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Expressing thinking in institutional interaction: Stancetaking in mental health rehabilitation group discussions



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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the stancetaking formats used to express personal thoughts, namely Finnish *mä aattelen/aattelin* 'I think/thought', *mä mietin* 'I think/wonder', and *mun mielestä/musta* 'I think/in my opinion'. We study how these first-person formats are used in mental health rehabilitation group meetings, which aim to promote joint decision-making. In particular, we analyze whether the institutional asymmetry between support workers and clients is reflected in the use of these thought expressions. Our data comprise 23 video-recorded rehabilitation meetings, and the adopted methods are conversation analysis and interactional linguistics.

Most of the stancetaking formats in our data are produced by support workers (106/129). The results of a sequential analysis conducted in this study demonstrate that support workers' thought expressions are embedded in their institutional actions, which are beyond the clients' authority. Moreover, our data suggest that support workers' and rehabilitants' thought expressions generate different participation dynamics. Although previous research has considered *I think*-formats typically as calls for other views, in institutional settings such as ours, these formats can also be interpreted as highlighting an institutional agent's controlling position. Acknowledging the existence of such differences in stancetaking practices can advance the design of new protocols to facilitate client participation.

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1. Introduction

When making plans and decisions, we routinely share and explain our views and opinions to display our involvement in the process and have an effect on the outcome. In interaction studies, this activity is often referred to as *evaluation*, *assessment*, or *stancetaking*. In essence, stancetaking is a speaker's interpersonal self-expression regarding their attitude about the entities or propositions that are being discussed (Englebretson, 2007; Alba-Juez and Thompson, 2014). The interpersonal nature of stancetaking is indicated in the way stance expressions are designed and responded to; there is an underlying expectation of solidarity to which the speaker and recipient orient. In this respect, stancetaking in an interaction is everyday rhetoric: the speaker seeks mutual understanding with the recipient, and the recipient displays their understanding of this effort by responding in one way or another.

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This paper focuses on the explicit expressions of a stance by analyzing the grammaticized stancetaking formats used to express personal thoughts and opinions in Finnish (e.g., *mä aattelen* and *mun mielestä*, cf. English: *I think*, Kärkkäinen, 2003; Mandarin: *wo juede*, Endo, 2013). What we are interested in is how these formats are used in the mental health rehabilitation group meetings in which support workers and clients plan joint activities. In particular, we study whether the support workers and clients in our data use stancetaking formats differently due to the underlying asymmetry between them, and if so, what consequences this bears on the decision-making process. By asymmetry, we mainly refer to the institutional asymmetry between the staff and clients (Drew and Heritage, 1992). The asymmetry originating from the differences in mental health status is discussed only when it is relevant to the analysis.

We hypothesize that the institutional expert position grants support workers a solid platform for performing evaluations that affect decision-making, whereas the clients' opportunities to appeal to their personal opinions are limited. We base this hypothesis on previous knowledge on the interplay between behaviors (e.g., utterances) and their context, assuming that participants' social statuses in relation to each other—something that may be based on their institutional roles and tasks—can be perceived as part of such context (Stevanovic, 2018). On one hand, this means that different participants may need to engage in different resources to accomplish specific actions, which can be seen, for example, in the observation that a truly powerful person rarely needs to issue aggravated commands. On the other hand, this means that the same interactional behaviors may have different interactional consequences, depending on who engages in these behaviors (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014).

The issue of participants' social roles and positions as institutional experts vs. lay persons is related to the study of institutional interaction and asymmetries in conversation analysis. Heritage (1997) suggested that such asymmetries are related to language, knowhow, knowledge, and participation. While language asymmetries were seen to refer to one or more participants having restricted language skills, asymmetries of knowhow and knowledge were considered related to participants' varying levels of practical skill and the differences in their access to information and right to articulate information. Heritage maintained that, in institutional encounters, asymmetries are commonly about the professionals having access and right to the institutionally relevant information and practices that a lay person lacks. Finally, institutional interaction is also characterized by asymmetries of participation, which Heritage saw to rise from the participants' complementary participatory roles connected to different rights and duties.

Institutional context is known to affect the ways in which opinions and ideas are exchanged (Drew and Heritage, 1992). It can also affect the frequency of such expressions. For example, in Simon-Vandenberg's study (2000), there were significantly more occurrences of *I think* in political interviews than in everyday conversations (61 per 10,000 words vs. 24 per 10,000 words). According to the literature, the institutional power hierarchy in each context can be reflected in the use of cognitive verbs. In a study on academic supervision meetings by Nelson and Henricson (2019; see also Henricson and Nelson, 2018), the supervisors produced significantly more cognitive verbs than the students (81% vs. 19%, data in Swedish). The supervisors' frequent use of cognitive verbs was related to their institutional task of giving feedback and modifying its directness. Although Nelson and Henricson (2019) examined all cognitive verbs in all personal forms, the formats analyzed in their examples were evaluative first-person expressions that depicted thinking: *jag tyckte* 'I thought' (*tycka* 'think expressing opinion') and *jag tänker* 'I think' (*tänka* 'think expressing thought'). In fact, cognitive verbs generally co-occur with first-person subjects, as speakers are more aware of their own mental processes than others' mental processes (Dahl, 2000; Helasvuo, 2014; Väänänen 2016:201).

Another finding on thought expression in institutional contexts can be found in Lindström and Lindholm's (2009) study of question frames in Swedish interaction. They demonstrated that in doctors' consultations, patients tend to frame their questions with expressions *jag undrar* 'I wonder' and *jag funderar* 'I ponder' which display uncertainty. By preannouncing their action as a mere "wondering," the patients were argued to emphasize their layperson role and avoid challenging the doctor's knowledge. Doctors, in contrast, were considered not to have the need to resort to similar considerations when posing questions to the patients.

