Greetings

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The feminist organization, Hollaback, has produced a video (Hollaback, 2014) that seemed to me to provide a convincing demonstration of the phenomenal extent to which women may be subjected to harassment while merely walking down the street. But my reaction was apparently not typical.

It is remarkable how many men reacting to the video were intent on denying that it demonstrated how common harassment is but also that among the angriest were those who focused on the fact that ‘all’ many of the men were doing was greeting the woman. Thus, typical responses to this aspect of the video included:

‘So...somebody saying to you “How are you doing” is harassment? I give up.’ (Steve Hill)

‘So saying Hi to a woman is now labelled harassment.’ (Dan MacGrath)

‘There is of course a big difference between paying attention and being a pest...but where that line is drawn depends on an individual point of view.’ (Rob Chisholm)

Above comments from The Independent 30 October in response to an article by Bryony Beynon about the Hollaback video. (Beynon, 2014)

Similar but perhaps even more argumentative reactions were shown elsewhere:

‘...most people were polite to her...Most of the people said how are you, how are you doing today or have a nice day.’ (Hybrids project)

‘So you don’t have the freedom of speech anymore or what’s going on???’ (Ozzy)

‘That was some of the most horrific street harassment I have ever seen. That vile piece of subhuman trash who said ‘Hi. How are you this morning?’ should be locked up to never see the light of day.’ (deme 9873)

‘When women like this try and pretend that every time a man talks to them without an express invitation to do so is harassing him. Well that just trivializes the entire situation and distracts from the instances of real harassment.’(Paul Foster)

‘One guy just said good morning. LOL.’ (Johnny Quest 456)

Above comments from You Tube, responding to video 10 Hours of walking in NYC as a woman labelled on You Tube as Street/Harassment Video. (2014)

As a way to consider the validity of these comments, it will be helpful to explore what sociology can teach us about greeting behavior. Peter McHugh and colleagues have sought to formulate the norms of greetings, building on some material first analyzed by the ethnomethodologist Roy Turner. Initially they suggest that: there is ‘a norm that requires acquainted persons to acknowledge one another on meeting face to face’. (McHugh et al. 1974, 113)

However, on reflection ‘acquainted’ seems too imprecise as a depiction of the distinguishing characteristic of those to be greeted. Nor does this term capture the fact that certainly one can and even must, in some situations, greet persons with whom one is
not already acquainted. It follows that, while it does seem right that to greet is to acknowledge something between oneself and one or more others, it is not yet clear exactly what is to be acknowledged. Furthermore, in that there are certainly other ways to acknowledge besides greeting, it is also not yet clear exactly what type of acknowledging a greeting is.

McHugh et al. go on to suggest that to greet is to make a kind of ‘claim’ on another. (122) What it claims is some kind of ‘relationship’ to them. (123) But as that is not the only way of claiming a relationship, still further specification is required now of the kind of relationship that enables or can even require a greeting.

The basic idea put forward by McHugh et al. is that the distinctive realm of the greeting is to acknowledge when a relationship is there, however minimal, and indeed, to need to do so especially when the relationship is only minimal. (124) That acknowledging a minimal relationship is the realm of the greeting can be seen by how this fact affects the appropriateness of a greeting. To acknowledge a relationship only by greeting is insufficient when the bond is much more than minimal. Thus: ‘Imagine someone returning home from the wars and saying ‘Hi’ to his lover. Even if you can picture such a thing, would you call that Hi a greeting?’ (114) It is hard to picture such a thing because that sort of relationship is not adequately acknowledged by a greeting. Much more is required. And if it did happen it would probably be right to call it something other than a greeting, e. g. a joke.

This is not to say that there are not occasions when a greeting is allowed or even required when the persons are not, in fact, acquainted. Circumstances can be such that persons who are not acquainted are, as it were, thrown into some sort of common situation with a stranger that can or even must be acknowledged. Sitting next to one another on a plane, particularly if it happens to be a long flight, passing by one another on a country path, particularly in an out of the way place, and walking up to the bar in some pubs would all be cases in point. However, it certainly doubtful that watching someone walk by on a busy street in Manhattan is any kind of relationship to them or, in other words amounts to having anything at all in common with them that deserves to be acknowledged by a greeting.

