purpose in that too.
20. R:  yes, we think that it’s awfully important that we
21. shut off. that we leave the job, bring the coffee
22. cup from the computer and we go out here for a
23. while to break off (. .) and then we can talk shop
24. there after all but again one gets away from one’s
25. S:  mm. okay, but you are perhaps more of a listener
26. M:  than a talker if I understood it correctly. yes
27. R:  a bit of both things perhaps (laughs)
28. M:  that’s both things I guess.

Here, the applicant Matt states that he is “goal-directed” (line 3) in carrying out his work tasks, an attitude which has most probably been praised within the youth project. But here, the two project leaders express another preference: they think that
"hanging around babbling at the coffee-table" (Sw. sitta å gagg) (lines 8, 38ff) is a laudable goal too. This again tells us something about ambiguities and contradictions involved in being 'a good employee' that might surface in real as well as in simulated job interviews, possibly causing confusion on the part of the young applicants.

4. Ambiguities and hybridities at four levels of the simulated job interview

As Engestrom (2000: 156) says, it may be "fruitful to think of the object of an activity as internally contradictory". We seem to be faced with at least four dimensions of ambiguities and hybridities in our simulated job interviews. Many activity types and activity roles in social life are subject to renegotiation and struggle, but an activity type like the simulated job interview seems to involve extra complexities.

First, a common feature of the activities analyzed here is that they are supposed to be educational. The young people are supposed to become better prepared to face a real job interview in the future. Therefore, the activity context involves simulating and rehearsing, as well as meta-talk seeking and giving information about the activity itself, and evaluating and reviewing of the applicants' achievements.

Now, learning is potentially everywhere. There are plenty of situations in the social world in which participants build a communicative activity together, although some of the participants are not fully competent in, or knowledgeable about, purposes and proper conduct. Therefore, some scaffolding in the form of meta-talk may be needed in order for progress to be made. It is sometimes a normal and integrated feature of communicative activities that they involve instructions from one participant to the other(s) about how to behave.

At the same time, our SJIs and normal job interviews are quite different from each other. In the real job interview, the interviewer asks agenda questions and contingently related responsive follow-up questions (Adelswärd, 1988). It is also a kind of test or gate-keeping situation: can the candidate provide the right answers? In other words, the interviewer: (a) asks questions about the applicant and his/her suitability for the job, (b) takes up the interviewee's answers by registering the information given, usually with some comments and evaluations (it's not a trial, after all), sometimes allowing a certain amount of deviation from the subject matter, and (c) follows up on the applicant's answers with contingently related questions about the subject matter.

Our SJIs, especially those of the mixed type [see excerpts (3)-(6)], are different from this. They include a simulated core activity, plus time-out activities and other utterances which are compatible both with the simulated interview and with the external frame or outer layer. One is reminded here of the time-out in a basketball game or in a rehearsal of a theater play or a piece of music. In SJIs, there are questions and answers in a job interview in real time, but there are also sequences of
time-outs from this interaction focused on: (a) guiding the interview (e.g., “now we take that question”), implying “now we rehearse the episode focused on that question”), as well as with (b) teaching proper behavior (i.e., counseling, education), and (c) therapy and personal growth talk (usually of an encouraging kind). Especially in SJIs of the mixed type, the interviewer’s role involves commenting on and evaluating the interviewee’s answers and responses, and giving advice about what (not) to say. All this confounds the test character of the job interview.

To summarize this first point, our data display some of the complexities and dilemmas of real job interviews. SJ interviewees need to be able to present themselves positively as well-suited or ideal candidates without exaggerating, boasting, or lying (Adelswärd, 1988). They must be authentic and at the same time convincing, and must be honest but at the same time tactically aware, and be able to avoid focusing attention on their own weak spots. As Chris says in excerpt (6), they should “be honest but not super-honest.” They must also be aware of potentially conflicting expectations on the part of prospective employers regarding the desirable personal qualities and competences of ‘good employees’ (e.g., possible differences in the relative importance of technical professionalism as opposed to social competence [cf. excerpt (7)]. Also, the emphasis on talk may seem strange for some applicants [see the reference to “a lot of verbal bullshit” in excerpt (5), line 48]), and can generate a good deal of unclarity and ambiguity.