This paper aims to investigate the relation between thought expression and institutional interaction further. We believe that focusing on the dynamics of self-expression practices in institutional contexts can be helpful in terms of understanding the position and opportunities of service users, whether they are mental health rehabilitants, patients, or customers.

1.1. *I think* as an expression of stance

The notion of *I think* as an expressive stance can be discussed with reference to insights from various fields of inquiry. First, from the perspective of discursive psychology, a central focus has been on how cognitive notions (e.g., *thinking*) are invoked and oriented to in an interaction and how they can be used as resources to accomplish various interactional goals (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997, 1999; Potter, 2006; Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007). Framing an utterance as a "thought" embodies a less stable orientation to what is being said, compared to an "opinion," which implicates a more developed attitude to the matter at hand (Potter and Puchta, 2007; 113–115). Both thoughts and opinions, however, are somewhat protected from the expectation that they should be justified (Myers, 1998, 2004).

According to Vandelanotte's grammar-based description and typology of speech and thought representation (2009:290), the functions of subjective thought expressions, such as *I think*, can be grouped into three types: epistemic, illocutionary, and textual. The epistemic function aims to code a subjective modality, whereas the illocutionary function is related to facework and hedging. The textual function refers to the use of *I think* as a type of hesitation marker comparable to *erm* and *uh*, which function as a way to hold the conversational floor while the speaker plans the rest of the turn. However, as illustrated later in this paper,

these three functions can overlap in practice. Some elements of stancetaking may be present even in the textual function, and displaying stance is unavoidably an interpersonal action (cf. Kärkkäinen, 2003; 2012; Rauniomaa, 2007; Stevanovic, 2013).

Here, we analyze an authentic interaction to study the use of six Finnish expressions that can be translated into English as 'I think', 'I am thinking' or 'I was thinking': *mä aattelen*, 'I think', *mä aattelisin* 'I would think', *mä aattelin* 'I thought, I was thinking', *mä mietin* 'I wonder, I am thinking, I was thinking', *mun mielestä* literally 'out of my mind', 'I think', and *mu-sta*, literally 'out of me', 'I think' (glosses are provided in Table 1). These expressions were selected because of the similarities in their semantic meanings and pragmatic uses. Hereafter, we refer to these expressions as *I think*-formats. Other first-person cognitive expressions in Finnish, such as *mä tiedän* 'I know' and *mä luulen* 'I suppose, I believe' are not analyzed in this paper as they convey the certainty level regarding knowledge rather than representing thinking or having a view as such.

Thoughts expressing stancetaking formats in Finnish interaction have previously been studied in casual conversations. Rauniomaa (2007) studied Finnish stance markers *minun mielestä* and *minusta*¹ in assessments and found that they are most commonly placed at the start of an intonation unit, which reflects their function to mark a transition to evaluative talk so that other participants can orient to stancetaking. Rauniomaa showed that highlighting a personal perspective could project disagreement and serve as a hedge, and in doing so, also function as a call for other evaluations. Rauniomaa's findings on the pragmatics of the Finnish stance markers are congruent with Kärkkäinen's (2003) findings on the English *I think* and Endo's (2013) findings on the Mandarin *wo juede*. For example, *wo juede* is used as a preface for possible disagreements and as a way to distance oneself from one's own claims by marking them as opinions. In the turn-final position, *wo juede* solicits agreement from the recipient (Endo, 2013). Hence, thought expressions seem to be closely related to mitigating conflicts between participants.

In the context of joint decision-making, stancetaking may have implications for the emergence of decisions. Stevanovic (2013) studied the Finnish past tense expressions *mä aattelin* and *mä mietin* 'I was thinking' as prefaces to proposals in planning meetings between colleagues, arguing that constructing a proposal as a thought is a way for a speaker to imply that they are prepared to abandon the proposal if the other participants do not consider it relevant. Stevanovic argued that, in this way, the participants could establish a symmetrical distribution of deontic rights at the beginning of decision-making sequences. In our interpretation, this finding also suggests that a subjective expression of thought can be used to display awareness of other ways of thinking and prepare the floor for negotiation (see also Kärkkäinen, 2012 on the English *I was thinking*).

As we, too, are analyzing planning meetings, we expect thought expression to be related to the joint decision-making sequences in our data. As our data comprise group discussions, these are expected to involve multilateral decision-making sequences, instead of dyadic decision-making studied by Stevanovic (2013). Paradoxically, however, the multilateral decision-making situation may not necessarily increase the likelihood of recipient uptake, as the responsibility for providing a response to a proposal is distributed among several people instead of a single co-participant. Moreover, in a group context between few support workers and multiple clients, a first-person stancetaking format can have quite different action corollaries, depending on whether it is backed up by the authority of the institutional agent, who is responsible for controlling the agenda of the participants' encounter.

1.2. Mental health rehabilitation as a context

In this study, we explore stancetaking in the context of mental health rehabilitation. Although the institutional context produces different positions and options for professionals and clients, a trend in current social and healthcare policy is to lower the institutional power hierarchy (Alanko and Hellman, 2017; Sihvo et al., 2018). A primary method adopted by mental health services today is client-centeredness: instead of being a target of services managed by professionals, clients are involved in services (O'Donovan, 2007). In this paradigm, clients' ability to express their opinions and participate in decision-making regarding their own rehabilitation is considered essential (Epstein et al., 2005). Furthermore, the ideal relationship between professionals and clients is defined as a collaborative partnership, where professional expertise communicates with client expertise based on clients' first-hand experience of mental health problems and the related services (Epstein et al., 2005).

