

---

This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.  
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

## Constructing group membership through talk in the field

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://rowman.com/>

PUBLISHER

© Rowman and Littlefield

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Robles, Jessica. 2019. "Constructing Group Membership Through Talk in the Field". figshare.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/21095>.

## **Chapter Seven: Constructing Group Membership through Talk in the Field**

Jessica Robles, Loughborough University

In our day-to-day lives, we position ourselves in relation to groups of others: we contribute to collaborative projects at work, we root for our favorite sports teams, call our fizzy drinks “soda” or “pop”, and spend more time with certain people than others. Through our communicative contexts and choices we form identifications and memberships, relating with others in constellations that shift, grow, reconfigure and disintegrate over time. Discursive strategies simultaneously seek to produce an authentic valued group identity and build up the sense that the group is, indeed, “a group”—a real, enduring collective with significant meaning for members.

Talk is one of the main ways in which people communicate group identity. This chapter considers how discourse is used to manage group membership in talk to and about others, in research subjects’ and researchers’ communicative practice. A central case study uses examples of transcribed audio-recordings to examine details of discourse that show how participants construct group membership moment-to-moment in interaction. Drawing on experience in discourse analytic research and ethnographically-informed case studies, the chapter discusses a social constructionist perspective on groups, considers methodological contingencies, and focuses on participating in group research, indexing cultural and group identities, and the acts and ethics of membering.

Discourse researchers do not always count themselves among the research participants, especially when operating as outsiders to the community under study. Most discourse analysts use video recordings to separate themselves from the participants in the data, and conversation analysts actively try to remove any analysis that is too rooted in their own perspective. However,

anyone who studies discourse—not just those who combine it with ethnography—can benefit from explicating their relation to their data, rather than taking the stance that none exists. Paying attention to the specifics of language use that indicate one’s orientation to a community can yield insights not just into the community itself, but also the researcher’s place in it.

### **The Social Construction of Groups**

A social construction approach views groups as an ongoing accomplishment. “Grouping” is a common way of seeing the world and distinguishing groups is an easy task for most natives most of the time. Social construction problematizes group identity. It assumes that groups are not inherently identifiable, though a group may feel “natural” to insiders or “look like a group” to outsiders. To examine groups as socially constructed is to explore how groups are continuously performed into being, and through what communicative processes people initiate, negotiate, maintain and dissolve memberships (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Because groups are performed moment-to-moment, what counts as a group can change moment-to-moment. This is not because the members of a group change *per se*, but because how people act and talk changes, causing prior groups to regroup and boundaries that seemed clear to become fuzzy or even vanish. Though sometimes people may associate with sports teams, their religion, or their nationality, these groups are not always equally relevant at all times—and who counts as a member (as well as how central or peripheral a member they are) may also shift. By focusing on how groups are accomplished in people’s talk, a social construction approach to groups places the “existence” of a group in the empirically-investigable domain of social interaction.

Thus, a primary assumption of this approach is that the idea of “a group” is not obvious or available a priori, but a question which itself must be interrogated and empirically grounded.

Based on this starting point, qualitative methods are employed to examine closely and over time how groups come into being and evolve. Ethnographic research involving participant observations comprises an important way in which researchers see groups “in action” as they emerge and can empirically examine how individuals participate in those groups so as to bring them into being. Interviews may be used to ask members about their personal experiences with groups—for example, how they entered groups, how they knew they were members, how they communicate their membership to others, whether they see themselves as central or peripheral members, what roles and rules exist, and so forth. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

In these instances the researcher’s experience with the group will depend in large part on their own identification with the group. A researcher with a preexisting relationship to the group will have unique advantages in terms of insider insights, but potentially disadvantages for the same reason that group members’ own understandings of their group identity may be tacit and therefore harder to elicit. For example, in one group I researched, my status in relation to the group was somewhat liminal. On one hand, I had been friends with them since I was in high school. By the time I was actually conducting the research as a graduate student, I’d known most of them for several years. We lived in the same suburb, went to the same high school, listened to the same music, and watched the same movies. We were different from other people who were our age in the town, too: we weren’t into sports, didn’t play in the school band, weren’t religious, and hated the mall. We were friends and so we spent a lot of time together. We had the same set of slang, a history of shared experiences, and a set of locations in town that were meaningful to us.

