

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

Article (Accepted Version)

Rossing, Hilde and Scott, Susie (2014) Familiar strangers: facework strategies in pursuit of non-binding relationships in a workplace exercise group. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 42. pp. 161-184. ISSN 0163-2396

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3 FAMILIAR STRANGERS:
5 FACEWORK STRATEGIES IN
7 PURSUIT OF NON-BINDING
9 RELATIONSHIPS IN A
11 WORKPLACE EXERCISE GROUP
13

15 Hilde Rossing and Susie Scott
17

19 **ABSTRACT**

21 *This chapter reports on the interaction dynamics of a workplace exercise*
23 *group for beginners. Dramaturgical stress occurred here as individuals*
25 *who already knew each other as competent colleagues felt embarrassed*
27 *about encountering one another in this low ability exercise group. To*
29 *resolve this role conflict, participants sought to define themselves as*
31 *familiar strangers (which they were not) through minimal interaction in*
33 *non-binding relationships. This was achieved through three types of face-*
work 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

35 _____
37 Revisiting Symbolic Interaction in Music Studies and New Interpretive Works
39 Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Volume 42, 163–185
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ISSN: 0163-2396/doi:10.1108/S0163-239620140000042009

1 *attempting to deny their “groupness,” these actors actually displayed*
 2 *and reinforced their solidarity as a performance team.*

3 **Keywords:** Case study; exercise; facework; Goffman; groups;
 4 workplace

7
 8 The democratic orientation of some of our newer establishments, however, tends to
 9 throw differently placed members of the same work team together ... causing them
 10 uneasiness ... These difficulties are especially likely to occur ... [in cramped
 11 places] ... for there individuals that are not quite on chatting terms must remain for a
 12 time too close together to ignore the opportunity for informal talk ... Embarrassment
 13 then is built into the establishment ecologically. (Goffman, 1956, p. 270)

17 **FAMILIAR STRANGERS AND THE DENIAL OF** 18 **“GROUPNESS”**

19 Workplace exercise is widely encouraged in the health promotion literature **AU1**
 20 as a means of accessing adults who might benefit from greater physical
 21 activity (World Health Organization, 2007). It is suggested that individuals
 22 prefer to be active in groups rather than alone, and that the interaction
 23 dynamics of an exercise group increase members’ feelings of cohesiveness
 24 and thus levels of adherence (Burk, Carron, & Shapcott, 2008). However, a
 25 problem with this body of research is that it relies upon rather abstract con-
 26 structs, such as cohesion, “groupness,” and social support (Darling-Fisher,
 27 Prosser, & Thomas, 2007; Priebe, Spink, & Wilson, 2010), which are often
 28 measured by quantitative dimensions and discussed in isolation from the
 29 lived experience of their members. More specifically, the dramaturgical
 30 context of self-presentation and impression management (Goffman, 1959)
 31 in these groups has been ignored. In this chapter we explore how the social
 32 setting from which the members of a workplace exercise group are drawn
 33 can paradoxically inhibit the positive effects of groupness by evoking feel-
 34 ings of dramaturgical stress: role conflict, self-consciousness, and interac-
 35 tional strain.

36 The exercise group can be defined as a collective of designated persons
 37 who regularly come together to sustain a common focus of attention (the
 38 pursuit of fitness), typically by signing up to follow a course of weekly
 39

1 sessions. They may recognize each other as “regulars” who hold familiar,
2 secure positions in the structure, as opposed to the more tentative positions
3 of strangers, temporaries, and homecomers (Katovich & Reese, 1987,
4 p. 308), and enjoy socializing together. Such groups can in principle take
5 advantage of the above-mentioned constructs of groupness and cohesion.
6 This can be contrasted with the standard, drop-in style exercise class, where
7 membership is fluid and constantly changing, and individual attendance
8 may be sporadic.

9 The latter can be understood as a gathering of familiar strangers: indivi-
10 duals whom we regularly observe but with whom we do not interact
11 (Milgram, 1977). Familiar strangers seek involvement without commitment
12 to each other, and feel no sense of mutual obligation. Their encounters are
13 focused rather than unfocused (Goffman, 1961), though restricted to situa-
14 tions of mere co-presence (Goffman, 1963), and strangely devoid of depth **AU.2**
15 or intimacy. This uncomplicated, loose relationship is usually sustained
16 without awkwardness by a tacit agreement between parties to mutually
17 ignore each other and behave as if they were each there alone, as in the
18 example of commuters who wait for the same train every day. Paulos
19 (2004) argues that the familiar stranger scenario is becoming an increas-
20 ingly prevalent interactional form in contemporary urban settings and pub-
21 lic places, as people increasingly seek “involvement without commitment”
22 in ever larger arenas of their lives.

