Respect and agency: An empirical exploration

Current Sociology

61(1) 57–75

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission: sagepub.

co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0011392111421531

csi.sagepub.com

Werner Schirmer

Uppsala University, Sweden

Linda Weidenstedt

Stockholm University, Sweden

Wendelin Reich

Uppsala University, Sweden

Abstract

Both in social science and in everyday life, ‘respect’ is an important and widely used term to describe positive conduct of one person towards another. However, just what respectful behaviour refers to, and how it can be differentiated from considerate, tolerant, kind, etc. behaviour continues to elude social-scientific analysis. In order to investigate the meaning that people give to the concept of respect, the authors carried out focus groups in that participants discussed two vignettes regarding respect and a very closely related concept – considerateness. A systematic analysis of the transcripts preliminary supported the study’s hypothesis that respect is a form of behaviour which refers to the ascribed agency of another person, as opposed to non-agential properties such as needs or feelings.

Keywords

agency, communication, focus groups, respect, social interaction

Corresponding author:

Werner Schirmer, Uppsala University, Department of Sociology, Box 624, 75126 Uppsala, Sweden.

Email: werner.schirmer@soc.uu.se

Respect seems so fundamental to our experience of social relations and self that we ought to define more clearly what it is. (Sennett, 2004: 49)

Introduction

The term 'respect' has experienced a remarkable public revitalization in recent years (De Cremer and Mulder, 2007), spearheading governmental and local campaigns in the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and other countries. Perhaps due to the increasing ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of national populations, respect has come to be seen as a 'least common denominator' of good social relations. Recently, respect has also become an attractive theoretical term for social science, as it appears to describe a very basic type of relationship between individuals (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2002; Colwell, 2007; Honneth, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999; Wolf, 2008). Like many other fundamental concepts in the social sciences, the meaning of respect continues to be subject to debate (Sennett, 2004: 49). The trend during the last decade has been to emphasize the positive, nurturing and egalitarian side of respect. In the empirical literature, this trend is manifest when authors operationalize respect in terms of concepts such as belonging (De Cremer and Tyler, 2005), admiration (Parse, 2006), self-esteem (Huo and Molina, 2006) or liking (Ellemers et al., 2004). Both Colwell (2007) and McDowell (2007) distinguish respect from deference, associating the former with egalitarian and the latter with hierarchical situations. Likewise, recent theoretical scholarship has tended to connect respect with caring and supportiveness, and to insist on a fundamentally egalitarian, mutualistic understructure at the heart of truly respectful relationships (Honneth, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999; Sennett, 2004).

However, this recent trend has not found universal approval. Researchers of non-European countries in particular admonish that respect towards parents, towards the elderly or towards people of rank does not fit the western conception of a mutualistic relationship, at least not in any simple sense (Bankston III and Hildago, 2006; Li, 2006; Sung, 2001). But once we are willing to give up the idea of equality and care as integral to respect, it becomes difficult to see how recent conceptions of respect constitute theoretical progress over Goffman's classical observations on the normative bedrock of everyday interactions (Goffman, 1956, 1963). Goffman showed that phenomena such as deference, demeanour or civility can be implicative of *both* egalitarian and hierarchical relationships (see also Whitman, 2000).

Against this background, we suggest that it is meaningful to search for a more general definition for the main constituent of respect. We concentrate on an aspect of respect that has hardly been proposed explicitly by social scientists, namely the *ascribed agency of the respectee*. However, implicit references to agency appear frequently in the literature. In a set of interviews conducted by Jones, for example, the 'key to "respect" was being listened to, being given time and having your experiences, ideas and views taken seriously and valued' (Jones, 2002: 348). Buttner's examination of what students consider respectful teaching revealed concerns such as: being asked for their opinions, having their concerns listened to and having their responses taken into account in decision-making processes (Buttner, 2004: 324ff.). Van Quaquebeke and Eckloff's study of respectful leadership found that respondents connect respect strongly with response-items such as 'trusts my ability to independently and self-reliantly

perform well', 'recognizes me as a full-fledged counterpart' and 'takes me and my work seriously' (Van Quaquebeke and Eckloff, 2009). Finally, on a more macro-social level and using the example of government-funded housing projects, Sennett (2004: 13) put forward the idea that governments can only respect their subjects to the extent that they grant them 'control over their own lives', as opposed to rendering them 'spectators to their own needs'.¹

The results of a minor pilot study with 51 field interviews, conducted in a large Swedish city, point in a similar direction. We asked participants of various ages to, among other things, name *spontaneously* one or several prototypical behaviours which they associate with the term 'respect'. The two most common types of behaviour mentioned by our respondents were 'listening to others' (29 percent of participants) and 'not interfering with others' (also 29 percent), which both presuppose a situation where one individual bows to the agency of another (whether or not the first individual also 'likes', 'admires', 'fears', etc. the other).

Considering the amount of accounts to agency in the respect literature as well as in the pilot study, we reasoned that a further exploration of the respect–agency connection might be a fruitful contribution to research on respect. Therefore, this study explores the empirical foundations of the idea that respect refers to *the treatment of another individual as an agent*. In other words, showing respect towards other persons is suggested to mean the symbolic, communicative act of giving their agency the elbowroom they need in order to control their environment in a skillful, knowledgeable and independent manner (see Schirmer et al., 2012). In order to investigate if people do, indeed, relate the meaning of respect to what we refer to as 'ascribed agency', we conducted focus groups in which participants were asked to discuss two vignettes regarding respect and a very closely related concept – considerateness. The study explores not only the meaning participants assign to the concept of respect and considerateness, but also the extent to which respect is being discriminated from considerateness along the agency dimension. Before we detail the methodology behind the study, we discuss the literature on the constructivist approach to agency and argue for its potential connections to respect.