On the other hand, my membership in the group was *always* somewhat provisional. Firstly, I was not born in the town, so I hadn’t grown up with them from childhood. Secondly, I

didn't live in their "part of town," which was associated with a lower socioeconomic lifestyle. Thirdly, and relatedly, I did not share many of their values, which eschewed education and saw work as a means for financial security and leisure rather than a goal of its own. Fourthly, I was a woman. This group was primarily composed of a core of male friends. Women were always peripheral and entered the group *through* male members. Any woman in the group who did not have a direct attachment was assumed to be a romantic interest (or available to romantic interests) of one of the current (male) members.

All of these aspects placed me on the fringes. In some ways this actually made it easier for me as a researcher, since my position had always been somewhat of an outsider. I had enough background with the groups and the culture to understand where many of them were coming from, but enough difference to see what was distinctive in their practices and norms. Regardless of the researcher's position in relation to the group, however, the researcher is in a unique position by virtue of acting "as a researcher" of the group. The researcher is positioned (Wetherell, 1998) by their identity in the context. In some institutional groups having someone "official" making records may not be very strange. But for most ordinary groups in which people participate in their everyday lives, research practices are not a part of their experiences and this fact will pose interesting challenges for the researcher.

This definitely had an effect in my work. In the group I just described, my status as a researcher had to be carefully negotiated. The group, which had countercultural ideals and engaged in some activities that were morally dubious and sometimes even criminal, was wary of anything that seemed like "surveillance." I broached the topic through my closest friend in the group, then had to discuss similar points many times over with multiple members, multiple times over the years, to gain or renegotiate consent. Maintaining an ethical consent process, therefore,

involved, for example, observing or only recording audio most of the time; providing participants the opportunity to erase or select what could be analyzed; shielding identities in video; and otherwise taking great care with anonymity. Additionally, at their request, I had to be unobtrusive in my research activities. They preferred not to know when I was actively taking notes, and that I record subtly and “randomly” rather than set up and “stage” a recording situation. This resulted in data that was in many ways partial, fragmented, or otherwise not ideal.

However, there were interesting benefits to these demands. In many ways, by allowing the group themselves to control the data in these ways, I felt I was obtaining a more interesting portrait of how they saw themselves. The methods of data collection seemed to reflect the everyday phenomenology of the group itself, in which members lived very much moment-to-moment and drew on multiple, fleeting meanings to make sense of each other and themselves. Furthermore, I found that despite their initial caution, over time most group members grew incredibly open and were more and more accepting of the research dimension of my interactions with them. In interviews, many of them had found a way to frame my project as a way to present “their side” of a cultural story in which they viewed themselves as social outsiders, marginalized and misunderstood.

### **Discourse Analyses of Groups**

Language and Social Interaction (LSI) is an area of communication research (overlapping with sociology, anthropology and linguistics, among others) that takes a social constructionist approach to groups while tying that explicitly to language practices and everyday encounters (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy & Haspel, 2004). Discourse analysis, as the primary method of LSI (including for example conversation analysis: Schegloff, 2007; ethnography of communication: Carbaugh, 2007; and critical discourse analysis: Ehrlich & Romaniuk, 2014),

seeks to ground analyses of interaction in situated instances of language use. This sort of analysis focuses mainly on transcribed examples of naturally-occurring conversation. A discourse analytic approach to group identity would be interested in the specific elements of language use that indicate group membership, for example, particular jargon or sociolects and how their competent deployment constructs membership (Tracy & Robles, 2013).

Therefore, while interviewing participants about their language use provides a *report* of members' communicative practices, transcribed recordings (of ordinary interaction or interviews) allows a *demonstration* of those practices. Taken together alongside observations, which can tap into the researcher's own interpretive mechanisms, this trifecta of qualitative methods gives different angles on interpreting what makes a group a group. By examining talk in the field based on observed interactions and recorded conversations, the researcher obtains a series of empirical snapshots of the life of a group. Indeed, much early research in the LSI sociocultural tradition started with ethnographies of groups, from Goffman's examination of asylums and Garfinkel's interrogations of organizational work, to Sacks' analyses of hotrodder talk and Philipsen's investigation of working class men in Chicago. In the next section I take up some of the key concepts explicated by some of this early LSI group research and how my own field experiences have made use of them.