The second point concerns the relationship between the job interview and its framing role-play, and as a consequence of this, the relationships between the participants. As both a simulated employer and a project leader (tutor, counselor), the interviewer acts out the roles of the employer and of the director staging the interview and evaluating the conduct of the young person. The young person, on the other hand, is both an interviewee in the job interview and a participant in the youth project. As a result, the activity comes out as a job interview plus metacommunicative activities (assessing, reviewing, advising, educating). In the consecutive SJI format, the interview is enacted as if it were serious during its performance, but is sometimes commented upon afterwards as if it were “mere improvisation”. For example, in the talk following excerpt (1b) (not shown here), the project leader Roger asks the applicant Matt to evaluate his (Roger’s) and Sarah’s role-playing performances.

The previous point was mainly about enacting a job interview and learning how to behave in this situation. But there are other ambiguities. We have to consider the relationship between the job interview frame and the youth project as a whole. For example, project leaders may criticize a young person’s behavior in an interview, and yet - despite various deficiencies and shortcomings—encourage him or her within the larger project frame; it is important that participants in such a project do not fail completely. The multiple roles of project leaders in a youth project include those of administrators, educators, work consultants (or counselors), social workers, etc. Youth projects are aimed at educating the participants and trying to change their attitudes, motivation, knowledge, social competence, etc.; and some of their constituent parts are rather school-like (lectures etc.). Related to this is the interdiscursivity with other talk activities beyond or bordering on the youth project, such
as employment agency talks, social welfare talks, adult education, etc. (see Fig. 1). So within a world of such diverse social practices, how are we to understand all this? What is this thing that we are witnessing: school, work, social rehabilitation, or something else?

Finally, there are the relationships between the youth project, its social environment, and the participant's entire life situation. In culture and society, there are long sociocultural traditions associated with the moral value of work, and work as a moral societal duty (cf. Mäkitalo, 2002). But what does 'work' stand for in the particular environment of the youth project? Participation in the project is designed to be work-like (participants get pay and must be present during 'working hours') and the project is intended to prepare the participants for 'real' work. But even for the leaders, work within the youth project is often a short-term job, and some of them are or have been unemployed themselves (this experience, in fact, being a qualification for being hired to work in the project). Paradoxically, the young people don't have jobs (which is the reason why the projects are organized to begin with), but the projects themselves are sometimes depicted as a form of employment.

This points to the ambiguities involved in regarding "unemployment as work": activities for the unemployed are conceived of as work, but the work itself is organized in terms of temporary projects rather than permanent jobs. This results in what has been called the "permanence of temporary jobs" (Gonäs, 1989), which seems to be increasingly characteristic of the "new economy" (Sennett, 1998).

So, what is going on in a simulated job interview (SJI)? Is it a kind of job interview? If it is not an authentic interview, is it then a simulated one perhaps rehearsing for a real one? We found that the SJIs we studied are so complex that they cannot be thought of as simulations or role-play "tout court." This was also Auer's (1998) finding about role-play interviews designed to prepare East German applicants for the West German labor market; but still, the hybridities noted in this earlier study do not quite seem to match the complexity of our data. We found ambiguities of discourse, hybridities of activity, and tensions between competing tendencies at many levels. These seem to result from various communicative dilemmas (Adelswärd, 1988: 165).

Parties have to navigate between two extremes at the four levels:

(a) in promoting themselves in the job interviews, the interviewees must be both honest and tactically clever;
(b) all participants must engage themselves in a realistic job interview while at the same time using this activity as an opportunity for learning and teaching;
(c) although the job interview itself is staged as a special and demarcated event, it is seen as part of a larger, integrated enterprise aimed at preparing young people for the external labor market;\(^{14}\)
(d) the development project is taken seriously as a kind of work, but there is an underlying realization that it is organized precisely because the young people have thus far been excluded from the labor market.