Ascribed agency and respect from a theoretical point of view

Constructivist notions of agency

Agency is a term that has given rise to a rich set of theoretical controversies across several social sciences. The point we try to make here is that there exists a significant difference in the ways in which two of the associated discourses have conceptualized the term. On one side, psychologists and philosophers tend to take agency as an intrinsic, complex capacity of human beings which allows them to act upon their environment, to exhibit self-control, to pursue plans, etc. (Bandura, 2001; Frankfurt, 1971; Searle, 1983). This thread has been picked up by a number of sociologists (most notably Archer, 2003; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992).

On the other side of the – surprisingly sharp – dividing line, we find constructivist social theorists, such as Meyer and Jepperson (2000), Fuchs (2001) or Loyal and Barnes (2001), who argue against the adoption of philosophical concepts which, they believe,

violate fundamental assumptions of sociological theory (see also Collins, 1992). Fuchs, especially, urges his readers not to overlook sociological contributions which treat agency primarily as a *social ascription*, hence as a construction that emerges from symbolic interaction and communication. The ascriptive approach to agency goes back to Parsons (see Parsons and Shils, 1951) and Schütz (1962, 1967). In Schütz's influential proposal, individual agents going about the business of everyday life produce a continuous but in itself meaningless flow of actions. It is only in hindsight, through a 'synthesis of re-cognition' (Schütz, 1967: 83, borrowing a term from Husserl), that this continuous flow can be decomposed into a sequence of discrete *acts*. Drawing on Parsons and Schütz, Luhmann (1995: Ch. 4; 2005 [1978]) proposes that such an observational decomposition of a ('natural' but meaningless) flow of action is at play when people make sense of other people's actions. This proposal implies that other people's acts, and the agency which can be held accountable for these, are not simply objective facts of the world, but observational ascriptions which follow their own social logic and are themselves the subject of frequent negotiation and conflict (Reich, 2010). One straightforward illustration is the case of an insulting remark made by a person from another culture. Here, the addressee must decide whether to observe the remark as a cultural mishap (hence not attributable to the agency of the speaker) or as intentional (hence due to the agency of the speaker) and respond appropriately. The empirical relevance of the ascriptive conception of agency lies in the fact that it does not force analysts to presuppose agency whenever a human being enters the stage; instead it allows them to treat agency as a variable property that human beings can have and be given to greater or lesser degrees in different situations or contexts. According to the ascriptive approach to agency, another person can be observed/treated *as* an agent (someone who is or who is not in control over themselves and their environment) or *as* a patient (the opposite of an agent), and this can vary by degrees (e.g. a king is given more agency than a superintendent).² As will be seen, the interesting issue does not lie in the agent/patient distinction per se but in the communicative processes through which persons acquire the position of agent or patient on a moment-by-moment basis and to greater or lesser degrees.

Ascribed agency as the target of respectful and disrespectful behaviour

Consider the illustration of a man who *intentionally* insults another man. The behaviour is interesting because it *conveys* communicatively that the speaker does not count on the agency of the addressee (with regard to a specific and momentary task/problem): the behaviour of the insulter conveys that he does not count on the insultee's right or ability to punish the wrongdoer. Now consider a man who makes a polite remark to a senior person of high rank. This behaviour is the precise counterpart of the preceding variant because it conveys communicatively that the speaker yields to the agency of the addressee.

Our theoretical hypothesis is that communicative expressions of this kind – affirmations of, and challenges to, the agential abilities and rights of others – are the primary reference of respectful/disrespectful behaviour. Thus, following this idea, the notion of respect would refer to communicative behaviour that explicitly or implicitly 'tells' an addressee

that one reckons with their agency; conversely, disrespect would refer to behaviour that tells the addressee that one disregards their agency.

Interpreting the distinction between respect and considerateness

Methodological reflections

It has often been pointed out in the literature that the concept of respect is multifaceted. Frei and Shaver's investigation of respect as an interpretive term of everyday life notes that respect is 'an inherently fuzzy concept' (Frei and Shaver, 2002: 123). Their study as well as those of other researchers (e.g. Langdon, 2007: 474ff.) pursues an explicitly inductive strategy that relies on open-ended questions through which participants are asked to state defining characteristics of respect. The methodological problem we see in this approach is that people's ability to *use* a concept and their ability to *define* it are two separate issues, and very little is known about their relationship from a cognitive-linguistic point of view (see the detailed discussion in Pinker, 2007: Ch. 3). The high degree of variation and 'fuzziness' reported by the aforementioned studies may thus be an artefact that underestimates the systematicity with which people select the term 'respect' over its close semantic relatives (such as tolerance, deference, liking or admiration) in everyday communication. What we need, then, is an approach that is different in two regards. Given that we follow a theoretical assumption based on empirical results from the literature, we chose a less inductive and more theory-driven procedure. While individually asking respondents for definitions generates rather than reduces fuzziness, we decided to have respondents discuss and reason in focus groups the (dis)respectfulness of specific social situations in which the agency of interactants becomes relevant (see later). We then ascertained whether ordinary people dissociate 'respect' from other concept *insofar as* the former but not the latter describes the treatment of other persons as agents. The present article focuses on considerateness as a contrasting concept.

Respect vs considerateness

The reason we opted for 'considerateness' is that this term is probably the closest etymological relative of 'respect', at least in Germanic and Romance languages.³ In many of them, the two words share a semantic root of 'looking [back/closely] at' in the sense of 'taking into account'. Both terms, thus, share a positive connotation. However, we project that the abstract 'entity' which is typically 'taken into account' by respectful vs considerate behaviour differs along the agency dimension. That is, while respect involves a positive action directed primarily at the *ascribed agency* of the other, considerateness involves a positive action which is directed at *non-agential* aspects of the other's person, such as their feelings or their needs. The difference can be illustrated, for example, by the case of an adolescent girl who offers her seat to a middle-aged woman who has just entered a crowded bus. The middle-aged woman could observe the offer as considerate

because the girl appears to put the woman's needs over her own, but she could also observe it as disrespectful because the girl apparently doubts her ability to perform such a basic task as standing in a moving bus.