### **Participation and Membership**

Goffman (e.g., 1961) examined groups somewhat explicitly in several of his ethnographic studies. Perhaps for this reason, his conceptual contributions to communication research are deeply relevant to groups even if his applications were mainly the "syntax" of situations. For my own work his ideas of framing, participation, and footing have been most relevant. Bateson proposed the idea of frame as a way in which people define and understand a particular set of

messages. Goffman (1974) borrowed the term and developed it to refer to a particular definition of the situation, a way of viewing and organizing a scene, in which many layers of meaning interact. Subsequent researchers have suggested that one way of seeing culture is that it is a particular way of framing (Agar, 1994; Streeck, 2002). Thus, it seems one way to examine what defines a “group” is that they share frames--how they frame themselves as a group, how they frame themselves in relation to others, how they frame their approach to different setting and situations, and so forth. For example, in an analysis of how people with HIV discussed their health, I discovered that during interviews I seemed to frame interviewees’ talk as based in medical processes rather than personal experience based on my membership in the research group, while focus group interactants framed their responses as “answers for researchers” more often than “turns in a discussion” (Tracy & Robles, 2010; c.f. Ho & Robles, 2011; Robles & Ho, 2014).

Goffman’s (1981) concept of a “participation framework” is also relevant. Like framing, he applied it to how people interact in a moment to organize their behavior in accordance to particular situations and, specifically, in relation to one another. Participation framework focuses, less on the process and components of interpreting situations, and more on the specific organization of participants in relation to each other and the interaction. A building up of stable participation frameworks over time could certainly constitute a group, as Goffman’s analyses of teams (1967) suggest the idea of “participation” itself can provide useful insight into the ways in which group memberships are multiple and negotiated. One can participate in both their work groups and religious groups, for example, or participate weakly as teammates in their local soccer club while serving as core members of an activist collective. These participations can change over time, as well as be downplayed or emphasized moment to moment (Robles, 2012b).



This latter point relates to Goffman's (1981) notion of footing, or shifting one's stance toward their situation, self, and others. This emphasizes the idea that participation is a performance done for others, and not merely an expression of a stable internal identity. Indeed, identity is really more of a process of identification in this perspective, in which participants perform membership in a group through their practices. For example, as a graduate student I studied my university's philosophy department and found that there were some recurrent practices that made the faculty and graduate students clearly members of this department. This included some obvious ones (official titles, space occupied in a certain building), some which differentiated core from peripheral members (attending regular colloquia, citing certain theorists), and some less obvious norms (such as a shared orientation to certain philosophical argumentative ideals).

Shared practices may refer to a particular habitus or common disposition (Bourdieu, 1977). By doing things the same way in a recurrent, largely unreflective manner, members communicate the depth of their entrenchment in a group and the extent to which they are "typical" or "native" members who find their group membership to be natural and unremarkable. This referential quality of practice can be grounded in Garfinkel's (1967) idea of indexicality (c.f. Duranti, 1992), or indexical expressions. These are unstated background assumptions hidden beneath the explicit talk that point to elements of shared context. Part of what makes a group seem to "cohere" is that they have a shared background that provides a common understanding of meaning in situations that permits the unproblematic accomplishment of ordinary practical actions (Robles, 2012b). I found indexical expressions to be one of the most perplexing in my studies of groups. In a recent analysis I looked at examples of crossing: a practice in which people speak in the style of a group of which they are not generally recognized as a member. This work allowed me to see, in action, how individuals subtly differentiate from and associate

with other groups. I discovered that there are assumptions about how members perform as cultural others based on a shared understanding of their own group as contrastable to those others.

For example, consider that U.S. American's imitations of Scottish and Irish dialects assume a similarity between them while their imitations of British English could be categorized as "received pronunciation" or "cockney." On the other hand, a British person would be able to far more subtly and accurately mimic Scottish and Irish dialects and a variety of other local accents as well. For Americans, a faraway accent can be vague and may require local markers to cue its locality (such as making references to Lucky Charms in producing an Irish-ish accent), while British speakers require a far finer and more accurate production of dialect. Speakers' success in such productions would be a measure of their local knowledge and, therefore, their local membership.

