Familiar strangers: facework strategies in pursuit of non-binding relationships in a workplace exercise group

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FAMILIAR STRANGERS: FACEWORK STRATEGIES IN PURSUIT OF NON-BINDING RELATIONSHIPS IN A WORKPLACE EXERCISE GROUP

Hilde Rossing and Susie Scott

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the interaction dynamics of a workplace exercise group for beginners. Dramaturgical stress occurred here as individuals who already knew each other as competent colleagues felt embarrassed about encountering one another in this low ability exercise group. To resolve this role conflict, participants sought to define themselves as familiar strangers (which they were not) through minimal interaction in non-binding relationships. This was achieved through three types of facework strategy not only the defensive and protective kinds that Goffman identified as saving individual faces, but also collective strategies, which sought to repair the face of the whole group. Paradoxically, therefore, in
attempting to deny their “groupness,” these actors actually displayed
and reinforced their solidarity as a performance team.

Keywords: Case study; exercise; facework; Goffman; groups;
workplace

The democratic orientation of some of our newer establishments, however, tends to
throw differently placed members of the same work team together … causing them
uneasiness … These difficulties are especially likely to occur … [in cramped
places] … for there individuals that are not quite on chatting terms must remain for a
time too close together to ignore the opportunity for informal talk … Embarrassment
then is built into the establishment ecologically. (Goffman, 1956, p. 270)

FAMILIAR STRANGERS AND THE DENIAL OF
“GROUPNESS”

Workplace exercise is widely encouraged in the health promotion literature
as a means of accessing adults who might benefit from greater physical
activity (World Health Organization, 2007). It is suggested that individuals
prefer to be active in groups rather than alone, and that the interaction
dynamics of an exercise group increase members’ feelings of cohesiveness
and thus levels of adherence (Burk, Carron, & Shapcott, 2008). However, a
problem with this body of research is that it relies upon rather abstract con-
structs, such as cohesion, “groupness,” and social support (Darling-Fisher,
Prosser, & Thomas, 2007; Priebe, Spink, & Wilson, 2010), which are often
measured by quantitative dimensions and discussed in isolation from the
lived experience of their members. More specifically, the dramaturgical
context of self-presentation and impression management (Goffman, 1959)
in these groups has been ignored. In this chapter we explore how the social
setting from which the members of a workplace exercise group are drawn
can paradoxically inhibit the positive effects of groupness by evoking feel-
ings of dramaturgical stress: role conflict, self-consciousness, and interac-
tional strain.

The exercise group can be defined as a collective of designated persons
who regularly come together to sustain a common focus of attention (the
pursuit of fitness), typically by signing up to follow a course of weekly
sessions. They may recognize each other as “regulars” who hold familiar, secure positions in the structure, as opposed to the more tentative positions of strangers, temporaries, and homecomers (Katovich & Reese, 1987, p. 308), and enjoy socializing together. Such groups can in principle take advantage of the above-mentioned constructs of groupness and cohesion. This can be contrasted with the standard, drop-in style exercise class, where membership is fluid and constantly changing, and individual attendance may be sporadic.

The latter can be understood as a gathering of familiar strangers: individuals whom we regularly observe but with whom we do not interact (Milgram, 1977). Familiar strangers seek involvement without commitment to each other, and feel no sense of mutual obligation. Their encounters are focused rather than unfocused (Goffman, 1961), though restricted to situations of mere co-presence (Goffman, 1963), and strangely devoid of depth or intimacy. This uncomplicated, loose relationship is usually sustained without awkwardness by a tacit agreement between parties to mutually ignore each other and behave as if they were each there alone, as in the example of commuters who wait for the same train every day. Paulos (2004) argues that the familiar stranger scenario is becoming an increasingly prevalent interactional form in contemporary urban settings and public places, as people increasingly seek “involvement without commitment” in ever larger arenas of their lives.

Familiar strangers, then, is a concept that would not normally apply to exercise groups, with their stable membership and common goals, yet as we shall show, it is a definition of the situation (Thomas & Thomas, 1923) that members may seek to create because of dramaturgical stress arising from role conflict. The participants in our study sought to define themselves as familiar strangers in order to avoid acknowledging their (real) group identity as “low ability” exercisers, insofar as this threatened to undermine their claims to professional competence in the workplace they shared (Author A & Co-author, in press). This required bracketing out their awareness of their existing ties as colleagues, as well as of the role conflict this generated. Claiming the status of familiar strangers enabled this exercise group to imagine itself as a more loosely structured exercise class, and thus to avoid being drawn into deeper levels of involvement and obligation: to engage only in “minimal interaction” and “non-binding relationships.” Paradoxically, however, upholding this definition of the situation demanded their co-operation as a performance team in enacting strategies of facework, which further reinforced their group identity.
Role Conflict, Embarrassment, and Dramaturgical Stress

A pivotal factor driving this paradox is the other social setting(s) from which members are recruited: in this case, the workplace organization. Employees’ behavior in the exercise group did not simply emerge from that situation alone, but rather was shaped by the roles and relationships they occupied in this other, prior setting, to which they shared an additional allegiance, and the extent to which these infiltrated the exercise arena.