Method and materials

In order to study the meaning of respect and its potential differences to considerateness, we chose to conduct focus groups. We are aware of the fact that focus groups create an artificial situation in which people have conversations they normally might not have (Morgan, 1996: 139ff.). Therefore, focus groups cannot capture 'real life' in the sense of observing what people *do*; yet we argue that focus groups present a favourable environment for observing how people *reason* about what they do/do not do. It is the aspect of *reasoning* that is essential in order to find out whether people can dissociate respect and considerateness. While critics consider group dynamics and influence (how participants influence each other, etc.) as problematic features of focus groups (Stycos, 1981: 451), we argue that it is precisely the interactive situation of (not) standing one's ground and (not) campaigning for one's argument that will reveal 'dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by the more conventional one-to-one interview or questionnaire' (Kitzinger, 1994: 109). The social nature of the discussions forces participants to think consciously about how they understand respect, considerateness and the difference between the two (if any). It also holds them accountable for their understandings, resulting in rich dialogue in which participants negotiate, and sometimes adjust, their interpretations. One can assume that if group dynamics have a restricting effect on 'unpopular' or contested opinions and arguments, and if arguing in a way that would support a respect-agency connection represented just such a contested view, then this view would not come forth and/or hold within the groups and could therefore not be considered to have significant value in everyday life.

In order to provide a context for the participants' discussions we presented stimulus material in the form of two *vignettes* (cf. Bloor et al., 2001: 45) in which we implemented our theoretical ideas of respect being linked to ascribed agency and considerateness being associated with beneficial behaviour. For designing the vignettes, we searched for generic yet realistic social situations which all participants could be assumed to comprehend. They are as simple and concise as possible, yet they provide sufficient context to minimize the likelihood that participants invent overly idiosyncratic contextualizations while reading and discussing the vignettes.

Both vignettes exist in two alternative versions. The difference concerns the *communicative manner* in which the focal agents carry out the instrumentally beneficial action, and this format is either *agency-affirming* (AA-alternative, for short) or *agency-constraining* (AC-alternative) to the target persons. Hence AC refers to behaviour in which focal agents limit the agency of targets by defining or narrowing their options for a course of action. AA is the converse of AC and includes behaviour in which focal agents show that they count on the agency of the targets. We assumed that participants' interpretations of the considerateness and respectfulness of the focal action are differentially affected by whether the action is AA or AC vis-a-vis the targets. That means, specifically, that if our supposition is correct, the AA-alternative will be evaluated as

relatively high in *both* considerateness and respectfulness, while the AC-alternative will be seen more considerate than respectful.

Vignette 1: 'Blindness'

Robert is blind and needs his cane in order to move around safely. One day he walks into the local police station because he has been asked to provide testimony in a fraud matter. In the foyer he asks a police officer where he should register his arrival. The officer explains that the walk to the right department may be a bit tricky to find and offers Robert to guide him there. [AA: After Robert accepts] [AC: Before Robert can accept] the offer, the police officer takes Robert's hand in order to guide him.⁴

The first vignette intentionally activates (Swedish) readers' cultural knowledge of disability as a socially charged issue (Michailakis, 1997). Persons with severe sensory, motor or intellectual impairments are frequently trapped between the status of agent (a person who can achieve goals by her-/himself) and patient (a person whose functional impairments entitle her/him to aid by other people; see Michailakis and Reich, 2009). In the vignette, the blind visitor can and must be expected to carry the agency-relevant claim of controlling his personal space (like any non-vision-impaired person). The police officer is trying to be instrumentally helpful in both alternatives (assumed considerateness). Yet while his action conforms to the visitor's agential claim in the AA-alternative (i.e. by awaiting his answer before helping; assumed respectfulness), he violates the visitor's agential claim in the AC-alternative (by not awaiting his answer; assumed disrespectfulness).

Vignette 2: 'Dinner'

Pete and Carl are colleagues who meet occasionally for dinner at The Steakhouse. Sometimes they are joined by another colleague, Johnson. One day, Carl contacts Pete and tells him that the three of them should have dinner again. But Pete suddenly remembers that Johnson's ex-wife recently took a job at The Steakhouse. Pete and Carl are unsure whether Johnson has already gotten over the divorce and might be afraid to bump into his ex-wife. Perhaps they should choose another restaurant? Eventually Pete and Carl decide [AA: to ask] [AC: not to ask] Johnson if they should pick another restaurant. [AA: After consulting with] [AC: Without consulting] Johnson, they decide that the three of them will go to The Diner instead.

The second vignette deals with two colleagues who try to spare a third colleague, Johnson, a potentially painful encounter with his ex-wife. Johnson can and must be expected to carry the agency-relevant claim of being included in a decision that concerns him directly (i.e. switching to a different restaurant). In the AA-alternative, Pete and Carl include Johnson in the decision (assumed respectfulness); in the AC-alternative, they decide without consulting with him (assumed disrespectfulness). Again, the commonality between both alternatives is that Pete and Carl carry out an action that is intended to be instrumentally beneficial for Johnson, and that they obviously care about his feelings and needs (assumed considerateness).

Participants and overall procedure

We conducted and video-recorded 14 focus group discussions for which we recruited $N = 68$ participants from a mid-sized Swedish city in the autumn of 2009 (43 women, 25 men; ages 18–64 with mean age = 26; 57 self-identified Swedes and 11 with immigrant background). Respect is a central value of Swedish cultural identity, everyday life and welfare politics which is mirrored in the official Swedish attitude towards ethnic minorities and refugees as well as towards gender equality (see Government Offices of Sweden, 2002). Thus we assumed that (dis)respect in everyday interaction should be of relevance to most people. This was also confirmed by the pilot study mentioned earlier in which participants talked about the importance of respect in their daily lives. All respondents were signed up by a professional recruiter who asked them to participate in a ‘study on respect with video-recorded group discussion’. The assignment of the 68 participants to groups of four to six members was designed such as to enable between-group heterogeneity along the dimensions of ethnicity and gender.⁵ Such a design is possible when the groups discuss a topic that is not highly sensitive or charged (see Morgan, 1997: 36), the rationale being that a mixture of heterogeneous and homogeneous groups may increase the breadth of commentaries. Discussions lasted 45–75 minutes. The organizational procedure for the focus groups was as follows. At the beginning, participants were informed about the strict confidentiality policy that we apply regarding the video-recordings. They were also told that the aim of the group discussion was exploratory and that there was no such thing as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ opinions on the topic (Myers, 1998: 90). Participants were then given enough time to read both vignettes and to compare the two alternatives of each vignette; it was part of the instructions to think about respectfulness and considerateness in the vignettes. However, participants were by no means clued in on our hypothesis that their perceptions of ‘respect’ (as opposed to those of considerateness) should depend on the agent-like/patient-like treatment of a respectee by a respecter. Thus, how the two concepts should relate to the different conditions in the vignettes was an issue participants had to explore for themselves and together with the group.

The moderation guideline was semi-structured insofar as the sessions began similarly but continued more freely following the dynamics of group interaction. As an ‘icebreaker’, we let each participant introduce themselves to the group. Moderators (one female, one male; both familiar with research aims) then initiated the discussion by asking participants to consider vignette 1 (‘Blindness’) and asking them on their opinion about the difference between the two versions. In all 14 groups, this put the debate right on track, and led to engaged conversations about the meaning of respect, considerateness and the difference between them. In order to meet methodological concerns about moderators’ influence on group discussions,⁶ we aimed to reduce interventions to a minimum, e.g. when discussions drifted to irrelevant topics. After the group discussions, participants were debriefed about our research agenda (if they wished). As compensation, they received an open voucher for a cinema ticket.

For the analysis, all focus group discussions were transcribed in full, catching interruptions, simultaneous talk, important prosodic discourse-markers as well as significant body talk. Using the qualitative data analysis package NVivo 8, we coded the corpus in several iterations that centred on emerging topics and interactional events which were

relevant to the research questions of this study. In a first step, the specific indices (which code descriptively for concrete events and mentions in single turns or multi-turn sequences, such as ‘participant(s) mention the importance of waiting for an answer before acting’ and ‘participant(s) mention the helpfulness of the focal behaviour’) were found inductively (Frankland and Bloor, 1999: 147). In a second step, we constructed analytical categories which aggregate indices as either referring to:

- Agency-relevant (agency-affirming or agency-constraining) behaviour; examples of indices subsumed by these categories include ‘participant(s) mention the importance of waiting for an answer before acting’ and ‘participant(s) mention the importance of letting the co-interactant decide’;
- or to
- Positive/negative behaviour that is not specifically targeted at the agency of the addressee; examples of indices subsumed here are ‘participant(s) mention the good intentions behind the focal behavior’ or ‘participant(s) mention the helpfulness of the focal behaviour’.

Results

I: Participants’ interpretations of the vignettes and of the differences between the versions

The presentation of the results is divided into two subsections. In this one, we show, first, that participants interpreted the focal behaviour in both vignettes as intentionally beneficial vis-a-vis the target persons, and second, that they saw the chief distinction between AA-/AC-alternatives in the way we had hypothesized. The subsection titled ‘Results II’ discusses how participants mapped this distinction on the difference between respect and considerateness.

Considering the following presentation we would like to add that focus groups do not always allow the attribution of ideas and mentions to individuals, especially in complex multi-turn sequences where participants influence each other recursively (Frankland and Bloor, 1999). Neither can the analysis be restricted to group level only as in some cases justice has to be given to phenomena on the individual level. To accommodate this dilemma at best, we present our data in three complementary ways (cf. Morgan, 1997: 60). First, *excerpts* displaying interactional turns, illustrating group as well as individual action. Second, counts of *mentions* of certain topics, and third, counts of specific, *individual* statements. None of these measures should be considered as ‘simpleminded counting’ (Morgan, 1995: 522); rather, they should be seen in context of each other: each measure in itself does not have more than an illustrative value; only taken together, do they show a general tendency.

Interpretations of the focal behaviour as instrumentally beneficial. The focal behaviours in both vignettes were designed to be comprehended as ‘instrumentally beneficial’ in both AA- and AC-alternatives. This was indeed how all focus groups discussed the focal behaviours, which can be illustrated by the following two excerpts.

Excerpt 1 // 'Blindness' (Group #4)

Context: The group is discussing the AC-version of the vignette 'Blindness'. One participant has just criticized the policeman for not waiting for Robert's answer.⁷

- Ida: But at the same time he, he still wants to help
 Fredrik: Mmm
 Ida: [In a way
 Lena and Sofia: [Mmm
 Ida: And there could be other factors. Perhaps he was, perhaps he was very busy or perhaps he wasn't busy at all and that's why he wanted to help Robert
 Fredrik: Mmm
 Lena: Mmm
 Sofia: If you look at the intention then it was very kind. He only wanted to help him

Excerpt 2 // 'Dinner' (Group #8)

Context: Participants discuss what impact Pete and Carl's behaviour in the AC-alternative would have on Johnson.

- Pia: Well both alternatives are possible with the best intentions, the most important issue is, I think, is probably that at least they tried to think about this problem before they decide for A or B, to ask or not to ask, that they have thought about this so that when there's a discussion that they have thought about it. That they have done this with the best intentions so to speak

These excerpts exemplify how participants talked about common features of the focal actions across AA-/AC-alternatives. They saw the good intentions 'behind' the act, even if they felt the way in which the focal action was executed to be inadequate. Exchanges such as these appear very frequently in the transcribed corpus. All in all, we found 96(13) cases (that is, 96 mentions distributed over 13 groups) where the focal behaviour was associated with *help or care*, 87(14) cases where it was associated with *good intentions*, 68(14) that interpreted it as addressed at the target person's *needs/feelings* and 37(10) that referred specifically to Robert's *blindness* (in vignette 1) as a special need. We conclude that respondents interpreted the focal behaviour as instrumentally beneficial in both vignettes.

Interpretations of the difference between AA-/AC-alternatives. We now turn to the issue of how participants interpreted the difference between the AA-/AC-alternatives. We knew, of course, beforehand that we could and should not expect participants to spontaneously use social-scientific constructs such as 'ascribed agency'. Moderators were also careful to avoid using this and other technical terms during the focus group discussions. To illustrate how participants used non-technical vocabulary to make sense of the two alternatives, we provide again two excerpts:

Excerpt 3 // 'Blindness' (Group #8)

Context: The group is discussing the behaviour of the policeman and comparing the AA-against the AC-alternative.

- Moderator: How do you evaluate the difference between the two
 (.) (.)

- Pia: Well, I agree with the others that, well, the big difference is that in version A Robert has given his OK, and received the power to choose whether he wants help or not. That's probably what this is about
- (.)(.)
- Maria: Yeah, I agree. ((*laughs*)) It feels a bit strange to just assume that he needs help without having asked him

Excerpt 4 // 'Dinner' (Group #13)

Context: Participants are comparing the vignettes 'Blindness' and 'Dinner'.

- Moderator: In what way do you see parallels or differences between the 'Dinner'- and the 'Policeman'-story ((= *vignette 'Blindness'*))
- Helene: I think that both try to show considerateness in a way[
- Magdalena: [Both in versions A [and B ((= *AA- and AC-alternative*))
- Helene: [((*inaudible*)) try to limit his space for action⁸ and just say like 'we go to that place', like that ha-ha-ha ((*non-humorous pseudo-laughter*)), not why, he like has to, he doesn't understand why they changed the restaurant all of a sudden. So they don't let him participate in the decision
- Erik: Yeah, no it's just, about well I think in both cases, I think this is about space for action in both. Well are you going to let him participate in the decision or not. They want Johnson to join but perhaps they think it would be awkward to ask. So they don't ask him, and then it's obvious they exclude him from the alternatives

Without ever using the term 'agency', the discussants in excerpts 3 and 4 use descriptions that social scientists will recognize as defining characteristics of the ascriptive conception of 'agency', such as: having 'space for action', knowing about alternative courses of action and participating in decision-making (Barnes, 2000; Dennett, 1987; Luhmann, 2005 [1978]). The discussants thus express that in the AC-alternatives, the policeman (vignette 1) as well as Pete and Carl (vignette 2) carry out their actions in a manner which limits the agential freedom of the target persons.

Again, the excerpts are not singular events; exchanges similar to these occurred frequently in all focus groups. Our analysis coded for a total of 222(14) cases where participants interpreted the focal behaviour in one or both vignettes by using agency-relevant descriptions. These descriptions included turns where participants pointed out that the target person should be asked before a decision is made, turns where they mentioned that the focal behaviour should submit to the target person, turns where they pointed out that targets should be given freedom of choice and similar cases. We therefore conclude that the participants comprehended the difference in the degree of ascribed agency in the expected fashion.

Results II: Participants' explicit understandings of respect vs considerateness

We now turn to the crucial issue of how participants reasoned about the *meaning* of respect, considerateness and the difference between the two. The patterns we found in the discussions are more complex than those which were presented under 'Results I'. We

begin this subsection with relatively clear-cut examples that exemplify the most typical discussion patterns on this topic:

Excerpt 5 // 'Blindness' (Group #12)

Context: The participants are talking about the difference between the AA- and AC-alternative in the vignette 'Blindness'. Participant Estefania has just stated that the policeman must have had good intentions when he led Robert to where he wanted to go.

- Tobias: Yes exactly, as you say. He, the thinking is good but it comes out wrong[
 Estefania: [Yes exactly[
 Tobias: [The effect is the almost the opposite. Right? ((addressing Simon))
 Simon: Yes. ((laughs)) I don't know, I tried to come up with something but
 Mia: At any rate I totally agree that he is showing considerateness but perhaps not really respect for his person
 Moderator: In version B? ((= AC-alternative))
 Mia: Mmm. Exactly
 Simon: In version A ((= AA-alternative)) he's showing both considerateness and respect[
 Estefania: [Yes that's true[
 Simon: [He waits for an answer, Robert accepts
 Estefania: Exactly
 Simon: And that is respect, there he respects that he gets to answer and respects the person as such

Excerpt 6 // 'Dinner' (Group #14)

Context: The participants are discussing what is respectful in the two versions of the vignette 'Dinner'. Participant Lina has just said that she finds it easier to see a difference between respect and considerateness in this vignette than in 'Blindness'.

- Britta: Respect was that they talked to him, ((inaudible)) talked with him and what do you think about this? Shall we go to some other place? And considerateness was, but here it's also considerateness more, it's a little more emotional that they think about the other person's feelings[
 Amelie: [Mmm
 Lina: [Mmm
 Britta: True[
 Moderator: (((inaudible))) Well, no I don't want to interrupt
 Lina: No but well, that they even care about his possible feelings regarding his ex-wife in this case
 (.) (.)
 Moderator: But why exactly is it respectful to ask?
 Lina: Because he's giving him a choice
 Amelie: Mmm
 Lina: That he gets to, it's just that instead of just making a decision and now we go to that place they give him a choice, and, where do you want to go?