Enough has been said to establish that what the commenters quoted above were claiming is ‘merely’ polite behavior actually amounts to a norm violation. What though can one respond if they concede this point but argue that all that means is that, whether rule violator or not, they should be credited with being friendly? It will help to resist that possible response if we can show not just that there are greeting rules but that these rules are not at all arbitrary or, to put it positively, that there is something good, something justifiable about the existing rules of greeting behavior.

There could well be several ways to defend greeting rules but the way McHugh et al. adopt is suggested in their admittedly cryptic proposal that ‘a greeting is an invitation, however momentary, to suspend differentiation, stratification, evaluation, specialization’. (124) As a way of elaborating and explaining this proposition, it can be suggested that the social worlds to which we belong have as a major property the fact that we share things with those from whom we are simultaneously differentiated. For example, those who share a place of work will normally be differentiated by status. Those who share the fact that they meet every day at the same time in the same newsagent are clearly differentiated depending on who is the customer and who is the shopkeeper. Greetings would seem to be the way and perhaps even the unique way in which we can at least temporarily ignore whatever differentiates us by acknowledging what we do, after all, have in common, a
shared place of work, a shared commitment to a particular shop, etc. As such, even strangers, i.e. those who are most clearly differentiated, can be called upon to suspend their differentiation if they come to share something, in our examples a country path or adjacent seats on a long distance flight. They manage an acknowledgment of what they have in common by a greeting.

Clearly we have relationships with friends, family, and co-workers but there are also numerous others with whom one is in regular contact. There is the person one tends to buy a sandwich from, the person who cuts one’s hair, the servitor at one’s university, the regular mailman and so on. It is certainly a fact that we should greet these people and not just when one sees them in situ but also (though in such cases recognition can be difficult) when one sees them elsewhere. Greetings in such instances are the specific way in which one can acknowledge that one does have at least something in common-something shared- with these people. One can put it that by greeting them one is including them within the boundaries of one’s world. One could go further and say the greeting is a way of respecting them, even as it is not to deny that they may have only a peripheral place in your world. They are still in rather than out, part of your social world. Again, being passed by in Manhattan is not an example of having anything in common to be acknowledged.

If we have sufficiently depicted the expected realm of greetings, what does it reveal about any one who oversteps the realm by greeting someone when they cannot really be said to share anything at all with them? Are they just being friendly? With regard to the data being analyzed, the most relevant point made by McHugh et al. is when they remark, in a footnote, that persons:

> Can use words of greeting to impress or manipulate but then they would be doing impression or manipulation and not greeting. (124)

The potential to use greeting words to impress rather than really greet lies in the possibility of claiming to share something with a person with whom really one has nothing at all in common. An example would be saying ‘HI’ to a celebrity. On so doing, one is not suspending differentiation in favor of asserting some basic commonality. Instead one is acting as if persistent and eradicable differences that do exist are not there at all. As such, instead of acknowledging common ground, it amounts to entering someone else’s space, a space where one has no actual part, no share. It is then, intrusive behavior.

The great problem with what the men in the video are doing is that it amounts to claiming, with no basis, that they share something with the woman who walks by. It really is, then, a violation of her boundaries, an intrusion. We can add that, therefore, harassment may well not be too strong a term for their behavior. While the behavior is, admittedly, and as many of the commenters are so eager to point out, not physically violent, it really is, to repeat, a violation, not just of a norm but of what we suggest this specific norm is able to mark, the boundaries of a person’s social world.

However, returning to the above explanation of the motivation for illegitimate greetings, it is admittedly difficult to understand who the men in the video are trying to impress. One possibility is that it could be themselves by demonstrating their ‘power’ to obliterate boundaries. Arguably, though it will prove more relevant to interpret their actions as a form of the other purpose for illegitimate greeting behavior mentioned by McHugh et al., namely manipulation.
The potential for using greeting words to manipulate depends on an additional aspect, not yet discussed, of greeting norms. Reflecting the fact that what is to be acknowledged by a greeting is that people share something, the commonality is, as it were, ratified when the greeting is not only initiated but also, as it is said, ‘returned.’ The potential for manipulation lies in the fact that one can feel a certain obligation to return the greeting even if one does not at all see anything shared- anything in common-that makes it necessary or desirable to suspend differentiation. One is in danger of being manipulated into appearing to agree that one has something in common with one who one experiences as nothing more than an intruder. While it is true that the woman in the video does not respond and so could be said to manage to avoid this form of manipulation, it is worth examining what some of the commenters on the video make of this behavior on her part.