As Freund (1982) pointed out, interaction contexts are not always conductive to an expression of self that feels authentic or desirable. Dramaturgical stress occurs in situations where there is a great discrepancy between an actor’s private self-identity and the role performance they are expected to display. Managing this discrepancy demands a high level of emotional labor and “deep acting” (Hochschild, 1983) to reconcile the conflicting role-identities, which may not be possible. The effect is exacerbated when actors are in relatively powerless positions and lack the “status shields” needed to protect their identities from challenge (Freund, 1982).

Having one’s workplace as the context of one’s exercise group creates dramaturgical stress in this way. This occurs largely because of the role conflict members experienced (outlined below) between being high functioning employees and low ability exercisers, but also because of the ambiguous position of this interaction context between the public and private realms. According to Lofland (1998), “public realms” are those dominated by stranger–stranger relationships and fleeting relationships, while closer, durable relationships predominate in the “private realm.” Between these realms is the “parochial realm” — a social territory of acquaintances, workmates, and neighborhood co-residents (Hubbard & White, 2005, p. 173).

Workplace exercise groups do not fit easily into any of these categories, and transgress the boundaries between them by containing elements of each. They are located in sites in the parochial realm and involve familiar figures from this realm (colleagues), yet insofar as they have never before encountered each other in these exercise roles, they may behave like strangers (characteristic of the public realm). At the same time, the setting demands that they share or expose quite personal information about their bodies and fitness levels, which would normally take place in the private realm. In line with Hubbard and White (2005), we argue that occupying such “border regions” between the three realms can create confusion, role conflict, and dramaturgical stress. This was resolved by our participants defining themselves as familiar strangers: enacting this group identity as a
status shield protected members against the encroachment of the workplace into the workout and vice versa.

Dramaturgical stress can be caused by the experience of role conflict. This is a discomfiting feeling of incongruence between two or more dramaturgical roles, identities, or statuses that an actor is expected to perform within a given situation. In the setting we studied, for example, a woman who was used to being viewed as a competent professional by her colleagues would suddenly find herself standing next to the same people, looking sweaty and disheveled, in a group explicitly labeled “low ability.” She would face the dilemma of whether to attend to the immediate task of the exercise activities, embracing her lower status in this context, or cling to her more dignified persona from the other context and show role distance (Goffman, 1961) from this one. To the extent that it is not possible to do either, the dramaturgically stressed actor must remain in an ambiguous terrain between the two identities, which cannot be comfortably reconciled. Thus our participants found that the eagerly anticipated effects of “group-ness” in their aerobics training were compromised by embarrassment, arising from the stress of managing a role conflict between their work and exercise personae. As exercising colleagues, they faced the challenge of juggling these two different selves, faces or sets of impressions in front of the same audience, which created interactional strain.

In a previous article, Author A, Co-author, and Co-author (in press) examined in more detail how this role conflict arose, and its effects on members’ self-identities. Being labeled a “low ability” exerciser sat uncomfortably with employees who worked in this high-pressure, competitive environment where it was otherwise desirable to demonstrate one’s poise and professionalism. Employees were used to comparing themselves to one other in this setting and wanting to avoid being seen as relatively incompetent (cf. Author B, 2007). This self-consciousness was transferred to the exercise arena as employees dreaded to be perceived as “low performing” here, by their colleagues who were exercising alongside them (Author A & Co-Author, 2013), insofar as this might spoil or contaminate their prior identity claims (Goffman, 1963a).

Role conflicts of this kind have a tendency to evoke feelings of embarrassment, which is understood in dramaturgical terms as resulting from an actor’s inability to perform a social role or project an appropriate public image (Miller, 1996). There is typically a discrepancy between the persona that one wants to enact and that which one fears one has actually communicated (Edelmann, 1987), or between the impressions consciously “given” and those unintentionally “given off” (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). At the
situational level, meanwhile, a collective sense of embarrassment emerges when a central assumption of interaction is unexpectedly or unqualifiedly discredited, because one or more actors cannot fulfill their role requirements (Gross & Stone, 1964). This may result from a loss of poise (mistaken identity claims, invasions of private territory, loss of control over the body or material props), an inappropriate identity performance (where the actor’s “announcement” of their identity does not match the normative expectations of the audience and their “placement” of her or him) (Stone, 1962), or an inconsistent identity performance, where two or more roles contradict each other (a dominant role may be undermined by an adjunct, reserve, or relic identity from another setting) — all of which create a loss of script and general uncertainty over how to perform (Gross & Stone, 1964).

The last of these contingencies — cases of inconsistent identity — relates most clearly to our example of role conflict within the workplace exercise group. As Goffman (1956) put it, “embarrassment [uneasiness] arises when the self-projected is somehow confronted with another self, which, though valid in other contexts, cannot be here sustained in harmony with the first” (p. 269). It can then be difficult to know which “face” to put on or which demeanor to display (cf. Goffman, 1967). Had our actors just been strangers meeting in a drop-in class at a fitness center, they might have been able to immerse themselves sincerely (Goffman, 1959) in this singular role performance, without the complication of a prior role identity. Instead, however, participants found themselves in the embarrassing predicament of regularly seeing colleagues whom they recognized but did not necessarily know well enough to approach or casually converse with, while being unable to escape the situation (as one normally can, following encounters with strangers). They were kept in a liminal state (Turner, 1967) between their work and exercise identities, being aware of both yet unable to reconcile them, nor to embrace either one completely.