In both excerpts, respect and considerateness are clearly differentiated by the respondents, and this is done in a manner which is coherent with our hypothesis. In excerpt 5, Mia and then Simon assign both concepts to the AA-alternative of the vignette 'Blindness',

but only considerateness to the AC-alternative. Along the way, they receive support from Estefania. Excerpt 6 centres on the AA-alternative of the vignette 'Dinner', where first Britta and then Lina explain to the group that the focal behaviour had both considerate and respectful aspects. Their differentiation receives support from Amelie.

How representative are excerpts 5 and 6 for the entire corpus of the 14 focus group discussions? As focus group researchers have pointed out, the dynamic organization of talk is too complex to permit definitive quantitative answers to questions such as these (Bloor et al., 2001; Frankland and Bloor, 1999). Following Silverman's suggestion, we generated aggregate counts for a selection of our codes in order to get an idea of the broader picture within our corpus (Silverman, 2008: 51ff.). However, these numbers serve illustrative purposes and should not be confused with inference-statistics. We include them here to show that a clear majority (as opposed to, say, a mere minority) of participants were involved in making associations of the type mentioned.

Across all the discussions we found 168(14) cases where respect is associated explicitly with 'agency' (made by 58 out of 68 participants), and 140(14) cases where considerateness is associated with concern for the other's needs or feelings (made by 51 out of 68 participants). There are 7(4) cases where respect is associated explicitly with needs or feelings and 9(6) where considerateness is associated with 'agency'. Regarding cases where the concepts are compared, we found 75(13) turns or multi-turn sequences where respect and considerateness are differentiated in the fashion we expected. In 26(9) cases, the two concepts are used either synonymously or contrary to our theoretical rationale. Thus, many but not all participants seemed to interpret the meanings of respect and considerateness in the same way as our hypothesis.

It is noteworthy that several of the discussion sequences where 'contrarian' voices could be heard actually involved negotiations of the meaning of the two focal terms among the participants. Here, participants debated the meaning of respect and considerateness in an exploratory fashion, as can be illustrated by the following example:

Excerpt 7 // 'Blindness' (Group #4)

Context: Participants have been discussing the issue of respect in the vignette 'Blindness' and now turn to the issue of considerateness.

- Linnéa: [And then considerateness and then it was just like things are floating about a lot. But in a way I feel that that to show considerateness towards someone is to show respect
 Lena: I don't think that. I think he's showing con-, he's showing considerateness because he's vision-impaired
 Fredrik: [Mmm
 Lena: [He is considerate of the fact that this person is having special difficulties
 Ida: ((nods)) [Mmm
 Lena: [I'm making this assumption now because he explains that the walk is tricky and offers to guide him there. So I think maybe that's not how he deals with others who ask for directions
 Ida: ((nods)) [No
 Lena: [Umm, and there he's considerate of because this person has [like
 Ida: [Yes
 Lena: special difficulties which I might have to help out a little more. (.) So I think he's considerate but I don't think he's showing respect (.) like, yes

Fredrik: I was also thinking in that direction [that he

Lena: [Yes

Fredrik: is more considerate than respectful

In her first two turns, Linnéa offers a comparison of respect and considerateness which our analysis counts as a non-differentiation (identification) of the two terms. However, the excerpt also shows that Linnéa's interpretation is met with resistance among the members of the focus group. Lena's first response is an outright rebuttal to Linnéa, a rebuttal which gains the support of Ida and then Fredrik. Linnéa's later remarks during the session indicate that she remains sceptical of Lena's interpretation, but she does not attempt to develop an alternative account and convince the others of its superiority.

Discussion

By and large, participants comprehended the stories as well as the difference of the alternatives in the expected manner. The most important result of this study is that participants of the focus groups tended to develop interpretations of the difference between respect and considerateness that cohere with our theoretical rationale. Detailed analysis of the transcripts revealed both conforming and contrarian understandings, yet the overall impression from our analysis is clearly that participants viewed respect as primarily targeted at another person's ascribed agency and considerateness at the person's feelings and needs.

The aims of the present article are exploratory, and we therefore want to point out five limitations of our study. First, our results need to be confirmed by comparing respect to additional concepts beyond considerateness, which have a similar connotation and are often used interchangeably, e.g. tolerance and politeness. Second, a broader array of vignettes is needed. The idea behind the use of vignettes is to furnish as much context as possible when participants interpret a focal behaviour. This has the advantage of avoiding decontextualized interpretations, but it makes comparisons across contexts and vignettes less straightforward. Third, different methods are needed to rule out the possibility that emergent interaction effects in the focus groups have biased the statements of individuals. One possibility would be rating experiments based on vignettes. Apart from these laboratory settings, qualitative field studies, in-depth interviews as well as ethnographic research are needed for deeper analyses on whether the link between respect and ascribed agency can be found in everyday situations.⁹ Fourth, as we have only studied the meaning of respect in Sweden on a very general level, we do not know the extent to which our findings generalize to specific subcultures and milieus. Fifth, the same can be said about the generalizability of our findings to cultures of other countries and continents. Consequently, more research is needed.

Conclusion

The present article constitutes a first, exploratory attempt to reconceptualize respect by systematically confronting a theoretical hypothesis with data on how cultural (but not theoretical) 'experts' reason about and use the term. Considering that focus groups

encourage lively and open discussions, participants had many opportunities to express their doubt about differences between respect and considerateness and/or decidedly argue in ways opposed to the rationale of the vignettes. However, our hypothesis received support: participants connected respect to what social scientists call ‘ascribed agency’, in the sense that the act of showing respect towards another person is targeted at this person’s ascribed agency. Although more research is needed on the connection of respect with ascribed agency in a variety of contexts, we believe that the results of this study are indicative enough to be pursued further in the understanding of respect.