There is one group who are even angrier than those who object to a ‘greeting’ being complained about: those angry at the woman for her lack of response. Thus:

‘...It was “how you doing?” and she did not respond to him...She was discriminating against him by not responding.’ (Orb 6918)

‘....most people were polite to her and she rudely ignored them’ (Hybrides Project)

‘...It’s actually quite egotistical to ignore compliments...Be grateful’ (Mike Barker)

‘And we’re not gonna mention how rude the chick is??’ (Thabelo Manwadu)

‘...the guy that told her to smile was right. He said something nice to her and she didn’t even say thank you.’ (Aaron Stone)

‘The only rude person in this video is the bitch ignoring non-agressive completely polite “catcalls” of people who just say “hi”.’ (4 cellar door)

‘Saying nothing is weird.’ (Alex Morley)

‘Girl acting like trash, when people are being friendly and polite you could at least recognize them.’ (Armen sur)

‘She just looks like an unappreciative bitch.’ (Dazn-1997)

‘...Really she can at least say something. It’s kind of rude to just look angry and storm away.’ (Quinn Buler)

All the above from You tube.

Far from thinking that the men in the video are violating a rule, this group of commenters think that it is the woman who is the rule violator. She has failed to return (what they think of as) a greeting, a behavior they find unacceptable.

But how unacceptable is it? The Turner paper included some material which, as reanalyzed by McHugh et al., can help us decide. An ex mental patient, called Bert by Turner, is complaining about one of his recent interactions. He reports, about a person he encountered in the street:
Yeah, yeah, that’s correct. I uh uh really did know h and uh he was with me in the Alexander Psychiatric Institute in Alexander, Western Province...we always buddied around together when uh were at the hospital...And uh I saw him out at Western City and I said ‘im: Hello, how are ya doing? He said ‘I don’t know who are you? Well, look it, I said ‘You must know.’ He says, No, I don’t know you. Now he was with another fellow there too-what he didn’t want to admit he was in the mental hospital...He didn’t want him to know. (McHugh et al., 110-11, citing Turner, 1971, 176)

The clear relevance to our examples is that we too have someone not saying Hello back and that being seen as grounds for complaint. After a lengthy analysis, McHugh et al. conclude that Bert’s complaint is indeed justified because he has been the victim of a snub but their analysis also concludes that the phenomenon of snubbing requires more than just the factual absence of a returned greeting.

The first and most obvious way in which an absent returned greeting need not be a snub is that to snub ‘it must be seen that alter chose not to return the greeting’. (116, emphasis in original) If, for example, for some reason the recipient failed to see or hear the greeting, she does not deserve to be accused of a snub: ‘For a snub to occur it must be seen to be deliberate.’ (127) As some confirmation of this feature, while persons might well apologize if they failed to return a greeting due to the accident of missing the signal, their apology is likely to take the form just of explaining why they did not reply, e. g. the sun was in my eyes and I could not see you, rather than explaining why they snubbed you. While one can, of course, apologize for a snub, in that case it could not take the simple form of explaining why you were not aware of the greeting.

Whatever clarification of the nature of snubs the fact that they must be done deliberately offers, it should be evident that this criterion cannot be used to defend the woman in the video. Part of the point of the whole exercise is to demonstrate that the woman is being visibly and audibly harassed, including by the men who ‘greet’ her. She is aware of what is being said and done and therefore must be said to have chosen not to say anything in reply.