\(^{14}\) One may compare this to, for example, the relationship between the specific activity type and the whole health care system (Engestrom, 2000: 156).
5. Conclusions: developing the notion of 'activity context'

Activity type is an absolutely central notion in discourse theory. Indeed, it can be seen as a meso-level concept providing a link between the micro- and macro-levels of sociological description, thus working against micro-macro dualism (cf. Laidler, 1994). Activity types in institutional environments are in themselves interactional institutions, or different kinds of 'talk cultures'.

The activities in the youth project are particularly interesting in that they represent institutions in statu nascendi. Comparatively much of the youth project itself lives only in and through interaction; if the interactions were terminated and abandoned, the institutions of the project as a whole would cease to exist. This is different from the situation in a court trial, for example, or in a social welfare agency interview, where talk is also central. Court trial talk and social welfare talk are strongly supported by a material environment in which the functions of the institutions involved are inscribed, a written environment of regulatory documents, laws, precedent cases, etc., and a professional environment with clear responsibilities, educational prerequisites, ethics, etc. In the innovative and unconventional youth project under study, there is relatively little of this institutional environmental contextual support (built, written, professional), and participants must borrow resources from other neighboring activity types.

The data analyzed in this article suggest the need for a dynamic concept of frame—a concept of 'framing' rather than of 'frame' (MacLachlan and Reid, 1994). With reference to concepts like multiple framing (Schutz, 1962; Goffman, 1974; Tannen and Wallat, 1993) and Clark's (1996) layering, we can say that participants in our study find themselves engaged in activities that are partly structured in terms of frames-within-frames. The participants move into and out of different framings.

Moves into and out of framings can take different forms. While some sequences may belong to, or be compatible with, frame A, for example, others may be compatible only with frame B. In such cases, transitions are often abrupt and discursively marked [one may think here of Gumperz’s (1982) 'contextualization cues']. In addition, some sequences may be intrinsically ambiguous—that is, potentially simultaneously compatible with both frames A and B (or even with additional frames). Sequences of two types may also interact, with talk sometimes drifting away from its original frame A into a mixture of frames A and B, then perhaps ending in frame B. When this happens, there may be a clear juncture, often marked meta-discursively, as in excerpt (4), lines 61 and 86. Accordingly, orientations to activity types (footings) may shift or glide from one to another in ways previously attributed to topics. This corroborates the theory that topics, episodes, and activities tend to interpenetrate (Linell, 1998a), and that orientation to an activity type is both turn-generated and dependent on pre-existing expectations.

Actors build their utterances to fit a specific activity context, or to fit several such contexts at the same time, and they enact role identities associated with these activities. (In the analysis of hybrid activities, identifying multiple framings could perhaps enable us to look at well-known activities such as police interrogations with new eyes, seeing them, for example, also as forms of therapy or social education.)
Activities and role identities are influenced by neighboring activity types of two kinds: first, by activity types that are similar in some sense, so that actors can borrow from them; second, by activity types that are biographically near-at-hand because of actors’ particular experiences, or (more interestingly, perhaps) because of different actors’ common experiences. These form the bases of hybrid activities.

The study of complex activities such as our SJIs casts doubt on assumptions that ascribe fixed situational definitions and activity roles to what we do in, and across, situations. But it may also raise some problems for orthodox CA theory and methodology in which the researcher preferably deals with just the talk-in-interaction data from one particular data corpus at a time. Can one analyze the different talks in the youth projects (dialogues or polylogues) as if the activities involved constitute a single type of talk exchange, or as if they occur autonomously from surrounding types of talk? Our contention is that they should be analyzed in the context of surrounding activity types. One must explore the whole ecology of the communicative activities. A corollary of this seems to be that activity types are not entirely endogenous to observed behaviors. However, even if some contextual resources are (in at least one significant sense) exogenous, with a pregiven sociogenesis, we still argue, in agreement with interactionist and CA theories, that they must be thought of as being dynamically and dialogically (re)appropriated and (re)accomplished in situ (cf. Mäkitalo and Säljö, 2002).

References


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