A common response by individual actors to embarrassment arising from role conflict is to engage in role or audience segregation (Goffman, 1961): keeping the two performances or people watching them apart, so that one cannot undermine the other. Indeed, Author A found that this was the preferred strategy of employees, who spoke of “want[ing] to be ‘me’, not ‘work me’ when I am exercising at work” (Author et al., in press). However, this is not always possible in settings such as this workplace-based “Easy Aerobics” group, which bring two conflicting role-identities together and preclude their segregation. Consequently, actors must pursue alternative means of managing potential embarrassment, which recognize rather than
avoid the presentation of contradictory self-images, and which can be carried out within the situation itself.

Three Kinds of Facework

Embarrassment typically arises from a real or imagined loss of face: the public image people want to project, which can be lost, maintained, or enhanced through social interaction (Goffman, 1967). An actor’s face therefore belongs not to him or her but to society, from which it is on loan (Goffman, 1967). Brown and Levinson (1987) further distinguished between different “face needs,” which can be positive (acceptance and approval) or negative (freedom from interruption or intrusion), and which must be negotiated with one’s dramaturgical teammates. Actors are therefore motivated to maintain or keep themselves “in face” by careful impression management, but are also aware of other people’s face needs. Consequently, we found instances of co-operation in face-saving, based on recognition of the “mutual vulnerability of face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66).

Facework, in turn, refers to the strategies actors employ both verbal and non-verbal, to deal with an actual or anticipated loss of face and to retain their dignity or poise. By attenuating feelings of embarrassment, facework allows actors to regain social composure and restores the smooth flow of interaction order. Goffman (1967) proposed two kinds of facework rituals that are performed by individual actors: “defensive” (to save one’s own face), for instance, by steering conversations away from topics that might contradict one’s self-presentational line, and “protective” (to save someone else’s face), for example the tactful avoidance of details which might challenge a fellow actor’s identity claims.

However, this dichotomy leaves unanswered the question of what happens when the compromised face belongs not to an individual but to a group. Goffman’s (1959) own notion of performance teams working together to stage a scene or pursue a common line of action lends itself to the possibility of there being a collective face that must be sustained. Subsequently, we propose that there is a third kind of facework ritual, found in situations involving such kinds of group face. “Collective facework” occurs where the members of a group perceive a threat to their shared face and use tacitly agreed upon strategies to avert this danger. This is a collaborative strategy, although the effects will be felt by each actor insofar as they share responsibility for maintaining the team impression (Goffman, 1959). Collective facework can be understood as a specific
variant of Goffman’s broader concept of teamwork: the ethos of co-operation within a performance team, which incorporates a plethora of strategies.

For example, in his study of how rap singers resolved the embarrassment of members “falling off” the beat during a group performance, Lee (2009) pointed to instances of collateral face-saving, whereby fellow singers simultaneously stepped in to cover up the mistake and “keep the flow going” (p. 306). Importantly, they did so for the sake of their mutual performance and felt dignity, rather than out of sympathy for the embarrassed member: it was the whole group’s shared face that was at stake rather than just that individual’s. Likewise, in the study we report here, we suggest that the participants engaged in collective facework by dramatizing strangeness: invoking and performing a definition of themselves as familiar strangers. Paradoxically, this team effort served to enable them not to recognize and interact with each other as members of a (stigmatized) group, and thus to avert a perceived threat to their shared image as competent professionals.

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss how the members of the Easy Aerobics exercise group employed all three types of facework strategy – defensive, protective, and collective – as means of dealing with the embarrassment arising from the role conflict they experienced in this situation.

METHODS AND DATA

The data for this chapter are drawn from a larger project about workplace-based exercise programs (see also Author A & Co-Author, in press; Author et al., in press). From August 2009 to June 2010, Author A conducted an ethnographic case study (Yin, 1984) within a large public research company in Norway. Due to the sedentary and computerized nature of the work here, the company had a long tradition of caring for its employees’ health. Among other activities, the company provided an exercise program during working hours. A total of 170 participants (approximately one-third of all employees) were organized into eight exercise groups; this chapter reports on one of these, the Easy Aerobics group. A novel enterprise established to attract beginners and introduce non-exercising employees to physical activity, this group consisted of 19 signed up members (all women). Participation was free of charge providing the employees agreed to use an
additional hour of their own time for exercise. The sessions involved a variety of aerobic steps, performed to music by participants who stood in a circle and were led by an instructor. All of the informants had been employed at the company for more than five years and shared a common concern of struggling to integrate regular exercise into their lives.