However, there is also another way in which a returned greeting can be absent without it constituting a snub. McHugh et al. ask us to imagine the following scenario: ‘A: Hi. B: Who are you?’ (117) Assuming that B is being sincere, it is not quite right to say she has snubbed A. In this case, B can be saying, as far as I know I have nothing in common with you and, until that is proved otherwise, it is actually inappropriate of me to return the greeting. The way A would be likely to try to rectify the situation confirms the point. For example, A could explain: ‘I am Joe Bunz...I used to be your babysitter when your family lived on Roscoe Street.’ (118) Were B to continue to refuse to greet A back, then, certainly, she is doing snubbing. Hence McHugh at al. can say that snub: ‘is not done out of ignorance but with the understanding that it denies ‘what is’.’ (130) It refuses to acknowledge a relationship, even though, however minimal it might be, there really is one. In the original Turner material, this is perhaps seen most clearly (and poignantly) in Bert’s final conclusion that the person who snubbed him ‘didn’t want to know his friends.’ (McHugh et al., 111, citing Turner, 176)

However, this is not to say you have to be friends with someone in order to be snubbed by them if they don’t return one’s greeting. One sees this, in the case of friends or lovers who have a quarrel that, alas, irreparably damages their relationship to the extent that they refuse to acknowledge each other’s existence. Typically there comes a point when they
finally stop snubbing each other but that does not mean they have become friends again. When they start greeting one another again, they have, as it is said, at least become civil with one another, the civility taking the form of no longer denying that there is some relation between them, albeit the relationship in this case being their shared history.

The main conclusion of this section is that if the greeting is not clearly legitimate, i.e. based on something shared with the greeter, no matter how minimal, that the recipient can understand as there, it is no snub to not return it. Therefore, the woman’s admittedly deliberate absent returned greetings amount to, certainly not snubs, and probably, we can add, the most defensible response to the circumstances she finds herself in. Instead of failing to acknowledge what is there, she is refusing, even in the face of pressure, to affirm what is not there.

footnote:

Most defensible in that ignoring but also recording the ‘greetings’ is less risky than the original (as the name implies) Hollaback tactic of hollering back.. Having said that, it is worth noting, however, that the actress who volunteered for the video has since been subjected to death and rape threats.

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It would be wrong for a paper that identifies a serious problem not to consider what form a solution to it might take. What role can what this paper has been doing, namely identifying social rules and suggesting why these rules are of value, play in eliminating the behavior described in the video and changing the attitudes of those who defend it?

While it is just possible that some small number of these offenders and commenters might not be aware of these rules or (perhaps more likely) not be fully cognizant of their importance for social life, most are almost certainly aware that what they are doing or reacting to is not in keeping with overall social norms. The main evidence of this awareness is the fact that they would be unlikely to similarly ‘greet’ any walkers who happened to be male.

Actually working toward changing this behavior and attitudes would require some sense of what, if not sheer ignorance of the rules or ignorance of their value, is causing it. A major factor is surely that this form of harassment is not illegal. If it were illegal, it would almost certainly become much less common but, as this is a practical impossibility, we need to look elsewhere for a solution.

What can be suggested is that many men must think that, even if this behavior does amount to a rule violation, albeit in their eyes a slight one, it is within their rights-their prerogative- as men. The question then becomes how to change these men’s views of what is within their rights. Clearly, the impetus for such change must come from social movements such as Hollaback, the organization behind the video that stimulated this paper.

The question then becomes the relation between this paper and the video. With this in mind, it is informative to consider aspects of the organization’s mission statement. That states that the goal is ‘to develop innovative strategies to ensure equal access to public space.’ (Hollaback Website) The movement, then, is part of the much wider struggle for equality but it is also worth noting that, in this particular realm, innovative strategies are
required. That these are necessary is a consequence of the group’s understanding of the specific nature of street harassment. They depict it as a power of men that it is possible ‘to take...away by exposing it.’ (Website). That it needs to be exposed means that many deny its existence and perhaps especially its extent. Clearly the video is one excellent example of an innovative strategy for exposing its extent.

However, the data cited in this paper indicate that, for some types of street harassment, just exposure may not be enough. There will also need to be struggles over the meaning of what is revealed. The commenters resist the point of the video by arguing about what it means. Even though they do not deny that the behavior in this video exists, they prefer to think that all it shows is that the men in the video are being polite or friendly and, furthermore, that the woman deserves to be criticized for snubbing them. Therefore, besides exposing the behavior and its extent, formulating its meaning—the meaning of what can appear to be greetings and what can appear to be snubs—all the work of this paper—needs to be an additional component of the struggle.

References

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