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

1 *Role Conflict, Embarrassment, and Dramaturgical Stress*

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

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

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

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

1 status shield protected members against the encroachment of the workplace
into the workout and vice versa.

3 Dramaturgical stress can be caused by the experience of role conflict.
This is a discomfiting feeling of incongruence between two or more drama-
5 turgical roles, identities, or statuses that an actor is expected to perform
within a given situation. In the setting we studied, for example, a woman
7 who was used to being viewed as a competent professional by her collea-
gues would suddenly find herself standing next to the same people, looking
9 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
11 exercise activities, embracing her lower status in this context, or cling to
her more dignified persona from the other context and show role distance
13 (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
15 terrain between the two identities, which cannot be comfortably reconciled.
Thus our participants found that the eagerly anticipated effects of “group-
17 ness” in their aerobics training were compromised by embarrassment, arising
from the stress of managing a role conflict between their work and
19 exercise personae. As exercising colleagues, they faced the challenge of
juggling these two different selves, faces or sets of impressions in front of
21 the same audience, which created interactional strain.

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

Role conflicts of this kind have a tendency to evoke feelings of embar-
35 rassment, which is understood in dramaturgical terms as resulting from an
actor’s inability to perform a social role or project an appropriate public
37 image (Miller, 1996). There is typically a discrepancy between the persona
that one wants to enact and that which one fears one has actually commu-
39 nicated (Edelmann, 1987), or between the impressions consciously “given”
and those unintentionally “given off” (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). At the

1 situational level, meanwhile, a collective sense of embarrassment emerges
when a central assumption of interaction is unexpectedly or unqualifiedly
3 discredited, because one or more actors cannot fulfill their role require-
ments (Gross & Stone, 1964). This may result from a loss of poise (mista-
5 ken identity claims, invasions of private territory, loss of control over the
body or material props), an inappropriate identity performance (where the
7 actor's "announcement" of their identity does not match the normative
expectations of the audience and their "placement" of her or him) (Stone,
9 1962), or an inconsistent identity performance, where two or more roles
contradict each other (a dominant role may be undermined by an adjunct,
11 reserve, or relic identity from another setting) – all of which create a loss
of script and general uncertainty over how to perform (Gross & Stone,
13 1964).

The last of these contingencies – cases of inconsistent identity – relates
15 most clearly to our example of role conflict within the workplace exercise
group. As Goffman (1956) put it, "embarrassment [uneasiness] arises when
17 the self-projected is somehow confronted with another self, which, though
valid in other contexts, cannot be here sustained in harmony with the first"
19 (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 stran-
21 gers 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
23 performance, without the complication of a prior role identity. Instead,
however, participants found themselves in the embarrassing predicament of
25 regularly seeing colleagues whom they recognized but did not necessarily
know well enough to approach or casually converse with, while being
27 unable to escape the situation (as one normally can, following encounters
with strangers). They were kept in a liminal state (Turner, 1967) between
29 their work and exercise identities, being aware of both yet unable to recon-
cile them, nor to embrace either one completely.

31 A common response by individual actors to embarrassment arising from
role conflict is to engage in role or audience segregation (Goffman, 1961):
33 keeping the two performances or people watching them apart, so that one
cannot undermine the other. Indeed, Author A found that this was the pre-
35 ferred 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
37 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
39 means of managing potential embarrassment, which recognize rather than

1 avoid the presentation of contradictory self-images, and which can be
2 carried out within the situation itself.

3

5

Three Kinds of Facework

7 Embarrassment typically arises from a real or imagined loss of face: the
8 public image people want to project, which can be lost, maintained, or
9 enhanced through social interaction (Goffman, 1967). An actor's face there-
10 fore belongs not to him or her but to society, from which it is on loan
11 (Goffman, 1967). Brown and Levinson (1987) further distinguished between
12 different "face needs," which can be positive (acceptance and approval) or
13 negative (freedom from interruption or intrusion), and which must be nego-
14 tiated with one's dramaturgical teammates. Actors are therefore motivated
15 to maintain or keep themselves "in face" by careful impression manage-
16 ment, but are also aware of other people's face needs. Consequently, we
17 found instances of co-operation in face-saving, based on recognition of the
18 "mutual vulnerability of face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66).