Observational fieldwork was carried out in the exercise sessions, locker room, and walking to and from class, giving a total of 90 hours of observation and around 130 recorded conversations. Author A kept a written record of her descriptions and interpretations of “settings, events, conversations, things heard and overheard amongst the prime actors” (Purdy & Jones, 2011, p. 334). She also conducted six in-depth interviews with three women over the course of the program, while another three women agreed to keep weekly logbooks. Some of the group responded as volunteers to a verbal request, while others were sought out by the researcher as particularly “information rich” cases (Patton, 2002) because they struggled with attendance and the exercises in the sessions. The interviews were loosely based on the researcher’s unfolding observations, which provided an opportunity for participants to communicate their own understandings, perspectives, and attributions of meaning (O’Reilly, 2005). Logbooks were kept in the form of regular entries written in response to two open-ended questions that the researcher sent by email after each class; these answers were followed up the following week. The data were subject to inductive analysis through the technique of constant comparisons (see Charmaz, 2006). To enhance their trustworthiness, the researcher and the informants collaborated in (a) trying out possible narrative interpretations of the findings during the interview situation and (b) encouraging elaboration on meanings and ideas that occurred in the logbooks, the following week (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

THE PURSUIT OF NON-BINDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH MINIMAL INTERACTION

A feeling of relative incompetence (Author B, 2007) came into play as the participants reflected on their image in the exercise group from the imagined perspective of others (cf. Mead, 1934), and considered how their performances might negatively affect their social identities in the workplace. There was an anticipation of stigma, as participants worried that their fallible, undignified status as beginners in the workout sessions might
“spoil” (Goffman, 1963a, p. 14) their established image of professional competence:

At work, we often have strong differences of opinion, and then we risk meeting each other’s eyes in the exercise group[ ... ] It feels extra uncomfortable, because I know I can easily lose the professional authority I need if I push myself forward in a breathless poorly executed exercise. (Hayley, logbook, spring 2010)

I have no desire to exercise with my closest colleagues [that I interact with everyday]; I think I am low performing and that it would be more positive for me to participate in a group where I’m more in the middle, ability wise, and not at the bottom. (Paige, interview, spring 2010)

The participants strove to resolve this role conflict by acting out a “familiar strangers” scenario in the exercise group: behaving as if they had no prior, potentially conflicting ties to consider. To this end, they attempted to engage only in what we call “minimal interaction” with their colleagues in pursuit of “non-binding relationships.” Minimal interaction describes a pattern of conduct that occurs when actors find themselves in situations of focused and sustained reciprocal involvement (cf. Goffman, 1967) but seek to keep this at a superficial level, avoiding the generation of deeper ties that extend into other settings or have repercussions for identity performances elsewhere. This type of interaction was pursued by our participants imagining the group’s relations in purely formal terms, defined by circumscribed role performances within that situation, and diminishing the need for any sociable, informal component beyond this:

I do not actually talk that much to the other participants in the group. Maybe we say something if we bump into each other walking to the class room, but usually not. (Haley, logbook, winter 2010)

Well, there are nice people in this group, like the group is OK, but some think the group is a bit silent. It is not a kind of group which acts as a group together; there is kind of no group dynamic. (Paige, interview, spring 2010)

Minimal interaction made it easier for the members to pretend that they were familiar strangers by prohibiting any references to social identities beyond the exercise role. Individually, they were able to sustain just a single line of self-presentation, while collectively it was easier to manage a situation based upon only one set of roles. As we shall demonstrate below, this carefully stylized pattern of interaction demanded a “ceremonial” form of informal, co-operative control (Katovich, 1996) to regulate the social distance between actors.
A related facet of minimal interaction in this case was that the group members sought to establish what we call “non-binding relationships” with one other. Whereas minimal interaction refers to a situated pattern of conduct, non-binding relationships refer to the longer term effects of this upon an actor’s identity. It describes a relatively superficial level of social bond, through which actors acknowledge their mutual presence in a situated interaction context, but avoid any deeper commitment or obligations beyond that setting. Non-binding relationships help actors pragmatically to deal with the dramaturgical exigencies of the immediate situation, without being “fateful” (Goffman, 1967, p. 217) for their future relations or identity performances in other settings (in this case, the work context).

Yes, I tend to enjoy a kind of recognition with the other participants that feel secure. But I like the interaction to be totally non-binding. I do not mind talking a little bit with the others, but I do not need it at all. (Adriana, interview, winter 2010)

I do not experience the social component in this group as very important to me, I get the stimulation from the instructor being welcoming and accepting, and it is really nice not being bothered by comments from the other participants. (Paige, interview, spring 2010)

The pursuit of non-binding relationships through minimal interaction was then translated into strategies for action, in the form of three techniques of facework outlined above: defensive, protective, and collective. We now present some examples of each of these and discuss their dramaturgical significance.

