

AUTHORITY AND POWER AS REFLECTED IN
SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY INTERACTION

Richard Buttny rbuttny@syr.edu

Authority or power is enshrined in our institutions, such as the State issuing marriage licenses or the Courts legalizing same-sex marriage. Institutions present one type of structure which enables and constrains agency. Other types of structure are, of course, quite familiar in communication studies: race, ethnicity, class, culture, historical period, or sexual preference. The question becomes which of these structures are especially relevant to this situated interaction? How are these structures manifest or shown interactionally?

My position on the structure-agency debate is a pragmatic one - a stronger case can be made when we can empirically show how participants are displaying or orienting to a particular structure. Alternatively, analysts can also draw on ethnographic information or background knowledge of structures to further interpret the interaction. A perspective which can capture both structure and agency is the social accountability in communication perspective (Buttny, 1993; Buttny & Morris, 2001). Starting at the level of interaction, one activity participants continually attend to is **what they and their interlocutors are doing and the propriety of those actions.** This orientation to the propriety of action becomes most visible as talk or positions are called into question or problematized. A blame, complaint, or criticism from another makes relevant an account to deny, excuse, explain, or justify oneself. Throughout this transcript we can see a number of blame implicative statements invoking social accountability which comprise much of the conflict. Participants' social accountability practices invoke institutional, legal, ethical, or religious structures. So we want to uncover the discursive practices in doing social accountability.

In this interaction we can see attempts to appeal to normative structure or rules in various ways: through appeals to the duties of a county clerk, to the right to marry, to judicial decisions, or even to God's authority. Broadly speaking, the social accountability interaction can be seen as invoking these different levels of conflicting authority. This conflict between the gay applicants and Kim and her co-workers is heightened by the presence of the media. The blaming and accounts offered are not only for the principle interlocutors, but given the presence of the media, for an **over-hearing audience**.

In line 1, we see White (not David) criticizing Kim as she approaches the counter as "smiling at me." Such smiling is problematized by the practice of metadiscourse, by referencing what Kim is doing in her embodied display. Intertextually it also can be heard as invoking a past where heterosexuals laugh/smile at gay people. Kim orients to this statement as a criticism and denies it. She further formulates the implications of this alleged action as "not being disrespectful to you." As this criticism-denial sequence unfolds, David broadens this criticism to "treating us as second-class citizens" (lines 4-5). Here the accountability has been ramped up from being treated poorly in a service encounter to invoking gay people's unequal legal status.

At the end of the day, these couples did not get their marriage license, but they did speak out in protest and invoke institutional and legal claims and counter appeals to God's authority.

References

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