The objective of this article is to contribute to a better theoretical definition of respect with an explicit empirical footing. In this regard, the study pursues a similar goal to other studies (Frei and Shaver, 2002; Langdon, 2007); it avoids, however, the cost of too inclusive a definition. We consider our research enterprise as a useful answer to current social-scientific research which tends to use relatively loose definitions of terms, to refrain from defining the concept at all or (even worse) to use definitions of concepts without connection to their empirical meanings.

By establishing a link between respect and ascribed agency, we hope that the present article can help to clarify some of the conceptual ambiguities and confusions surrounding the term, and to nuance or even modify some of the previous assumptions about the nature of respect and its connection to topics like agency, autonomy and freedom. As the focus is on the definition of respect, this article does *not* address the causes and consequences of respect. Suggesting that respect refers to the ascribed agency of the target person does not touch upon the question whether this person acts more or less as an agent when (dis)respected. No doubt, this is an important subject for future research but we think it is necessary to first clarify the relevant concepts. Apart from the advantage an empirically based conception of respect can have for social-scientific analysis, applied contexts such as welfare research, ethnic relations, gender studies and disability research could profit from understanding respect in terms of ascribed agency. To give but one example, both Margalit (1996) and Sennett (2004) discuss institutional respect in terms of state authorities that empower their subjects and avoid treating them in a paternalistic manner (see also Grill, 2007). Our work helps to clarify just *what* paternalism and disempowerment have to do with disrespect – after all, paternalistic behaviour, even if carried out with benevolent intentions (see Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008), limits the ascribed agency of the target person.

Funding

Generous support was provided by grants from the Swedish Research Council (VR dnr 2007-1638) to WR and WS, the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS dnr 2006-0729) to WR, and the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (dnr KU 2003-4516) to WS.

Notes

1. For further examples of implicit associations of respect with agency in the literature on respect, see Bird (2004: 213), Hill (2000: 116), Jacobs (1995: 140), McDowell (2007: 277) and Van Quaquebeke et al. (2007: 187). A more explicit example of associating respect with agency can be found in Wojciszke et al. (2009).

2. This corresponds to the way in which agency vs patiency or agency vs objectness is operationalized in cognitive science (e.g. Gergely and Gergely, 2003; Meltzoff, 2007) as well as recent psychological research (Gray and Wegner, 2009). The terms patiency/patient in this meaning should not be confused with their homonyms in medical doctor–patient relations.
3. Obviously, this relationship will not generalize to all other language families. Note, however, that it only serves to motivate the choice of a contrasting concept for our methodology, which is reasonable insofar as the present study draws on Swedish data.
4. Translations from Swedish are the authors’.
5. Four of our groups were heterogeneous along both dimensions, seven all-Swedish groups were heterogeneous with respect to gender only, one all-female group was heterogeneous with respect to ethnicity only and two groups were homogeneous (all self-identified ethnic Swedes in one all-female and one all-male group).
6. However, we agree with focus group expert Morgan, that ‘the concern about the influence of focus group moderators is unreasonably magnified’ (1997: 15) especially as there is ‘no hard evidence that the focus group moderator’s impact on the data is any greater than the researcher’s impact in participant observation or individual interviewing’ (1997: 14).
7. We have tried to keep the excerpts readable. We use the following conventions:

[	denotes overlapping turns
,	brief pauses
(.)	longer pauses
((comment))	denotes interpolated comments or unspoken action by participants.
‘Mmm’	was uttered with agreement intonation in all cases transcribed here.
	All names have been changed.
8. The relatively common Swedish word *handlingsutrymme*, literally ‘space for action’, is actually a very good non-technical translation of ‘agency’. The technical/scientific translation is *handlingsförmåga*.
9. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

References

- Anderson E (1999) *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: Norton.
- Archer M (2003) *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bandura A (2001) Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology* 52(1): 1–26.
- Bankston CL III and Hildago DA (2006) Respect in Southeast Asian American children and adolescents: Cultural and contextual influences. In: Shwalb DW and Shwalb BJ (eds) *Respect and Disrespect: Cultural and Developmental Origins*. San Francisco: Wiley, 25–38.
- Barnes B (2000) *Understanding Agency: Social Theory and Responsible Action*. London: Sage.
- Bird C (2004) Status, identity, and respect. *Political Theory* 32(2): 207–232.
- Bloor M, Frankland J, Thomas M and Robson K (2001) *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Bourgois P (2002) *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buttner EH (2004) How do we ‘dis’ students? A model of (dis)respectful business instructor behavior. *Journal of Management Education* 28(3): 319–334.
- Collins R (1992) The romanticism of agency/structure versus the analysis of micro/macro. *Current Sociology* 40(1): 77–97.

- Colwell B (2007) Deference or respect? Status management practices among prison inmates. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 70(4): 442–460.
- De Cremer D and Tyler TR (2005) Am I respected or not? Inclusion and reputation as issues in group membership. *Social Justice Research* 18(2): 121–153.
- De Cremer D and Mulder LB (2007) A passion for respect: On understanding the role of human needs and morality. *Gruppendynamik und Organisationsberatung* 38(4): 439–449.
- Dennett DC (1987) *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ellemers N, Doosje B and Spears R (2004) Sources of respect: The effects of being liked by ingroups and outgroups. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 34: 155–172.
- Emirbayer M and Mische A (1998) What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4): 962–1023.
- Frankfurt H (1971) Freedom of the will and the concept of a person. *The Journal of Philosophy* 68(1): 5–20.
- Frankland J and Bloor M (1999) Some issues arising in the systematic analysis of focus groups. In: Barbour R and Kitzinger (eds) *Developing Focus Group Research*. London: Sage, 144–155.
- Frei JR and Shaver PR (2002) Respect in close relationships: Prototype definition, self-report assessment, and initial correlates. *Personal Relationships* 9(2): 121–139.
- Fuchs S (2001) Beyond agency. *Sociological Theory* 19(1): 24–40.
- Gergely G and Gergely C (2003) Teleological reasoning in infancy: The naive theory of rational action. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7(7): 287–292.
- Giddens A (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Goffman E (1956) The nature of deference and demeanor. *American Anthropologist* 58(3): 475–499.
- Goffman E (1963) *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Government Offices of Sweden. (2002) *Swedish Integration Policy for the 21st Century*. Stockholm: Ministry of Industry Employment and Communications.
- Gray K and Wegner D (2009) Moral typecasting: Divergent perceptions of moral agents and moral patients. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96(3): 505–520.
- Grill K (2007) The normative core of paternalism. *Res Publica* 13(4): 441–458.
- Hill TE (2000) *Respect, Pluralism, and Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Honneth A (2007) *Disrespect*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Huo YJ and Molina LE (2006) Is pluralism a viable model of diversity? The benefits and limits of subgroup respect. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 9(3): 359–376.
- Jacobs J (1995) *Practical Realism and Moral Psychology*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Press.
- Jones HMF (2002) Respecting respect: Exploring a great deal. *Educational Studies* 28(4): 341–352.
- Kitzinger J (1994) The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16(1): 103–121.
- Langdon S (2007) Conceptualizations of respect: Qualitative and quantitative evidence of four (five) themes. *Journal of Psychology* 141(5): 469–484.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot S (1999) *Respect: An Exploration*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.
- Li J (2006) Respect in children across cultures. In: Shwalb DW and Shwalb BJ (eds) *Respect and Disrespect: Cultural and Developmental Origins*. San Francisco: Wiley, 81–89.
- Loyal S and Barnes B (2001) ‘Agency’ as a red herring in social theory. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 31(4): 507–524.
- Luhmann N (1995) *Social Systems*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Luhmann N (2005) [1978] Erleben und Handeln. In: Luhmann N (ed.) *Soziologische Aufklärung 3. Soziales System, Gesellschaft, Organisation*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 77–92.

- McDowell L (2007) Respect, deference, respectability and place: What is the problem with/for working class boys? *Geoforum* 38(2): 276–286.
- Margalit A (1996) *The Decent Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Meltzoff A (2007) The ‘like me’ framework for recognizing and becoming an intentional agent. *Acta Psychologica* 124(1): 26–43.
- Meyer JW and Jepperson R (2000) The ‘actors’ of modern society: The cultural construction of social agency. *Sociological Theory* 18(1): 100–120.
- Michailakis D (1997) When opportunity is the thing to be equalised. *Disability and Society* 12(1): 17–30.
- Michailakis D and Reich W (2009) Dilemmas of inclusive education. *ALTER European Journal of Disability Research* 3(1): 24–44.
- Morgan DL (1994) Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology* 22: 129–152.
- Morgan DL (1995) Pearls, pith, and provocation: Why things (sometimes) go wrong in focus groups. *Qualitative Health Research* 5(4): 516–523.
- Morgan DL (1997) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Myers G (1998) Displaying opinions: Topics and disagreement in focus groups. *Language in Society* 27(1): 85–111.
- Parse RR (2006) Feeling respected: A Parse method study. *Nursing Science Quarterly* 19(1): 51–56.
- Parsons T and Shils E (1951) *Toward a General Theory of Action*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Pellegrini EK and Scandura TA (2008) Paternalistic leadership: A review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Management* 34(3): 566–593.
- Pinker S (2007) *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. New York: Viking.
- Reich W (2010) Three problems of intersubjectivity – and one solution. *Sociological Theory* 28(1): 40–63.
- Schirmer W, Weidenstedt L and Reich W (2012) From tolerance to respect in interethnic contexts. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, forthcoming.
- Schütz A (1962) Choosing among projects of action. In: Schütz A (ed.) *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 67–96.
- Schütz A (1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Searle J (1983) *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sennett R (2004) *Respect: The Formation of Character in a World of Inequality*. London: Penguin.
- Sewell W (1992) A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology* 98(1): 1–29.
- Silverman D (2008) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stycos JM (1981) A critique of focus group and survey research: The machismo case. *Studies in Family Planning* 12(12): 450–456.
- Sung K (2001) Elder respect: Exploration of ideals and forms in East Asia. *Journal of Aging Studies* 15(1): 13–26.
- Van Quaquebeke N and Eckloff T (2009) Defining respectful leadership: What it is, how it can be measured, and another glimpse at what it is related to. *Journal of Business Ethics* 91(3): 343–358.
- Van Quaquebeke N, Henrich DC and Eckloff T (2007) ‘It’s not tolerance I’m asking for, it’s respect!’ A conceptual framework to differentiate between tolerance, acceptance and (two types of) respect. *Gruppendynamik und Organisationsberatung* 38(2): 185–200.

- Whitman JQ (2000) Enforcing civility and respect: Three societies. *The Yale Law Journal* 109(6): 1279–1398.
- Wojciszke B, Abele AE and Baryla W (2009) Two dimensions of interpersonal attitudes: Liking depends on communion, respect depends on agency. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 39(6): 973–990.
- Wolf R (2008) Respekt. Ein unterschätzter Faktor in den Internationalen Beziehungen. *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 15(1): 5–42.

Werner Schirmer received his doctorate in sociology in 2008 at Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, Germany. He worked as lecturer and researcher at Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, University of Gävle, Sweden and Uppsala University, Sweden. He was visiting fellow at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, the Department of Sociology at the University of California Irvine and the Centre for Social Theory at Ghent University, Belgium. His current research focuses on a sociological theory of respect in social interactions and on the communicative construction of agency.

Linda Weidenstedt is currently a doctoral student at the Department of Sociology at Stockholm University, Sweden. Her research interest is in social interactions with focus on communicative aspects of the concepts (dis)respect, (dis)empowerment and reciprocity.

Wendelin Reich is an associate professor in social psychology at Uppsala University and a *Pro Futura Scientia* Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS). He is currently a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University (2011–12).