An interactional phenomenon to which the ideal of client-centeredness is strongly connected is joint decision-making (Lindholm et al., 2020). This refers to a series of actions starting with the identification of a proposal for future action and ending with a mutually committed decision (e.g., Campbell et al., 2019). According to Stevanovic (2012), the joint outcome is reached when recipients' responses to the proposal display understanding about the content of the proposal (access), indicate that the proposed action is realizable (agreement), and express willingness to carry out the plan (commitment). However, interactional studies on decision-making in mental health care show challenges in this endeavor. First, joint decision-making can be prevented if professionals' initiative turns are more like announcements than proposals inviting clients' immediate acceptance instead of negotiation (Collins et al., 2005). Furthermore, clients' difficulties following the turn exchange can lead to expressing opinions as misplaced in relation to the overall structure of conversation (McCabe and Lavelle, 2012). In addition, the lack of contributions by clients can cause situations in which professionals pursue approving responses on behalf of clients, which prevents clients from resisting forthcoming decisions (Stevanovic et al., 2020). This is critical, as the opportunity to display resistance, and through it negotiate an acceptable decision, is significant from the perspective of client-centeredness (Koenig, 2011).

¹ The expressions *mun mielestä* and *minun mielestä* are both colloquial variants for the standard form *minun mielestäni*, while *musta* is a colloquial variant for the standard form *minusta*.

An example of client-centered mental health rehabilitation is the Clubhouse model. Having its origin in the human rights movement, it has become a worldwide rehabilitation model that aims to improve clients' quality of life and prompt their return to work (McKay et al., 2018). Clubhouses are communities that offer premises where clients can practice their work-related skills and find their full potential with the support of staff and peers (Hänninen, 2012). Clubhouses are guided by international quality standards, which emphasize clients' right to participate in all Clubhouse activities, including the planning and development of services (Clubhouse International, 2021) (Webpage). In Finland, 23 Clubhouses offer opportunities for social relationships and support in obtaining employment or education for anyone with a history of mental disorder (Finnish Clubhouse Coalition, 2021). Participation in the work-ordered day is voluntary for clients; they can choose their own tasks and schedule their visits as they wish within the opening hours.

Previous studies have illustrated the role of a professional as a facilitator who builds an atmosphere that encourages clients to participate in Clubhouse operations (Chen, 2017; Chen and Oh, 2018) and appreciates all clients' opinions (Raeburn et al., 2017). An example of such an activity at the interactional level is the so-called "meta speech," through which professionals frame decision-making encounters prospectively and retrospectively as joint ones, matching with the ideal situation (Valkeapää et al., 2020). Furthermore, professionals use second-person plural forms addressing clients to invite them to contribute to decision-making (Paananen et al., 2020). However, despite the willingness to promote clients' participation, research shows that in group sessions, some clients have more influence over decision-making than others (Meeuwisse, 1997; Valkeapää et al., 2020), and professionals' opinions tend to rule in the final decision (Karlsson, 2005; Valkeapää et al., 2019).

2. Data and method

Our data comprise 23 video-recorded meetings at a Clubhouse mental health rehabilitation community from September 2016 to August 2017. Participation in the study was voluntary. The board of Clubhouse directors approved the study. The clients and the support workers received both written and spoken information about the study, its aims and their rights as participants, and signed a participant consent form.

At each meeting, 1–3 support workers and 2–10 rehabilitation clients discuss work, practice work-related skills, plan activities around these topics, and make decisions regarding the Clubhouse-organized Transition Employment Program. The duration of the meetings varies between 30 and 60 min, the overall duration being 18 h and 55 min.

Table 1
Distribution of *I think*-formats.

Format	Support workers	Clients	All
<i>mä aattel-i-n</i> I think-IMP-1SG 'I was thinking'	49 (94%)	3 (7%)	52
<i>mun mielestä</i> my mind-ELA lit. 'out of my mind' 'I think, in my opinion'	30 (64%)	17 (36%)	47
<i>mä miet-i-n^a</i> I wonder-IMP-1SG 'I was thinking'	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	9
<i>mä aattele-n</i> I think-1SG 'I think'	7 (100%)	— (0%)	7
<i>mä mieti-n</i> I wonder-1SG 'I wonder, I am thinking'	6 (100%)	— (0%)	6
<i>mä aattel-isi-n</i> I think-COND-1SG 'I would think'	5 (100%)	— (0%)	5
<i>mu-sta</i> I-ELA lit. 'out of me' 'I think'	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	3
All	106 (82%)	23 (18%)	129

^a The identification between the present tense (*mieti-n*) and imperfect tense (*miet-i-n*) is based on the contextual cues, as the forms are homologous.

There are 129 instances of first-person stancetaking formats that refer to thinking in the data, and these instances and their sequential contexts form the collection analyzed in this study. The distribution of the different formats is depicted in Table 1.

Some of the formats have several variants in spoken Finnish. For example, in our data, *mun mielestä* also appears in a contracted form *mun mielest*, and *mä aattelen* and *mä aattelin* are sometimes pronounced without the elicitation of the phoneme /j/: *mä ajattelen*; *mä ajattelin* (*ajatella* → *aatella* ‘to think’). However, in this paper, we categorize all variants under the same format, as we do not address dialectal variation in the analysis.

Note also, that because the person is also expressed in the predicate verb, the subject pronoun is not grammatically obligatory in Finnish (*mä ajattelen-n* vs. *ajattelen-n*). However, the first-person singular pronoun is typically expressed with cognition verbs in spoken Finnish (Väänänen, 2016:189), and this holds for our data as well: there are only two occurrences in which the pronoun is omitted from the *I think*-format.

We use the methods of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics. Conversation analysis has a five-decade-long history with roots in Erving Goffman's microsociology and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell and Stivers, 2012), whereas interactional linguistics is a more recently developed research field in which the analytic tools and concepts of conversation analysis are used to study how linguistic structures are formed through interaction and how various linguistic resources are used to implement social actions and sequences of actions (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2017; Kern and Selting, 2012). The methodological approach involves an inductive analysis of video or audio recordings of naturally occurring social interactions. Generally, the research process also involves detailed transcription of the data,² whereby the elaborate conventions developed by Gail Jefferson are used (see Schegloff, 2007:265–269; transcription symbols are listed at the end of this paper). After the transcription, the data analysis proceeds case-by-case, which involves collecting sequences with the phenomenon of interest and describing the variation in the collection (ten Have, 2007). As indicated above, our analysis focuses on a collection of 129 sequences with a first-person stancetaking format that refers to thinking. Below, in section 3, we will account for the variation found within this collection.

3. Results

The starting point for discussing the results is the unequal distribution of the *I think*-formats produced by the clients and support workers. As observed in Table 1, most instances of *I think*-formats are produced by the support workers (106 cases, 82%), although the clients outnumber the support workers in the data. The distribution is similar to that observed in Nelson and Henricson's (2019) study on cognitive verbs in Swedish supervision meetings, where the supervisors produced a vast majority (81%) of all cognitive verbs.

One probable explanation for this imbalance is that because the support workers chair the discussions, they produce more talk compared to the clients. However, although there are ways to measure the talk distribution quantitatively (Stivers, 2015), we believe that knowing the exact amounts of talk would not adequately explain its contents. Instead, in what follows, we illustrate the uses of *I think*-formats with the aim of showing that support workers produce these formats frequently because they are embedded in certain institutional tasks, such as coordinating the conversation and maintaining the meeting agenda, and because similar use of *I think*-formats is therefore beyond the clients' authority (cf. Henricson and Nelson, 2018). For example, as past tense formats *mä aattelin* and *mä mietin* are typically used as prefaces for proposals, the fact that most of them (94% of *mä aattelin*, 78% of *mä mietin*) are produced by the support workers reflects the support workers' position as proposal makers and not only their dominance in producing talk. Moreover, by expressing their personal stance while performing their institutional tasks, the support workers can paradoxically highlight their controlling position instead of hedging it, and thus, diminish the clients' possibilities to express contradicting opinions.

In the following sections, we analyze the functions of *I think*-formats in our data. In 3.1, we analyze *I think*-formats in relation to assessments. By comparing the assessments made by the support workers with those made by the clients, we illustrate how a participant's institutional status affects the use and interpretation of these expressions. In 3.2, we illustrate how the support workers' past tense thought expressions are used as prefaces for proposals that concern the group's activities and decisions.

3.1. Thought expressions in assessments: from casual remarks to displays of professional opinions

In this section, we examine thought expressions that depict the present stance: *mä aattelen* ‘I think’, *mun mielestä*; *musta* ‘I think, in my opinion’, and *mä ajattelin* ‘I would think’. In general, the function of such expressions is to mark a transition to evaluative talk (Kärkkäinen, 2003; Rauniomaa, 2007). What follows is a subjective view, an opinion that can be disputed.

The way these expressions are used in the data reveals more differences between the support workers and clients. Extract 1 depicts a “casual assessment” that both the support workers and clients produce in the data. It is from the end of a client's lengthy narrative sequence, in which they explain their work history and educational background.

² In this study, personal and identifiable items were changed in the transcripts.

Extract 1.

- 01 Tanja: ja sit mä kävin kaks vuotta sitten
and then I took two years ago
- 02 ton (.) mielenterveyden ensiapukurssin
the (.) first-aid course on mental health
- 03 se oli **mun mielestä** kiva kurssi käydä että.
it was **in my opinion** a nice course to take.
- 04 SW3: kuka sitä järjesti,
who organized that,
- 05 Tanja: siis siin oli varmaan ihan- siin oli joku järjestö
it was probably just- it was some association
- 06 oisko se ollu sit mielenterveyden keskusliitto
maybe the national mental health association
- 07 vai mikä se oli.
or what was it again.

Tanja's assessment concerns a first-aid course on mental health (l. 1–3). The thought expression *mun mielestä* is embedded in the middle of the utterance after the predicate, which indicates that the personal assessment is a casual remark and not a call for other views. It also seems to be received that way: it is not followed by other assessments or negotiations but a question about the course organizers. After the extract, Tanja continues to talk about her plans.

Extract 2 is another example of contexts in which the clients express their stance with a thought expression. In this case, the support workers and clients select a name for their weekly group from three alternatives. One of the clients, Anu, plays an active role in gathering the participants' opinions.

Extract 2.

- 01 Anu: mitä Pertti ajattelee.
what does Pertti think.
- 02 Pertti: **mun mielest** se (.) "työvalmennusryhmä"
I think that (.) "job-coaching group"
- 03 ois paras.
would be the best.
- 04 (1.0)
- 05 SW5: °mm-m?°
- 06 Anu: elikkä enemmistö ois sitä mieltä että
so the majority would prefer
- 07 "työvalmennusryhmä"
"job-coaching group".
- 08 SW5: mua miellyttää nää kaikki kolme.
I'm pleased with all these three.

What is noteworthy in the extract above is that Anu produces an explicit view-elicitor that calls for Pertti's opinion (*mitäs Pertti ajattelee* 'what does Pertti think', l. 1). Pertti's thought expression therefore acts as a second-pair part (l. 2). In our data, the clients' assessments are typically solicited by other parties (Question-Answer formats, cf. Paananen et al., 2020). Usually, it is the support workers who lead the conversation, but as the Clubhouse environment underlines equal participation, the clients can also play a more active role, as Anu does in the extract. One of the clients is usually nominated as the secretary of the meeting and is therefore in charge of taking the minutes.

By contrast, the support workers tend to offer their insights unsolicitedly. In Extract 2, one of the support workers expresses their opinion even after Anu has stated that one of the alternatives has received the majority's support (l. 8). Another thing that differentiates the support workers' stance expressions from the clients' is that they are used as first-pair parts. The support workers' assessments require the clients' acceptance or refusal (Proposal-Response format). We illustrate this through Extract 3, in which the group selects a client for the Transition Employment Program. Karri is one of the three candidates, and Support Worker 4 has asked him to clarify the current state of his treatment plan. Karri answers that they and their doctor have agreed to gradually end one of their medications. In the following extract, Support Worker 4 gives his opinion on how changes in the treatment plan can affect Karri's ability to take on a job.

Extract 3.

- 01 SW4: se on- se o:n muutaman kuukauden prosessi
it is- it is a process that takes a couple of months
- 02 se [voi] olla kolmeki kuukautta.
it [can] well take three months.

- 03 Karri: [joo.]
[yeah.]
- 04 SW4: .hh **mä ajattelisin** sillä tavalla että (.)
.hh **I would think** in such a way that (.)
- 05 kokemuksesta nyt puhun ihan (.) ihan kokemuksesta
I'm talking from experience really (.) from experience
- 06 että (.) **mä aattelen** Karri että se voi olla kyllä
that (.) I think Karri that it can be
- 07 sellasta aikaa. (0.4) että tota noin ni
such a time. (0.4) that erm I mean
- 08 tommonen noinkin iso muutos
that kind of a big change
- 09 että nyt lähtis sitte (.) täs yhtäkkiä töihin
to now go (.) suddenly to work
- 10 ja on se (.) lääkemuuos. (0.2)
and have that (.) change in medication. (0.2)
- 11 nii se voi olla kyllä ninkun semmosena ninkun, (0.3)
it may well be like, (0.3)
- 12 yhtäaikasena juttuna aika kova. (0.2)
as a simultaneous thing rather tough. (0.2)
- 13 siis sanotaanko se on aikamoinen ponnitus
or should one say quite an effort
- 15 koska sitä ei voida tietää, (0.4) mitä (0.6) tapahtuu
because one cannot know, (0.4) what (0.6) happens
- 16 sinä aikana.
during that time.
- 17 Karri: mullon kyl toinen lääke aloitettu tilalle.
I have been given another medication in its place though.
- 18 SW4: niin ni sekin vie taikka kestää,
yes so that too will take time,
(omitted 14 lines in which SW4 talks about the importance of the treatment plan)
- 33 SW4: että mä MELkeen sanosin Karri että
so I almost would say Karri that
- 34 kato tää kesä. (.) rauhassa.
see through this summer. (.) in peace.
- 35 Karri: [*°jo.°
[°yup.°
*** Karri nods**
- 36 SW4: [kato miten käy. .hh koska mun mielestä, .hh (1.0)
[see what happens. .hh because in my opinion, .hh (1.0)
- 37 *kun (.) ninku tiiät sä oot varmaan ollu ennenki
as you know you have probably been before
***Karri turns their gaze away from SW4 and gazes down toward the table**
- 38 näis tilanteissa missä kokeillaan jotain uutta?
in these situations when you try something new?
- 39 (0.2) ja puretaan (.) niin (.) ei ikinä tiedä. (0.2)
(0.2) and quit (.) so (.) one never knows. (0.2)
- 40 että miten se lähtee ninkun tepsii.
how it will start to work.
- 41 (1.0) **Karri looks at SW4 and nods, then turns their gaze down again**
- 42 SW4: ni kyl mä *melkein, .hh **mä aattelin** että se on se, (.)
so I would almost, .hh I would think that it is, (.)
***SW4 cringes**
- 43 sun (.) i- *tärkein asia tällä hetkellä et
your (.) most important thing at the moment that
***SW4 nods**

- 44 sä, [ninku annat rauhassa sen ajan kulua,
 you, [like let the time pass now,
- 45 Karri: * [°mm.°
 *Karri nods and gazes down

The first thing we would like to note about Extract 3 is that Support Worker 4 uses multiple first-person expressions, which emphasizes that their opinion matters in the selection process (*mä ajattelisin* ‘I would think’, *mä aattelen* ‘I think’, *mä melkeen sanosin* ‘I almost would say’, and *mun mielestä* ‘in my opinion’). In addition, they display their epistemic knowledge on ending a medication: they give an estimation of how long a process it can be (l. 1–2) and stress that they are talking from experience (l. 5) when saying that it can be “rather tough” and “quite an effort” (l. 12–13, on epistemics, see [Heritage, 2012](#)). By appealing to their opinion and knowledge, Support Worker 4 constructs a “professional opinion” that seemingly leads toward Karri’s rejection. Note also that Support Worker 4 starts their evaluative statement by breathing in and saying *mä ajattelisin sillä tavalla* ‘I would think in such a way’ (l. 4). This statement has multiple functions. First, announcing one’s thoughts in this way, as a “directive by example” ([West, 1990:96–97](#)), presupposes the relevance of one’s thoughts as guidelines for others to follow. Meanwhile, the support worker’s thought expressions are, again, related to coordinating the conversation: they steer the interaction away from what seems to be against Karri’s interests. Furthermore, both thought expressions project and mitigate disagreement: Karri will be disappointed to hear Support Worker 4’s opinion, and the accounts expressed as thoughts work to alleviate the conflict (cf. [Rauniomaa, 2007](#); [Endo, 2013](#)).

Nevertheless, the conflict is somewhat actualized: Karri indicates that they have started a different medication (l. 17), which can be interpreted as resisting the idea of facing tough times. Support Worker 4 counters by saying that starting new medication is also troublesome (l. 18). After explaining the importance of discussing the treatment plan, Support Worker 4 advises Karri to see through the summer and justifies this by saying that they think that Karri’s situation is uncertain and that it would be “most important” to let time pass (l. 34, 36–40, 42–44). The thought expressions *mun mielestä* and *mä aattelin* ‘I would think’ are once again highlighted with audible in-breaths, and the dispreferred outcome from Karri’s viewpoint is reflected in the way SW4 cringes their face before advising Karri to let time pass (l. 42).

By using their opinion as an argument, Support Worker 4 implies power in an implicit way. They display a strong orientation to the taken-for-granted assumption that for them, the mere expression of opinion is enough to legitimize their dominant use of the conversational floor. Karri’s nodding and minimal responses produced in a quiet voice and falling intonation (*jo.*; *mm.*), as well as their downward gaze (l. 35, 37, 41, 45), apparently convey disappointment and passive resistance toward Support Worker 4’s advice to pass the opportunity due to the changes in their treatment plan ([Stivers, 2007](#)). However, there is not much they can do as Support Worker 4 moves on to selecting one of the remaining candidates. As highlighted in previous studies on the expression of opinions in a group, such asymmetries are always more or less participants’ collaborative achievements (see, e.g., [Myers, 1998](#)).

To conclude, in our data, the professionals’ thoughts and opinions are more often overtly expressed than the clients’ are. What differentiates the clients and support workers in terms of assessments is their influentiaity: the support workers produce thought expressions unsolicitedly, and these expressions have clear implications for others, whereas the clients tend to give their opinions only when asked, and the implications of these assessments have a narrower scope. In the next section, we continue examining the support workers’ power by analyzing their past tense thought expressions related to proposals.

3.2. Thought expressions in proposals: balancing mitigation and institutional power

As in [Stevanovic’s \(2013\)](#) study, past tense expressions *mä aattelin* and *mä mietin* ‘I was thinking’ are often used as prefaces to proposals in our data. As [Table 1](#) illustrates, the support workers produce most of these expressions (94% of *mä aattelin*; 78% of *mä mietin*), which apparently reflects their coordinating role in the conversations. In fact, only one of the clients uses thought expression as a preface to a proposal in our data, whereas other thought expressions produced by the clients deal with other things such as plans for self (*mä aattelin et meen sinne* ‘I was thinking that I would go there’) and assessment (*mä aattelin et nää on toisaalta aika helppoja* ‘I thought that these are actually quite easy’), which we analyzed in the previous chapter.

By introducing possible next actions as thoughts, the support workers display awareness of other options. However, their thought expressions do not seem to prepare the floor for actual negotiation but instead smoothen the transition to directive action. The following extract is a segment from a meeting in which the group is planning the topics they want to cover in the following meetings. In Extract 4, the meeting is ending. Before the extract, Support Worker 3 states that the conversation has split and reminds the group that they are supposed to talk about developing the job-coaching group. In lines 1 and 3, they concede that all topics are nevertheless related. Despite Support Worker 3’s effort to lead the conversation back to the original agenda, client Teo interrupts to ask about news regarding possible workplaces (l. 4–5). As Teo’s turn is not in line with the overall aim of the meeting, Support Worker 1 comments about the remaining time (l. 10–11) and introduces their idea of how to spend it, which returns the focus to the agenda of planning future activities.

Extract 4.

- 01 SW3: mut et tavallaanhan nää liittyy kaikki yhteen?
but I mean in a way all of these ((topics)) are related?
- 02 Teo: mm.
- 03 SW3: et tää on kuitenkin osa tätä Klubitalon kokonai[suutta].
this ((group)) is anyway part of the entity of the Clubhouse.
- 04 Teo: [mut onk se]
but is it
- 05 Teo: tota, nytte ku mä en mu- muista ja oikee-
so now cause I don't re- remember really and
- 06 niin ni. oliko nytte jotai, Prisma ei ilmeisesti
so. was there something, Prisma ((a hypermarket)) apparently is
- 07 oo vielä ihan varma ja Motonetistä nytte-
not yet confirmed and Motonet ((a store)) then-
- 08 (1.8)
- 09 SW1: nii **mä ajattelin** et jos meil on nyt ajatus (.)
so I was thinking that if we now have an idea (.)
- 10 vai mitä se kello mahtaa mä katon sun (-)
or what's time now let me see your ((watch))
- 11 niin varttii vaille kymmenen, ni **>mä aattelin** et<
ok quarter to ten, so >I was thinking that<
- 12 jos meil on vartti aikaa niin **mä aattelin** et
if we have fifteen minutes then I was thinking that
- 13 pitäskö <nyt tässä pohtia>, (0.5) <ihan niitä aiheita>
should we <here and now contemplate>, (0.5) <those topics>
- 14 (.) että mitä me, (0.4) siis esimerkiks et
(.) like what we, (0.4) I mean for example like
- 15 jos me halutaan ihan jotain tämmösii erilaisii aiheita
if we want to choose different kinds of topics
- 16 ku (-) vaikka kattoo niitä työvoimalaitoksen
like (-) for instance examine the employment services'
- 17 sivuja m-mollin sivuja, (0.2)
webpages, MOL's ((ministry of labour)) pages, (0.2)
- 18 Ani: mm.
- 19 SW1: [opetella] niitä käyttään,
[learn] how to use them,
- 20 Ani: [mm.]
- 21 SW3: mm-m?
- 22 SW1: ja sit näitä jotain itsearviointijuttuja ja, (0.2)
and then some of these self-evaluation things and, (0.2)
- 23 ja mitä kaikkii muita ajatuksia nyt täs tuleekaan (.)
and whatever other ideas might come up (.)
- 24 ja sit tehtäs niistä vaikka ihan
and then we would make for instance
- 25 vaikka joku semmonen niinku <kalenteri>.
something like a sort of a <calendar>.
- 26 SW3: mm m?
- 27 SW1: vähän niinku tehtiin eilen- eilen-
a bit like we did yesterday- yesterday-
- 28 Ani: mm.
- 29 SW1: ton- mikä ryhmä tää nyt on-
in the- what's that group called now-
- 30 SW3: vapaa-ajan ryhmä.

- leisure time group.
- 31 SW1: nii vapaa-ajan ryhmän kanssa et jaet- jaoteltiin
yes in the leisure time group we sort- sorted
- 32 sinne jo niitä aiheita. ni voitasko me tehdä
the themes there already. so could we do
- 33 ↑tässä samalla tavalla, ↑helpottasko se
the same ↑here, would it make things ↑easier
- 34 meidän kaikkien työtä.
for all of us.
- 35 Kia: no tää ei kuulu tähän mut
well this ((comment)) is not about that but
- 36 puhuitteks te jo siitä reissusta,
have you already discussed the trip,
- 37 SW1: ei. ha[hahaha]
no. ((laughs))
- 38 Tanja: [hahaha]
- 39 Mona: [hahaha]
- 40 SW3: haha @sun tarvi olla paikalla.@ mutta, miltä se
((laughs)) @you need to be there.@ but, how does that
- 41 kalenteriajatus kuulostaa,
calendar idea sound,

In Extract 4, Support Worker 1 uses *mä a(j)attelin* ‘I was thinking’ three times before completing the actual proposal to discuss which topics to cover in the next meetings. In Vandelanotte’s (2009) terms, the thought expressions seem to code all three functions: epistemic, illocutionary, and textual. First, they code the support worker’s subjective stance: knowing what they know, this is how they would spend the remaining time. Second, they function as hedges for the proposition and soften its directive tone: this is a proposition that is based on a certain viewpoint and there can be other viewpoints. Third, as the first two thought expressions (lines 9 and 11) are left incomplete, the repetitions seem to serve as fillers that signal continuation. Simultaneously, the restarts reflect the problematic nature of the support worker’s action: they are leading the conversation away from the topic that Teo has just initiated.

Another noteworthy element in the proposal design in Extract 4 is that the support worker does not format the proposal as declarative (not: *mä aattelin et meidän pitäis* ‘I was thinking that we should’) but instead uses an interrogative in conditional form that is less direct (*mä aattelin et pitä-s-kö* (must-COND-Q), ‘I was thinking that should we’, lines 12–13). Yet, Support worker 1 does not pause, so that the group can reply to the initial proposal to discuss what kind of topics they would like to have in the program, but instead goes on and lists some possible topics (getting to know how to navigate on a job search site, completing self-evaluation forms, l. 16–1, 19, 22). Then, the support worker introduces yet another proposal, which is to schedule the topics (l. 24–25). Throughout, Support worker 1 uses verbal expressions of hesitation that mitigate the directive tone (*siis esimerkiks* ‘I mean for example’, *vaikka joku semmonen niinku kalenteri* ‘for instance something like a sort of a calendar’, *vähän niinku* ‘a bit like’).

After explaining their idea, Support worker 1 informs the group that a similar process was carried out in the leisure time group. The support worker then asks whether they could do the same in this group and whether acting according to this plan would make things easier for all of them (l. 32–34). Support worker 1’s persuasive tone signals that the preferable next action for the clients would be to approve the plan and move on to suggesting topics and dates, whereas initiating a negotiation over the first part of the proposal, what to do for the last 15 min of the meeting, would be unexpected and not preferred at this point of the conversation.

The idea of misaligning is also observable in the next turn: Kia starts by saying *no tää ei kuulu tähän* ‘well this is not about that’ and then enquires whether an upcoming trip has already been discussed (l. 35–36). Although it turns out that the trip has not been mentioned yet in the meeting, Kia’s question is not recognized as something that would challenge the proposal made by one of the institutional agents but merely as a departure from the agenda. After answering Kia’s question, Support Worker 1 starts to laugh, and some clients and Support Worker 3 join the laughter (l. 37–40). This transition to a humorous mode of interaction seems to display affiliation with Kia’s problematic turn (cf. Haakana, 2010). Then, Support Worker 3 teams up with Support Worker 1 and directs the discussion back to making the schedule (40–41). This shows that although the support workers present their proposals as thoughts and soften them in various ways, they can be interpreted as more than just possible options.

Another example of this can be seen in Extract 5, in which one of the support workers is making a poster with a client. In the extract, the support worker introduces their plan to print the texts and attach them to colored cardboard.

Extract 5.

- 01 SW1: muistaks sä Oili missä meil on noita pahveja,
do you remember Oili where we have that cardboard,
- 02 Oili: eh,
nope,
- 03 SW1: noit on kuulemma jossain lisää.
I heard there is more somewhere.
- 04 Oili: okei^{hh},
okay^{hh},
- 05 SW1: kun **mä aattelin** et jos ne tulos- tulostais
*because I was **thinking** that we could print- print them*
- 06 ja sit liimais tiiäks sä tämmöselle (0.2)
and then stick them you know on one of these (0.2)
- 07 mitä oot mieltä.
what do you think.
- 08 (1.5)
- 09 SW1: eiks se ois kivempi [et se ois joku et se ei ois ihan vaan-
wouldn't it be nicer [if it was something and not just-
- 10 Oili: [oishan se.
[it would.
- 11 SW1: valkonen paperi valkosella seinällä.
a white paper on a white wall.

Support Worker 1's actions seek cooperation: they produce several first-pair parts that demand participation on behalf of the client. They first ask if Oili remembers where the cardboard is stored (l. 1). Then, they explain that to their knowledge, there should be more cardboard somewhere, and present their idea to use the cardboard as the background of the poster (*mä aattelin* 'I was thinking', l. 5). They ask Oili's opinion on their idea (l. 7), and when Oili does not immediately respond, they ask again using a question design that implies a clearer preference for agreement (*eiks se ois kivempi* 'wouldn't it be nicer', l. 9). Thus, even though the support worker first presents their plan as a "mere thought," they nevertheless pursue agreement from the client rather than the other options. The client accepts the proposal in the middle of the support worker's turn (*oishan se* 'it would', l. 10). Thus, the client seems to succumb to the support workers' proposal, which, as an act, maintains institutional asymmetry. Stevanovic et al. (2020) also showed that by pursuing clients' agreement, support workers could unintentionally impose their own ideas instead of genuinely promoting joint decision-making.

Both Extracts 4 and 5 illustrate a friendly, non-oppressive way to direct the clients. By introducing their plans as thoughts, the support workers display flexibility but at the same time make it known that they have been planning the next steps. In this regard, one can argue that the past tense thought expressions also manifest institutional power: the support workers express "having been thinking" often, because it is part of their job to plan and guide the conversation. In fact, some support workers' directive proposals prefaced with thought expressions seem quite rhetoric: they announce rather than propose the next steps, as in Extract 6.

Extract 6.

- 01 SW4: **mä aattelin** et voiks sillain tehdä tänään tietysti
*I was **thinking** that can we do it like so today*
- 02 et vois käydä vaik niinku (0.6) meil on tänään
that we could for instance go through (0.6) today we have
- 03 aiheena ollu toi työllistämisestä toi,
(1.2) toi tosiaan toi,
employment as a topic, (1.2) and indeed,
- 04 (1.5) puhuttiin silloin että mitä siirtymä
(1.5) a while ago we talked about transition
- 05 >puhutaan nyt tästä< klubitalon siirtymätyö
>let's now talk about< the Clubhouse Transition
Employment
- 06 -ohjelmasta ja: sitte (.) työvalmennusryhmästä ja
miks on-
*Program and then (.) the job-coaching group and why
it is-*
- 07 miks ois ihan hyvä että osallistuu niihin. (.)
why it would be good to participate in them. (.)

- 08 niin **mä aattelin** sillai että vois- vois ihan tälleen (.)
so **I was thinking** that we could- could just like this (.)
- 09 puhua ja keskustella vaan (.) tästä klubitalon
talk and discuss (.) the Clubhouse's own
- 10 työllistämishojelmasta (.) kun me puhutaan
employment program (.) when we talk about
- 11 <siirtymätyöstä>. (0.5) mä en tiedä *mitä se- (0.4)
<transition employment>. (0.5) I don't know *what it- (0.4)
***Sonja nods**
- 12 varmaan täst on aika paljon ↑pühuttukkin? *ja
probably we have ↑talked about it already quite a lot *and
***Sonja nods 4 times**
- 13 osa tietääkin ja sillon ku on tullu klubitalolle,
some of you know about it and when one has come to the Clubhouse,
- 14 (2.0)
- 15 SW4: klubitalolle *tutustuun [niin] sitähän puhuttiin sillon[ki.]
to the *familiarization [so] it was discussed then [too.]
***Sonja nods 5 times**
- 16 Sonja: [°joo.°] [joo.]
[yeah.] [yeah.]
- 17 SW4: oikeestaan toi siirtymätyö on semmonen asia että,
actually the transition employment is a thing that,

((SW 4 talks about the Transition Employment Program for the next 16 min and 21 s while the three clients and the other support worker present listen quietly.))

In Extract 6, Support Worker 4 opens the meeting by talking about the meeting's agenda (l. 1). Once again, the support worker softens the tone of their proposal by framing them as thoughts (*mä aattelin* 'I was thinking') and using interrogative formatting (*voiks sillain tehdä* 'can we do it like so'). However, later during the same turn, after providing an account for the proposal (l. 2–7), the support worker uses a conditional declarative, which conveys a somewhat more directive tone than the interrogative (*mä aattelin sillai että vois ihan tälleen puhua ja keskustella vaan* 'I was thinking that we could talk and discuss just like this', l. 8–9). The declarative formatting decreases the proposing nature of the support worker's turn, which in turn effaces its function as a first-pair part in the interaction. