"She got an A for ripping:” Cautionary tales, identity, and group norms in an American quilting guild

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This paper will explore issues of identity and community using conversational data gathered during an ethnographic study of an American quilt guild. Working within the framework of Conversation Analysis, the larger research project examined the different discourse functions assigned to narratives by the women in the guild. In the data, several different categories of narratives were identified: personal experience narratives about daily life unrelated to quilting, story rounds on quilting topics, cautionary tales, how I did it stories, and situating narratives. This paper will present an analysis of cautionary tale narratives. Cautionary tale narratives are employed by the quilters to communicate and reinforce acceptable quilting practices, thus maintaining group norms. Since the narratives are self deprecatory, that is, they are stories the women tell on themselves, they also function to present a specific kind of identity for the narrator/quilter within the context of this particular community of practice. More importantly, the self deprecatory nature of the narrative allows quilters to negotiate the tension between egalitarian group norms and the need to maintain group standards for the quality of the quilted work. In addition, these narratives function to socialize newcomers into appropriate discourse and quilting practices. This study contributes to the research on narrative by focusing on the socially situated nature of these narratives and their role in creating and maintaining a shared as well as individual identity for the guild members.

Keywords: identity, conversation analysis, narrative.