DEFFENSIVE FACEWORK STRATEGIES

Regulating the Spatial Distribution of Bodies

The first set of facework strategies were performed by individual members to defend themselves against the stigma of being a “low ability” exerciser amidst a group of significant others whom they perceived as “competent colleagues” (Author et al., in press). As outlined above, this role conflict generated embarrassment through individual face threats, which had to be resolved. In the case of defensive facework, this was achieved through symbolic gestures (Blumer, 1969), which allowed the members to communicate to others (and pretend to themselves) that they were there alone, rather than acknowledging each other and their respective role obligations.
Firstly, participants were observed to navigate their way around the social space of the class by maneuvering their body vehicles (Goffman, 1971) in a careful and strategic way so as to claim an area of personal space or “territories of the self” (Goffman, 1971, p. 29). Sometimes this would involve the use of physical objects, such as water bottles, as props or markers of the boundaries around this space (cf. Author B, 2009). At the same time, the actors would feign obliviousness to the fact that they were doing this, gazing out from their positions, as if seeing everybody but acknowledging the presence only of the instructor. The image is evocative of Goffman’s (1959, p. 16) description of the fictional character Preedy, who affected an air of nonchalant absorption in his carefully studied activities:

The participants were most of the time arranged in a circle with the instructor as part of the circle close to the disc player. Some placed themselves with a straight ahead view of the instructor, others close to the fan or far away from the speakers. Others would be standing close to the instructor. This meant that everybody could see the instructor and each other, though the woman next to you could only be seen out of the corner of your eye. The participants in this group soon found their favorite positions; their unique, personal body space and that of the established group was reserved and protected by exercise equipment lying behind them: a bag, a towel or their water bottle. (Field notes, 05.10.2009)

Another example was how participants would corner the instructor in the outer margins of the room and ask questions in hushed tones, even though the advice might have benefited everyone. This tactic functioned almost literally to defend the individual’s face, which was directed away from the gaze of fellow exercisers. By affecting the appearance of a private, one-to-one encounter, self-conscious individuals strove to bracket out their awareness of the others’ presence.

Participants are repeatedly asked by the instructor to approach her with any thoughts, problems and need for facilities. The instructor makes herself available after class by walking around the room, saying goodbye and asking if everything went ok today. Participants wanting to talk to the instructor move towards her and place themselves with their backs towards the others who are gathering their equipment and leaving class. The participants lower their voices, making the instructor lean in to hear what they are saying, and answer in the same low tone of voice. (Field notes, 14.12.2009)

Body Gloss

A second strategy of defensive facework concerns what Goffman terms “body gloss”: the use of embodied gestures to make facts otherwise unavai

174 HILDE ROSSING AND SUSIE SCOTT
features of a performance that might otherwise be misinterpreted, or to offer a reinterpretation that alters the audience’s view. A variant of this is “circumspection gloss” which refers to gestures aimed at covering up a blundered or inappropriate interactional move, and disarming onlookers’ suspicions about its implications (Burns, 1992, p. 85).

This often occurred when participants felt that they had performed a step incompetently, threatening their face with the stigmatizing attribute of being “low ability.” As the group members were, by definition, “unaccustomed to exercise,” there were several incidences of participants taking a wrong step, being unable to keep up or having physical pain that prevented them from executing a move with the full range of motion. Here, it was common to see people looking self-consciously around to see if anybody else had noticed their mistake, as if fearing that all eyes were upon them. The embarrassment that ensued in this scenario arose not only from the exposure of the actor’s low level of fitness, but also from the incongruence between this and the impression that they wanted to convey to their colleagues, of professional competence. Circumspection gloss was then applied to repair the damaged face by actors moving their bodies out of the group configuration, thus making a symbolic claim to be “away” (Goffman, 1963b) or “temporarily out of play” (ibid., p. 69).

If the step is moving in such a direction that means individuals risk bumping into the participant next to them, if they do not get it correct they might pretend that they needed a break at exactly this moment (moving towards their water bottle), or move a little bit out of the circle, making space for the ones who are doing it right. (Field notes, 01.02.2010)

PROTECTIVE FACEWORK STRATEGIES

Sympathetic Identification

The next set of facework strategies were what Goffman (1967) calls protective: those executed by one or more individuals act to save the face of another individual. The first of these strategies, which we call “sympathetic identification,” was used in cases where a member of the group was visibly experiencing difficulty with a move. Fellow participants would step in to spare the individual’s blushes with reassurances that they had had the same difficulty and thus that the individual was not inherently incompetent. Symbolically, their gestures expressed an attitude of “me too,” aligning
the actors as teammates to face the audience together. For example, if a participant was seen receiving a lengthy explanation and extra attention from the instructor, someone else would move to join them with a gesture of comfort and support:

After class the instructor went over to a woman who had struggled with her push ups during the class, while the other participants were getting ready to leave the room. As the woman still found it hard to improve with the new instructions, she sat up on her knees with a puzzled look on her face. The instructor asked if I could help her out by explaining. As I went over, another participant stopped and said: “This seems useful; I have got to pick up these tips as well,” while lying down next to the woman. As they now both kept trying to get the exercise correct, the [first] woman looked up at the last participants leaving the room, laughed and said; “we are being held back in detention … hee hee hee.” (Field notes, 18.01.2010)

In another example, teammates provided reassurance that although an individual was struggling, she had nevertheless improved her fitness level since the beginning of the course. Here a woman’s feeling of tiredness was detached from any evaluation of her personal fitness by referring to the escalating difficulty level of the class. It was implied that she was tired because the instructor was “upping the standard” and demanding more of them, but that if they had used a constant measure she would see that she could handle more physical activity than before. Below we see a whole succession of individuals stepping in to offer the same face-saving gestures.