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

29 However, this dichotomy leaves unanswered the question of what hap-
30 pens when the compromised face belongs not to an individual but to a
31 group. Goffman's (1959) own notion of performance teams working
32 together to stage a scene or pursue a common line of action lends itself to
33 the possibility of there being a collective face that must be sustained.
34 Subsequently, we propose that there is a third kind of facework ritual,
35 found in situations involving such kinds of group face. "Collective face-
36 work" occurs where the members of a group perceive a threat to their
37 shared face and use tacitly agreed upon strategies to avert this danger. This
38 is a collaborative strategy, although the effects will be felt by each actor
39 insofar as they share responsibility for maintaining the team impression
(Goffman, 1959). Collective facework can be understood as a specific

1 variant of Goffman's broader concept of teamwork: the ethos of co-
operation within a performance team, which incorporates a plethora of
3 strategies.

For example, in his study of how rap singers resolved the embarrassment
5 of members "falling off" the beat during a group performance, Lee (2009)
pointed to instances of collateral face-saving, whereby fellow singers
7 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
9 performance and felt dignity, rather than out of sympathy for the embar-
rassed member: it was the whole group's shared face that was at stake
11 rather than just that individual's. Likewise, in the study we report here, we
suggest that the participants engaged in collective facework by dramatizing
13 strangeness: invoking and performing a definition of themselves as familiar
strangers. Paradoxically, this team effort served to enable them not to
15 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
17 professionals.

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

23

25

METHODS AND DATA

27

The data for this chapter are drawn from a larger project about workplace-
29 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
31 ethnographic case study (Yin, 1984) within a large public research company
in Norway. Due to the sedentary and computerized nature of the work
33 here, the company had a long tradition of caring for its employees' health.
Among other activities, the company provided an exercise program during
35 working hours. A total of 170 participants (approximately one-third of all
employees) were organized into eight exercise groups; this chapter reports
37 on one of these, the Easy Aerobics group. A novel enterprise established
to attract beginners and introduce non-exercising employees to physical
39 activity, this group consisted of 19 signed up members (all women).
Participation was free of charge providing the employees agreed to use an

1 additional hour of their own time for exercise. The sessions involved a
2 variety of aerobic steps, performed to music by participants who stood in a
3 circle and were led by an instructor. All of the informants had been
4 employed at the company for more than five years and shared a common
5 concern of struggling to integrate regular exercise into their lives.

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

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31 **THE PURSUIT OF NON-BINDING RELATIONSHIPS** 32 **THROUGH MINIMAL INTERACTION**

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34
35 A feeling of relative incompetence (Author B, 2007) came into play as
36 the participants reflected on their image in the exercise group from the
37 imagined perspective of others (cf. Mead, 1934), and considered how their
38 performances might negatively affect their social identities in the work-
39 place. There was an anticipation of stigma, as participants worried that
40 their fallible, undignified status as beginners in the workout sessions might

1 “spoil” (Goffman, 1963a, p. 14) their established image of professional
competence:

3

5 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 breath-
7 less poorly executed exercise. (Hayley, logbook, spring 2010)

9 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,
11 interview, spring 2010)

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

27 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)

29

31 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)

33 Minimal interaction made it easier for the members to pretend that they
were familiar strangers by prohibiting any references to social identities
35 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 situa-
37 tion based upon only one set of roles. As we shall demonstrate below, this
carefully stylized pattern of interaction demanded a “ceremonial” form
39 of informal, co-operative control (Katovich, 1996) to regulate the social
distance between actors.

1 A related facet of minimal interaction in this case was that the group
3 members sought to establish what we call “non-binding relationships” with
5 one other. Whereas minimal interaction refers to a situated pattern of con-
7 duct, non-binding relationships refer to the longer term effects of this upon
9 an actor’s identity. It describes a relatively superficial level of social bond,
11 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).

13 Yes, I tend to enjoy a kind of recognition with the other participants that feel secure.
15 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)

17 I do not experience the social component in this group as very important to me, I get
19 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)

21 The pursuit of non-binding relationships through minimal interaction was
23 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.

25

27

DEFENSIVE FACEWORK STRATEGIES

29

Regulating the Spatial Distribution of Bodies

31

33 The first set of facework strategies were performed by individual members
35 to defend themselves against the stigma of being a “low ability” exerciser
amidst a group of significant others whom they perceived as “competent
37 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 sym-
39 bolic 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.

1 Firstly, participants were observed to navigate their way around the
social space of the class by maneuvering their body vehicles (Goffman,
3 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
5 involve the use of physical objects, such as water bottles, as props or mar-
kers of the boundaries around this space (cf. Author B, 2009). At the same
7 time, the actors would feign obliviousness to the fact that they were doing
this, gazing out from their positions, as if seeing everybody but acknowled-
9 ging the presence only of the instructor. The image is evocative of
Goffman’s (1959, p. 16) description of the fictional character Preedy, who
11 affected an air of nonchalant absorption in his carefully studied activities:

13 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
15 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
17 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 pro-
19 tected by exercise equipment lying behind them: a bag, a towel or their water bottle.
(Field notes, 05.10.2009)

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

29 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.
31 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
33 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)

35

Body Gloss

37

39 A second strategy of defensive facework concerns what Goffman terms
“body gloss”: the use of embodied gestures to make facts otherwise unavail-
able “gleanable” (Goffman, 1971, p. 11) – in other words, to highlight

1 features of a performance that might otherwise be misinterpreted, or to
 3 offer a reinterpretation that alters the audience's view. A variant of this
 5 is "circumspection gloss" which refers to gestures aimed at covering up a
 7 blundered or inappropriate interactional move, and disarming onlookers'
 9 suspicions about its implications (Burns, 1992, p. 85).

11 This often occurred when participants felt that they had performed a
 13 step incompetently, threatening their face with the stigmatizing attribute of
 15 being "low ability." As the group members were, by definition, "unaccus-
 17 tomed to exercise," there were several incidences of participants taking a
 19 wrong step, being unable to keep up or having physical pain that prevented
 21 them from executing a move with the full range of motion. Here, it was
 23 common to see people looking self-consciously around to see if anybody
 25 else had noticed their mistake, as if fearing that all eyes were upon them.
 27 The embarrassment that ensued in this scenario arose not only from the
 29 exposure of the actor's low level of fitness, but also from the incongruence
 31 between this and the impression that they wanted to convey to their collea-
 33 gues, of professional competence. Circumspection gloss was then applied to
 35 repair the damaged face by actors moving their bodies out of the group
 37 configuration, thus making a symbolic claim to be "away" (Goffman,
 39 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

33 The next set of facework strategies were what Goffman (1967) calls protec-
 35 tive: those executed by one or more individuals act to save the face of
 37 another individual. The first of these strategies, which we call "sympathetic
 39 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

1 the actors as teammates to face the audience together. For example, if a
 3 participant was seen receiving a lengthy explanation and extra attention
 of comfort and support:

5 After class the instructor went over to a woman who had struggled with her push ups
 7 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
 9 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
 11 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)

13 In another example, teammates provided reassurance that although an
 15 individual was struggling, she had nevertheless improved her fitness level
 since the beginning of the course. Here a woman's feeling of tiredness was
 17 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
 19 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
 21 could handle more physical activity than before. Below we see a whole suc-
 cession of individuals stepping in to offer the same face-saving gestures.

23 The woman in the blue and red shirt said; "Well, I am not getting in any better shape,
 25 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,
 27 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
 29 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
 31 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)

35 *Externalizing Failure to the Situation*

37 A related strategy of protective facework occurred when participants
 stepped in to reassure a struggling member that their problems could be
 39 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

1 normalizing strategy which suggested that, under these circumstances,
3 anyone would experience the same difficulties. This demonstrates again the
5 commitment of teammates to upholding a shared definition of the situation
7 even when it involves collusive acts of mutual deception. Burns (1992)
9 refers to the “polite fictions” (p. 76) that oil the wheels of social interaction:
11 scenarios in which all participants are aware of a truth, but pretend to
13 believe in some alternative version of events to avoid conflict or embarrass-
15 ment. In Glaser and Strauss’s (1964) terms, this constitutes a “pretence
17 awareness context” (p. 61) through which actors bracket out their shared
19 knowledge of an underlying reality. Participants enjoin each other to sus-
21 tain whatever fictions are operative at the time and functional in sustaining
23 their lines of self-presentation. Thus, as well as saving the face of another,
25 each actor also “insulates himself or herself by blindness, half-truths,
27 illusions and rationalizations” (Ferguson, 2009, p. 75).

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

23 The room facilities are small, without proper air conditioning. Almost every group
25 session for the first months, participants and the instructor have addressed how hot and
27 sweaty they are getting in this room. As the instructor pointed out, “I am getting really
29 hot today, how about you?” She went on, “This room is really hot, and it is difficult to
31 get good air conditioning, I will call and ask maintenance.” In the middle of the class a
33 woman whispered, asking me if I could try and have the doors opened, to let some air
35 into the room. The instructor noticed and said, “Yes, it is really extra hot in here today.
37 I wonder if it also has something to do with the weather outside.” (Field notes,
39 09.11.2009)

31 Often the instructors were complicit in this, as they could see that several
33 members of the group were feeling self-conscious. Interestingly, rather than
35 engaging in backstage conspiratorial “staging talk” (Goffman, 1959,
37 pp. 173–174), whereby they might have come out of character and agreed
39 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:

39 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

1 talk to maintenance several times, but they say there is nothing more they can do with
 2 the air con.” Instructor 2: “Do you think we can shift the schedule a little bit to try and
 3 air the room as best as possible between the groups?” Instructor 1: “Yes I can ask,
 4 and I will leave the fans on, because these women really do not appreciate it being too
 5 warm. I think it is difficult for them to exercise.” (Field notes, 05.10.2009)

6 Although these protective facework gestures may seem friendly and altruistic,
 7 they were ultimately still aimed at sustaining minimal interaction, by
 8 avoiding the acknowledgment of a group identity and its incumbent binding
 9 obligations. These actors were motivated by a need to distance themselves from the
 10 stigmatizing label of the whole group being of “low ability,” which was hinted at by
 11 individual protestations of incompetence. Thus, only when members felt the utterance of
 12 an individual threatened the group’s fiction that they were familiar strangers, did they
 13 concede to encounter each other directly.
 14

17 COLLECTIVE FACEWORK STRATEGIES

18 The third set of what we call “collective” facework strategies occur when
 19 actors move in to save the face not of an individual but of the group as a
 20 whole. This usually happens when actors recognize each other as teammates
 21 with a common dramaturgical fate: beyond the face threats to individual
 22 lines of self-presentation, there is a collective team impression (Goffman,
 23 1959) to be controlled and managed. In this case, our exercising colleagues
 24 perceived a threat to their assumed identity as familiar strangers, and to the
 25 definition of the situation they upheld on the basis of this claim: that they
 26 had only non-binding relationships with no prior ties and need only pursue
 27 minimal interaction. Paradoxically, then, the official claim that they worked
 28 collaboratively to defend was that they were not a group. Collective face-
 29 work functioned to affirm one claimed group identity (familiar strangers)
 30 while denying another (low ability exercising colleagues): an unwanted
 31 social face that had been bestowed upon them. It is ironic that, in attempt-
 32 ing to deny their groupness, the participants actually revealed just that, for
 33 collective facework is a team performance.
 34

35 This collective facework can also be seen as an example of Katovich’s
 36 (1996, p. 262) ceremonial control, one of four types of informal,
 37 co-operative dramaturgical regulation that occurs when actors are com-
 38 mitted to upholding interaction order. In contrast to the “instrumental”
 39 control that develops between people in stable, permanent relationships,

1 “interpersonal” control between actors co-operating on a task with a
3 shared focus of attention, and “categorical” control based on membership
5 categories, “ceremonial” control occurs between actors who meet in fleeting,
7 situational encounters, where their regular and repeated co-presence
9 demands some kind of polite acknowledgment. Reminiscent of Goffman’s
11 (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.

13 However, ceremonial control can have an altogether different meaning
15 when it takes place between interactors who share a social past (and so
17 are “familiar”), but feel too embarrassed, awkward, or reluctant to refer to
19 this in the current situation. Katovich (1996, p. 262) gives the example of
21 passing an acquaintance on the street that one does not particularly like,
23 and restricting the interaction to a hurried, unsmiling nod to avoid talking.
25 In the Easy Aerobics class, our participants had a shared and continuing
27 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.

27

29

Civil Inattention

31

33 The first collective facework strategy was “civil inattention” a term
35 employed by Goffman (1963b, p. 86) in a different text that nevertheless
37 resonates strongly with his essay on facework. Civil inattention refers
39 to the tendency of strangers meeting in fleeting encounters to glance briefly
at but then away from each other, to communicate that while they respec-
tively 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, cour-
tesy without conversation” (Lofland, 1998, p. 30).

1 Moreover, this interpersonal ritual is also suited to familiar strangers,
3 who seek to define themselves as (absolute) strangers and thus effectively
5 become so for the duration of the situation. As with many norms of inter-
7 actional etiquette, this rule is tacitly “seen but unnoticed,” visible only in
9 the breach (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36). Thus one participant reflected:

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

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

31 Furthermore, civil inattention was not confined to the exercise room; it
33 spilled over into other settings and spaces, including those that were ostens-
35 sibly less public. For example, the locker room, which was intended to
37 function as a backstage region (Goffman, 1959) for private changing, was
39 not used by the majority of participants, who preferred to get changed in
41 their offices. Although a degree of civil inattention is tactfully observed
43 between strangers in any locker room (Author B, 2009; Sassatelli, 1999),
45 the practice took on a heightened significance here, because of the awkward
47 role conflict the actors felt as exercising colleagues. In the locker room they
49 faced the prospect of encountering not simply strangers, but rather those
51 familiar from their other, workplace setting. Just like the exercise room
53 itself, the locker room brought the colleagues into co-presence in a situa-
55 tion that simultaneously defined them as low ability exercisers, and so
57 made them painfully aware of these two contradictory roles. Consequently,
59 the locker room effectively became an extension of the frontstage region,
61 and required the same rules of civil inattention. Those who did use it found
63 that there was an unspoken agreement about barely acknowledging each
65 other: they would keep their backs to each other, look down at their
67 clothes, and avoid all kinds of speech, down to the briefest greetings and

1 farewells. Hayley's reflective commentary on this reminds us of the impor-
2 tance of avoiding binding social relations.

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

9

11 *Humor and Playful Sociability*

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

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

25 Others, however, dealt with this embarrassment by positively embracing it
26 as an opportunity to display their professed lack of binding "groupness."
27 This involved the use of humor and frivolity to redefine the situation as
28 merely playful, which reduced the fatefulness of any potential faux pas.
29 Humor is a common strategy for dealing with embarrassment (Miller,
30 1996), which functions to restructure communication patterns that have
31 broken down or been interrupted (Fink & Walker, 1977). Thus some exer-
32 cisers coated their moves with a protective gloss of humor, such as here in
33 the words of Adriana: "I kind of like the exercise where we are clapping
34 each other's hands. This makes us laugh a bit and the music is really
35 catchy" (Adriana, interview, winter 2010).

36 This resonates with Goffman's (1961) notion of role distance, whereby
37 actors seek to convey that they are more than just the parts that they are
38 playing, and that they have the capacity to critically reflect upon their own
39 performances. Just like the teenagers Goffman observed, who rode the

1 horses on a merry-go-round with ironic parodies of seriousness (standing
 3 up in the stirrups, holding on to the mane, and so on), some of the exercis-
 5 ing colleagues used humorous gestures to dispel any suspicions that they
 7 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.

9

Muteness

11

13 The fourth collective facework strategy happened in situations where civil
 15 inattention was compromised by the instructor verbally addressing the
 17 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 breath-
 takingly rude.

19

21 Every class the instructor addresses the class with different comments, cheers and ques-
 23 tions 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 com-
 pletely unattended and unanswered. The participants kept staring straight ahead, as if
 they were not being addressed. (Field notes, 19.10.2009)

25

27 However, when interpreted in light of the actors' dramaturgical predica-
 29 ment, 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 agree-
 33 ment, 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
 35 Haley revealed how strong this moratorium on speaking was, and how
 breaking it constituted a distinct rule infraction:

37

39 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)

1 We use the term “muteness” rather than “silence” here to emphasize the
agency of the teammates. This was not merely a passive, embarrassed
3 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
5 gesture of resistance to a perceived face threat, which functioned to protect
the group’s claims to a (non-)identity.

7
9
11 **CONCLUSION**

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

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

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