Sacks' (1992) membership categorization device (MCD), a particular explication of indexicality, builds on this idea of examining the mechanisms of shared knowledge in interpretation; indeed, Sacks referred to the stuff of MCDs as "culture." This so-called device described a process of interpreting categories or groups of people based on associated activities, or vice versa. In explicit references, for example, a person might say "I'm a mom" as a way to index assumptions about things moms typically do, or a person might examine someone engaging in certain activities and proclaim "she's a typical mom." In much of my data, participants have drawn on membership categories as a way of grouping people in talk and distinguishing in-groups and out-groups. For example, a person may refer to an ethnic group such as "Mexicans" alongside a negatively-assessed activity, suggesting an inherent association and differentiating "us"--the speaker and people with whom they speak along with others "like

us"--from them, people who are different and engage in purportedly bizarre or negative behavior. This is a mechanism involved in stereotyping and racism (Kurylo & Robles, 2015; Robles, 2015b).

An even subtler indexical marker of group membership is what Gumperz (1982) described as contextualization cues--aspects of language such as tone and prosody that indicate cultural, contextual elements outside the explicit talk necessary for interpreting the full meaning of an utterance. Gumperz showed how something as fleeting and implicit as the sound of a word can generate very different interpretations depending on one's frame of reference (linking back to Goffman) which may be located in a different cultural background. In my research on humor and irony in British versus American contexts, I've found that tone of voice is a greater contextualization cue for sarcasm or non-literal meaning in American English, while the content of an utterance is a stronger determiner in British English. As an American English speaker, I encountered numerous misunderstandings on the basis of this difference--British English speakers would frequently misinterpret my enthusiasm as sarcasm because my emotional expression seemed at odds with what they interpreted as unremarkable content. Meanwhile, I would assume they understood that I was speaking genuinely because if I were to convey sarcasm, I would do so with a particular vocal quality (Robles, 2011a).

Much of these unstated aspects of shared context within groups form the foundation of culture, which Philipsen (1975) defines as tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the sort of knowledge we use every day but did not learn explicitly (or often do not recall learning explicitly) and therefore cannot necessarily articulate. This leads to the assumption that one's communicative practices are "normal," "natural" and otherwise unmarked--indeed, a-cultural (Thurlow, 2001). Speech codes, which are ways of communicating guided by local expectations

(Fitch, 1998; Philipsen, 1992), often fall into this category. Even where there are explicit understandings (as in norms about respect or politeness), members often frame these understandings in normative terms based on a community's ideals rather than specifying actual, nuanced practices. Cultural approaches to discourse such as those aligned with speech codes theory SOURCE? define groups as recognizable communities primarily based on whether they share speech codes.

In current research based on an ethnography I conducted on a family-owned automotive business in the Northeast, workers applied a particular approach to customer service based on "putting the customer before profit." This relational speech code was present in their interactions with customers and also formed the logic in their interviews to account for and explain their unique work practices, which often did not make them money in the short term (though it tended to engender loyalty and therefore longer-term benefits). The strength of organizational members' location in the group culture was largely attributed to sharing this code for how they ran their business.

A key dimension of these particular discursive practices involves the competence with which members use them. Hymes (1972) described communicative competence as the way in which people interpret and deploy local communication. Building off Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance--competence as the idealized knowledge of a language, performance as the actual (imperfect) speaking of it--Hymes emphasized the appropriate use of language in context as the basis for cultural competence. The competent performance of group identity depends on how expertly one deploys the practices described. In my research on the House of Lords, I was a pure outsider, never interacting with the people I studied. If I had participated, I may have mastered their ritualized politeness markers, but I would have struggled

to enact their aggressive, face-threatening style of argumentation during political debates (Robles, 2011b).

### Case Study: The Insider-Outsider

In the following case study, I focus on how the interaction between myself and others in the data constructs insider and outsider statuses among participants, particularly in relation to occupation and gender. I examine two examples of simple transcripts of audio recordings of naturally-occurring interaction that illustrate common patterns across the data. The analysis, focuses on specific details of discourse that show how groups are socially-constructed in talk-in-interaction. I follow these comments with some reflections on the role of looking at this data for understanding the participation status of researchers in discourse studies.