The woman in the blue and red shirt said; “Well, I am not getting in any better shape, haven’t been here a couple of times … ” Before she manages to finish the sentence one of the other participants steps in, saying, “Yes, but we have gotten into better shape, though.” The instructor enters the meaning exchange, “Yes, I am sure you guys could not manage this [exercise] in the beginning.” The co-participant continues, “Yes, ‘cos we kind of raise the level a little bit each time, and this kind of makes us equally tired each time … if we would have repeated the first class, we probably would have seen how much stronger we are now.” I feel moved to chip in as well, by saying, “Yes, it is easier to see the improvement if you kind of measure it against something constant, like walking up the same flight of stairs.” The instructor finishes my sentence: “Yes, and you can sense how out of breath you get.” (Field notes, 19.04.2010)

Externalizing Failure to the Situation

A related strategy of protective facework occurred when participants stepped in to reassure a struggling member that their problems could be attributed to external features of the situation (such as the task difficulty or physical setting), rather than to their inherent low ability. This was a
normalizing strategy which suggested that, under these circumstances, anyone would experience the same difficulties. This demonstrates again the commitment of teammates to upholding a shared definition of the situation even when it involves collusive acts of mutual deception. Burns (1992) refers to the “polite fictions” (p. 76) that oil the wheels of social interaction: scenarios in which all participants are aware of a truth, but pretend to believe in some alternative version of events to avoid conflict or embarrassment. In Glaser and Strauss’s (1964) terms, this constitutes a “pretence awareness context” (p. 61) through which actors bracket out their shared knowledge of an underlying reality. Participants enjoin each other to sustain whatever fictions are operative at the time and functional in sustaining their lines of self-presentation. Thus, as well as saving the face of another, each actor also “insulates himself or herself by blindness, half-truths, illusions and rationalizations” (Ferguson, 2009, p. 75).

A clear example of this occurred when a group member complained about being too hot, or was visibly red-faced, uncomfortable, and sweating. Immediately, others would step in to attribute the blame for this embarrassing lack of poise to external features of the situation. In this case, it was reassuringly asserted that the room was too small and hot because the air conditioning was not working properly. This allowed the embarrassed individual to regain her composure, as the focus of the audience gaze was directed elsewhere:

The room facilities are small, without proper air conditioning. Almost every group session for the first months, participants and the instructor have addressed how hot and sweaty they are getting in this room. As the instructor pointed out, “I am getting really hot today, how about you?” She went on, “This room is really hot, and it is difficult to get good air conditioning, I will call and ask maintenance.” In the middle of the class a woman whispered, asking me if I could try and have the doors opened, to let some air into the room. The instructor noticed and said, “Yes, it is really extra hot in here today. I wonder if it also has something to do with the weather outside.” (Field notes, 09.11.2009)

Often the instructors were complicit in this, as they could see that several members of the group were feeling self-conscious. Interestingly, rather than engaging in backstage conspiratorial “staging talk” (Goffman, 1959, pp. 173–174), whereby they might have come out of character and agreed merely to humor the participants, the instructors seemed to maintain their act even in front of each other, displaying a “sincere belief” (Goffman, 1959, p. 28) in the parts that they were playing:

Between two different sessions the instructors meet in the hallway, talking about how to deal with the heating situation in the room: Instructor 1: “Well yes, I have tried to
talk to maintenance several times, but they say there is nothing more they can do with the air con.” Instructor 2: “Do you think we can shift the schedule a little bit to try and air the room as best as possible between the groups?” Instructor 1: “Yes I can ask, and I will leave the fans on, because these women really do not appreciate it being too warm. I think it is difficult for them to exercise.” (Field notes, 05.10.2009)

Although these protective facework gestures may seem friendly and altruistic, they were ultimately still aimed at sustaining minimal interaction, by avoiding the acknowledgment of a group identity and its incumbent binding obligations. These actors were motivated by a need to distance themselves from the stigmatizing label of the whole group being of “low ability,” which was hinted at by individual protestations of incompetence. Thus, only when members felt the utterance of an individual threatened the group’s fiction that they were familiar strangers, did they concede to encounter each other directly.

COLLECTIVE FACEWORK STRATEGIES

The third set of what we call “collective” facework strategies occur when actors move in to save the face not of an individual but of the group as a whole. This usually happens when actors recognize each other as teammates with a common dramaturgical fate: beyond the face threats to individual lines of self-presentation, there is a collective team impression (Goffman, 1959) to be controlled and managed. In this case, our exercising colleagues perceived a threat to their assumed identity as familiar strangers, and to the definition of the situation they upheld on the basis of this claim: that they had only non-binding relationships with no prior ties and need only pursue minimal interaction. Paradoxically, then, the official claim that they worked collaboratively to defend was that they were not a group. Collective facework functioned to affirm one claimed group identity (familiar strangers) while denying another (low ability exercising colleagues): an unwanted social face that had been bestowed upon them. It is ironic that, in attempting to deny their groupness, the participants actually revealed just that, for collective facework is a team performance.

This collective facework can also be seen as an example of Katovich’s (1996, p. 262) ceremonial control, one of four types of informal, co-operative dramaturgical regulation that occurs when actors are committed to upholding interaction order. In contrast to the “instrumental” control that develops between people in stable, permanent relationships,
“interpersonal” control between actors co-operating on a task with a shared focus of attention, and “categorical” control based on membership categories. “ceremonial” control occurs between actors who meet in fleeting, situational encounters, where their regular and repeated co-presence demands some kind of polite acknowledgment. Reminiscent of Goffman’s (1967) notion of interaction ritual, this involves a sequential exchange of gestures or behaviors to communicate reciprocal acknowledgment and mutual responsiveness (e.g., students from the same class exchanging eye contact and smiles as they pass each other on campus). By engaging in the ceremony and establishing mutual control, interactants allow themselves to establish contact without being intensely involved.

However, ceremonial control can have an altogether different meaning when it takes place between interactors who share a social past (and so are “familiar”), but feel too embarrassed, awkward, or reluctant to refer to this in the current situation. Katovich (1996, p. 262) gives the example of passing an acquaintance on the street that one does not particularly like, and restricting the interaction to a hurried, unsmiling nod to avoid talking. In the Easy Aerobics class, our participants had a shared and continuing past as colleagues, which they were embarrassed to acknowledge insofar as it was compromised by their present humiliating status. Had they given proper recognition to their prior, adjunct identities, they might have engaged in more deeply committed interpersonal or instrumental control, but instead they seemed to regress to a lower level of intimacy to keep things at a superficial level. By using ceremonial control, they were able to redefine themselves as familiar strangers, thereby marking the encounter as unfocused (Goffman, 1961) and their relationships as non-binding.

Civil Inattention

The first collective facework strategy was “civil inattention” a term employed by Goffman (1963b, p. 86) in a different text that nevertheless resonates strongly with his essay on facework. Civil inattention refers to the tendency of strangers meeting in fleeting encounters to glance briefly at but then away from each other, to communicate that while they respectively acknowledge their mutual co-presence, they will not expect to involve each other in a sustained period of interaction. This makes possible “co-presence without co-mingling, awareness without engrossment, courtesy without conversation” (Lofland, 1998, p. 30).
Moreover, this interpersonal ritual is also suited to familiar strangers, who seek to define themselves as (absolute) strangers and thus effectively become so for the duration of the situation. As with many norms of interactional etiquette, this rule is tacitly “seen but unnoticed,” visible only in the breach (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36). Thus one participant reflected:

I tend to get a little disturbed when we are standing in a circle. You have to be careful not to stare at somebody, [but] at the same time it is impossible to avoid it. If you randomly happen to meet the gaze of someone, it feels embarrassing: have you been observing the other person? Should you smile or something? At the same time it gets really obvious how each one is doing a particular exercise … Seeing somebody [a colleague] doing better than me pulled my attention away. (Haley, logbook, winter 2010)

Participants in the class engaged in careful “glance management” to avoid eye contact with each other. They kept their eyes on the instructor as much of the time as possible, not even wanting to turn their heads when the steps required that they face other participants; instead they would “look straight through” them. This practice was also observed by Sassatelli (1999) in her study of fitness gyms: “While remaining on their machines or moving towards the next one, clients may glance around, focusing on anything in particular, and they assume inexpressive, or even hostile, expressions or cast distracted smiles, avoiding eye contact” (p. 234).

Furthermore, civil inattention was not confined to the exercise room; it spilled over into other settings and spaces, including those that were ostensibly less public. For example, the locker room, which was intended to function as a backstage region (Goffman, 1959) for private changing, was not used by the majority of participants, who preferred to get changed in their offices. Although a degree of civil inattention is tactfully observed between strangers in any locker room (Author B, 2009; Sassatelli, 1999), the practice took on a heightened significance here, because of the awkward role conflict the actors felt as exercising colleagues. In the locker room they faced the prospect of encountering not simply strangers, but rather those familiar from their other, workplace setting. Just like the exercise room itself, the locker room brought the colleagues into co-presence in a situation that simultaneously defined them as low ability exercisers, and so made them painfully aware of these two contradictory roles. Consequently, the locker room effectively became an extension of the frontstage region, and required the same rules of civil inattention. Those who did use it found that there was an unspoken agreement about barely acknowledging each other: they would keep their backs to each other, look down at their clothes, and avoid all kinds of speech, down to the briefest greetings and
farewells. Hayley’s reflective commentary on this reminds us of the importance of avoiding binding social relations.

The same goes for the locker room. Here the difference between a training center and the work place is even more tangible. I do not care if somebody sees me in my underwear in a training center. We do not mean anything to each other. But then, immediately when there are colleagues concerned, it matters. It becomes somewhat vulnerable and I feel, literally stripped … It becomes too close and intrusive. (Haley, logbook, winter 2010)

Humor and Playful Sociability

On some occasions, civil inattention was compromised by explicit instructions to co-operate in the execution of an aerobic routine that became more like a social dance. For example, one sequence of steps involved participants standing in two lines facing each other; throughout each chorus of the song, they had to take four steps forwards, clap the hands of the person opposite, and then take four steps back. This inevitably required eye contact and an embarrassing acknowledgment of their intimate co-presence. Not surprisingly, some participants resisted engaging with this insofar as it directly contradicted the polite fiction of being familiar strangers.

The woman standing opposite me is taking short steps, not meeting me on the imaginary halfway line. She keeps her arms close to her body, making me step closer to her. I try and smile and sing along a little, to lighten up the mood, but the woman opposite keeps looking away. (Field notes, 14.09.2009)

Others, however, dealt with this embarrassment by positively embracing it as an opportunity to display their professed lack of binding “groupness.” This involved the use of humor and frivolity to redefine the situation as merely playful, which reduced the fatefulness of any potential faux pas. Humor is a common strategy for dealing with embarrassment (Miller, 1996), which functions to restructure communication patterns that have broken down or been interrupted (Fink & Walker, 1977). Thus some exercisers coated their moves with a protective gloss of humor, such as here in the words of Adriana: “I kind of like the exercise where we are clapping each other’s hands. This makes us laugh a bit and the music is really catchy” (Adriana, interview, winter 2010).

This resonates with Goffman’s (1961) notion of role distance, whereby actors seek to convey that they are more than just the parts that they are playing, and that they have the capacity to critically reflect upon their own performances. Just like the teenagers Goffman observed, who rode the
horses on a merry-go-round with ironic parodies of seriousness (standing up in the stirrups, holding on to the mane, and so on), some of the exercising colleagues used humorous gestures to dispel any suspicions that they might care about the moves, and by implication, that they associated with the group’s identity and collective face. For example, the researcher observed many gentle chuckles and exaggerated gestures as participants overplayed their parts, turning aerobic steps into mock dance moves.

**Muteness**

The fourth collective facework strategy happened in situations where civil inattention was compromised by the instructor verbally addressing the class as a whole, thus indicating their group identity. In response to this, the researcher observed the curious strategy of muteness: the participants simply did not answer the instructor. This gesture of resolute, determined ignorance was initially quite shocking to observe, for it appeared breathtakingly rude.

Every class the instructor addresses the class with different comments, cheers and questions like: “Is everybody doing well today?”; “Give a little bit extra now, this is the last of it!”; “Do you want me to show you one more time?”; “Is the music loud enough?”; “You are looking amazing today. Good job!” These attempts to interact were left completely unattended and unanswered. The participants kept staring straight ahead, as if they were not being addressed. (Field notes, 19.10.2009)

However, when interpreted in light of the actors’ dramaturgical predicament, this strategy makes more sense. Wanting to avoid being classified as “low ability” group members, the participants were loathe to speak out and draw attention to themselves. If they were to do so, this would identify them as one of the group to which she was referring. By contrast, keeping quiet allowed participants to sustain the illusion that they were anonymous and invisible, with no such group identity or social ties. Furthermore, the fact that every participant colluded in doing this, by unspoken tacit agreement, made it easier for each one to be rude: they felt de-individuated and less accountable for their actions (cf. Zimbardo, 2007). A comment from Haley revealed how strong this moratorium on speaking was, and how breaking it constituted a distinct rule infraction:

It is totally out of the question to talk during class! (…) It is completely quiet in the room. It might be so because, by saying something you might draw everybody’s attention to yourself? Everybody listens! (Haley, logbook, spring 2010)
We use the term “muteness” rather than “silence” here to emphasize the agency of the teammates. This was not merely a passive, embarrassed response, of being at a loss as to what to say, but rather an actively chosen and strategically deployed tactic to avoid an unwanted identity. It was a gesture of resistance to a perceived face threat, which functioned to protect the group’s claims to a (non-)identity.

CONCLUSION

Our findings challenge the view espoused in sports science literature, that participating in an exercise group will enhance its members’ cohesiveness, social support, and adherence. Instead, in the setting that we studied, the familiar strangers scenario seemed ostensibly to fit the situation. Crucially, though, we argue that these participants were not true familiar strangers, because of their previous, shared background in the workplace setting. Nevertheless, they strove to achieve the appearance of such, as a definition of the situation, through the pursuit of non-binding relationships and minimal interaction. Defensive, protective, and collective facework strategies were employed to this end to manage the embarrassing role conflict they would otherwise have experienced if they had acknowledged the contaminating co-presence of their work and exercise personae.

Collective facework, in particular, worked simultaneously to affirm one group identity (the claimed status of familiar strangers) while denying another (the stigma of being low ability exercising colleagues), and ironically revealed strong performance team dynamics. That is, in their attempts to pursue non-binding relationships, exercising colleagues actually employed co-operative lines of action that drew them closer together and enhanced their solidarity. Moreover, their mutual awareness of these moments of dramaturgical stress, and willingness to repair the effects upon their shared social face, demonstrate the significance and impact of their pre-existing ties. Dramatizing strangeness, ironically, required collaboration, and was a studied team performance. Paradoxically, therefore, in striving to distance themselves from an unwanted group identity, these teammates betrayed their true status as “bound” relations and highlighted their common dramaturgical fate.
REFERENCES


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Edelmann and Hampson (1981); Turner (1962).
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