#### Example 1

The first example I will discuss is a transcript excerpt from audio recordings I took in 2008 during a summer visit TO WHERE? HOMETOWN? TRIP?.

- |    |         |  |
|----|---------|--|
| 1  | Jim:    | Hey I just got a new job=  |
| 2  | JR:     | =oh yeah?  |
| 3  | Darren: | <u>wash</u> in dishes  |
| 4  | Jim:    | washing dishes yeah at that new restaurant on second (.) have you been                 |
| 5  |         | there?=<br>=no   |
| 6  | JR:     |  |
| 7  | Jim:    | not the <u>best</u> job but (.) it's pretty laid back                                  |
| 8  | Alex:   | [except when you have to wake up in the morning]                                       |
| 9  | Darren: | [except when you sleep in and [the boss calls you] ((laughs))                          |
| 10 | Jim:    | [except- yeah- ha ha but- but-]  |
| 11 | JR:     | oh no  |
| 12 | Jim:    | it was fine my boss is cool (.) I don't have a lot of hours right now which            |
| 13 |         | kind of sucks but (.) I mean I like the time to myself but I need the money            |
| 14 | Darren: | that's why I <u>love</u> my job I have the whole day to myself [and my job]            |
| 15 | Alex:   | [and your] job   |
| 16 |         | makes hella money  |
| 17 | JR:     | but you get off so late (.) I never <u>see</u> you anymore (.) I just can't wait until |

- 18 two am these days (.) gettin old=  
 19 Darren: =that and I'm usually sleeping until the afternoon  
 20 (1.0)  
 21 JR: these tiny windows of opportunity  
 22 Alex: I'm thinkin of quittin my job (.) even though I'm broke  
 23 JR: I thought you liked that job  
 24 Alex: at first yeah (0.5) now I'm gettin called at the time I mean it's good money  
 25 and it was sweet when it was like hunnerd dollars for a Sunday or  
 26 somethin but (.) too much work ((laughs))  
 27 WHO?: well no matter how much you work anyway you're fucking broke so

The moment I want to point out here is on lines 17-18, 21, and 23. Each of these contributions signal my insider-outsider status. On one hand, I display knowledge of when Darren typically gets off work, and refer to the recurrent activity “never get to see” which suggests I regularly have an opportunity to see Darren. On the other hand I frame my account for this as located in “getting old” even though the group members I’m speaking with at that moment are my age or older and regularly stay awake until such late hours, even if they don’t have a job that requires it. In the reference to “tiny windows of opportunity” I reference in part the fact that I live in another state--so am only around during holidays--but also suggest that there is minimal overlap among our free time. This is not true, though, for most of the men, who see each other nearly every day, whenever they have free time. This suggests that I am busier and have friends outside of my friendship with them. All of these elements of my talk place me at the margins of this group. It is my understanding of the subtly of interactional details from discourse analysis, my prior experiences with the group, and my study of them over time that allows me to make sense of these unstated meanings.

An even more hidden, off-record interpretation underlies the topicalization of work in this brief exchange. Alex’s contributions describes his own job, linking to Jim’s earlier complaints about hours (except having too many, lines 24-25, rather than not getting enough,

lines 11-12). Jim was singled out for actions which could be seen as violating the “worth ethic” WHAT IS WORTH ETHIC? assumed concomitant with a valorization of the working subject. Alex is not “torn down” for complaining in potentially similar ways. Complaints about work occur within a code of being grateful for *having* work, and this is a fine balance. The tearing down of Jim is a performance; it is a ritual intended to honor the value of work in the face of its complaints by challenging the (relatively minor) failings of a working member. The tearing down in this case is done playfully and without rancor, but pointedly too, eliciting an acknowledgement and account from Jim (lines 12-13). Jim’s follow up with yet another complaint could be seen as potentially undoing his prior acceptance of something like chastisement, but is instead consistent with the footing work necessary to maintain the balance by still having a “tough,” “complainable” job. Only Darren in this excerpt (and in most other cases) can get away with being almost entirely favorable about his job, and so lauded by others, precisely because his job is known to be the most valued (difficult, requiring skill, long-term, late-night, high-paying, etc.). PERHAPS RELATE THIS BACK EXPLICITLY TO GROUP ALIGNMENT

As in Philipsen’s (1975, 1992) ethnographies, this group is organized in part by a gendered code of conduct. It is not just that the group is primarily formed of people who are recognizable as “male,” but that to be a legitimate member, one must perform adequately “as a man.” The work required to achieve this locally relevant “face” (Goffman, 1967) of manliness differs according one’s station. A man who is married, has borne children, or whose sexual prowess with women is accepted as a fact, for example, is under significantly less duress to “perform” in other ways. But for most participants at most times, behavior is constrained to particular ways of being associated with traditional working class heterosexual masculinity.

Dressing in plain unfashionable clothes, swearing frequently, discussing sexual conquests, valuing manual labor as a profession, and displaying “toughness” are some of the forms of communicating manliness in the group.

Thus, there are two more dimensions in which the talk in this instance indirectly constructs my outsider status. Firstly, at the time of recording it is known that I am in graduate school--contrasted with my interlocutors, none of whom attended any college and many of whom barely passed high school—and that I have only worked white collar jobs in the service and education industries. So even if I knew how to competently participate in talk about work, I would not be able to participate as a group member in this way; I literally do not have the materiality, the physical lived experience, of doing hard manual labor to get enough money on which to live. I am even more removed from this possibility by being a woman. The men assume that women do not work these sorts of jobs anyway. I cannot perform as one of them, and I am not expected to. I am a separate entity, never fully membered, by virtue of my embodied person. For this reason, I was never excluded, tested, or challenged as a member in the group’s explicit talk, because I was never a member to begin with. It would perhaps be more accurate to say I was an outsider-insider in this group with an emphasis on “outsider.”

## **Example 2**

The second example is from a transcript excerpt from audio recordings four years later during a Christmas visit. This is one of the last set of research materials I gathered for the project. The excerpt begins with Jim suddenly exclaiming about Dave’s prior relationship with a woman named Sadie, whom he dated for years but whom none of his friends liked.

## **Excerpt 2**

- 1 Jim: aren’t you glad you aren’t with Sadie anymore
- 2 Dave: ye[ah



3     Darren: [she was such a [bitch  
 4     Dave:                               [she was cool though  
 5     (1.0)  
 6     JR:     hm.  
 7     Dave: sometimes ((laughs)) I'm glad I don't have to buy her cigarettes anymore=  
 8     Jim:    =so fucking expensive already (.) I need another job I'm=  
 9     Dave:   =yeah you got a family [now  
 10    Darren:                               [work]ing for two- [three  
 11    Jim:   [I- ] exactly (.) speaking of  
 12               where your money goes  
 13    Darren: beer.  
 14    Dave: ((laughs))  
 15    Jim:    I am Irish  
 16    Darren: exactly (.) you got a kid *and* beer  
 17    Jim:    [and smoking]  
 18    Dave: [you just have] beer D ((to Darren))  
 19    ((laughing))  
 20    JR:     I've got nothing  
 21    Jim:    yeah and you probably make more money than all of us  
 22    JR:     uh you'd be surprised  
 23    (1.0)  
 24    Dave: you should come work with me ((to Jim))  
 25    Jim:    I'm not driving all the way out there fuck that  
 26    Dave:   it's not that far  
 27    Jim:    ah the bridge toll right now though,  
 28    JR:     oh yeah (.) it's brutal  
 29    Jim:    fuck ((name of town omitted)) too  
 30    Dave:   it's not that bad  
 31    JR:     I've lived there I can tell you ((laughs)) rich people suck ((laughing))  
 32    Dave:   oka::y it's pretty bad ((laughs))

In this excerpt, the participants continue to reinforce the importance of work. There are some differences, for example, Jim's responsibilities are highlighted (line 16) and the theme of money is more explicit (line 12). Explicit references to costs such as cigarettes, beer, and bridge toll indirectly reference typical concerns rather than discussing other sorts of costs (such as clothes, musical instruments, etc.). Furthermore, a particular town (line 29) is referenced as a way of positioning the group against a city which is larger than their own and is seen as particularly

affluent. When Dave, who works there, tries to stand up for the town on line 30, even the outsider insults it. Dave has to accede a negative assessment so as not to be seen as aligned with the town, which is seen as upper class.

In this instance, it is clear from the data that I do some work to align with the others, in terms of agreeing with the negative framing of the town where Dave works, and in converging my communication style (c.f. Bailey, 2000; Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991) in how I talked about it (using the slang “sucks” and referring to “rich people” as representing anyone white who is white and/or middle class). This presents an attempt to position self as a member of the group. In some ways I don’t recall this as a conscious choice on my part, but I do recall feeling keenly that the sort of people and associated places that the group regularly disparaged were ones in which I was (or could be seen as) a member. We see this happening also when an assumption of income is voiced and countered. Turns designed for the researcher--myself--are more likely to be marked as suggesting differences in category incumbency, including categories related to shared everyday experiences, language practices, work ideologies, socioeconomic class, education, and so forth. By presenting self as hardworking and needing/wanting work, while also not enjoying it, the men in this group accomplish being seen as ordinary working class men who treat labor instrumentally and practically. It is this shared code of talking about work, reflecting a tacit habitus of the need to embody masculine labor, that partially defines the group, as well as what differs between the group and me as the researcher.

### **Reflections**

Details of discourse in a social construction approach to groups draw attention to how groups are formed moment to moment in members’ communicative practices. In my research experience I have membered myself by participating in group identities through how I

communicated in the field. Sometimes I shared groups with people--for example, in my study of a philosophy department I was a member of categories such as “graduate student,” “resident of Colorado,” “person in their mid-20s,” “Caucasian,” and so forth., which overlapped with many other students in that department. However, I did not share their distinctive intellectual tradition or assumptions about certain academic practices. Similarly, my commonalities with the group I examined in the case study--going to the same high school, sharing some similar ethnic background, living in the same town, speaking the same language, and so forth--did not constitute sufficient shared practices where it mattered to the formation of that group. While the group itself changed over time as members joined, left, died and so forth, a core set always remained and their fundamental principles and lifestyles endured. Their discursive practices gave me insight into how to “belong” to some extent. I knew to emphasize my love of music, to downplay my academic achievements, to highlight my dire finances and laugh off sexist comments. Without knowing how to treat their behavior as they did--as ordinary--I would have lost an opportunity to hear their talk as they did, as well as having a harder time tracking how they morally differentiated and justified their practices against stated or imagined others (c.f. Robles, 2015a).

I also became very aware of my limits. I could never “disappear” into the group or fully shed my researcher status. Ethically, it seemed most honest to accept what access I had based on my history with the members while also accepting that I could not be entirely membered. This very much reflected my experience prior to researching them. Grounding communication in practice and practice in discourse (Craig, 2006) provided a useful link between situated interaction and recurrent patterns of activity. In grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995), the purpose of this approach is to reflect on communication practice for the purpose of

improving it. In reflecting on my research practices, I gained a better sense of the particular micro-moments in which membership is made in action and how to spot them, as well as a better understanding of how I was constructing membership in my own talk. The practices I examined permitted a concrete way of seeing the mechanisms of social construction at work.

But more than that, these practices allowed me to see what I was missing. I was something of a legitimate peripheral participant, not in an apprenticeship sense, but as a “new” version of the peripheral member I had always been. I was allowed along for the ride *perhaps because* my presence did not have major consequences for anyone anymore. “Doing” identity takes a knowledge of discursive materials and how to competently deploy them, but it also takes materials a person may have little or no control over. Rather than trying and failing or being mystified, a close analysis of talk allows the researcher to more precisely understand her role in talking her membership (or lack thereof) into being by understanding how members of the group effectively do so.

This chapter took a social construction and discourse-centered approach to groups as an accomplishment of interaction to analyze how groups are talked into being. Furthermore, the chapter considered some specific ways in which discursive strategies can be seen to position the researcher and participants as insiders or outsiders of groups. By paying attention to details of talk, researchers can gain a more concrete idea of how language use communicates shifting group identities in the field.

## References

- Agar, M. (1994). *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*. New York, NY: William Morrow & Company.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, B. (2000a). Communicative behavior and conflict between African-American customers and immigrant Korean retailers in Los Angeles. *Discourse and Society*, 11, 86–108.
- Carbaugh, D. (2005). *Cultures in conversation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carbaugh, D. (2007). Ethnography of communication. In W. Donsbach (Ed.) *The Blackwell International Encyclopedia of Communication*. Blackwell Reference Online. [http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405131995\\_chunk\\_9781405131995397](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405131995_chunk_9781405131995397)
- Craig, R. T. (2006). Communication as a practice. In G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John, & T. Striphas (Eds.), *Communication as ...: Perspectives on theory* (pp. 38-47). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Craig, R. T., & Tracy, K. (1995). Grounded practical theory: The case of intellectual discussion. *Communication Theory*, 5, 248-272.
- Duranti, A. (1992). *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ehrlich, S., & Romaniuk, T. (2104). Discourse analysis. In R. J. Podesva & D. Sharma (Eds.) *Research methods in linguistics* (pp. 460-493). Cambridge: University Printing House.
- Fitch, K. (1998) *Speaking relationally: Culture, communication and interpersonal connection*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Giles, H., Coupland, N., & Coupland, J. (Eds.). (1991). *The contexts of accommodation: Dimensions in applied sociolinguistics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Mahwah, NJ: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, Erving. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ho, E. Y., & Robles, J. (2011). Cultural resources for health participation in a public health setting: Examining acupuncture and massage therapy for HIV-related peripheral neuropathy. *Health Communication*, 26, 1-12.
- Hymes, D. (1972). Models of the interaction of language and social life. In J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp.35-71). New York, NY: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston.
- Kidwell, M. (2000). Common ground in cross-cultural communication: Sequential and institutional contexts in front desk service encounters. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 11, 17-37.
- Kurylo, A., & Robles, J. S. (2015). How should I respond to *them*? An emergent categorization of responses to interpersonally communicated stereotypes. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 44, 64-91.
- Lindlof, T., & Taylor, B. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Philipsen, G. (1975). Speaking 'like a man' in Teamsterville: Culture patterns of role enactment in an urban neighborhood. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61, 13-22.

Philipsen, G. (1992). *Speaking culturally explorations in social communication*. Albany NY: SUNY Press.

Robles, J. S. (2011a). *The interactive achievement of morality in everyday talk: A discourse analysis of moral practices and problems in interpersonal relationships* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Colorado at Boulder, Colorado.

Robles, J. S. (2011b). Doing disagreement in the House of Lords: "Talking around the issue" as a context-appropriate argumentative strategy. *Discourse & Communication*, 5, 147-168.

Robles, J. S. (2012a). Troubles with assessments in gifting occasions. *Discourse Studies*, 14, 753-777. Robles, J. S. (2012b). Culture in conversation. In A. Kurylo (Ed.), *Inter/cultural communication: Representation and construction of culture in everyday interaction* (vol. 2) (pp. 89-114). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Robles, J. S. (2015a). Morality in discourse. In K. Tracy (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*. CITY, STATE?: Wiley-Blackwell.

Robles, J. S. (2015b). Extreme case (re)formulation as a practice for making hearably-racist talk repairable [special issue on –isms in interaction]. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 34, 390-409.

Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on Conversation*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Schegloff, E. A. (2007). *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Streeck, J. (2002). Culture, meaning, and interpersonal communication. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (pp. 300-336). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Thurlow, C. (2001). 'I don't have one - it's just normal.' Young teenagers' ideas about 'culture': Critical transcultural communication awareness and the exoticisation of self. In D. Killick & M. Parry (Eds.), *Mapping the territory: The poetics and praxis of languages and intercultural communication* (pp. 111-125). Glasgow: Glasgow French & German Publications.

Tracy, K., & Haspel, K. (2004). Language and social interaction: Its institutional identity, intellectual landscape, and discipline-shifting agenda. *Journal of Communication*, 54, 788-816.

Tracy, K., & Robles, J. S. (2010). Challenges of interviewers' institutional positionings: Taking account of interview content and the interaction. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 4, 266-289.

Tracy, K., & Robles, J. S. (2013). *Everyday talk: Building and reflecting identities* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Guilford.

Wetherell, M. (1998). Positioning and interpretive repertoires: Conversation analysis and poststructuralism in dialogue. *Discourse & Society*, 9, 387-412.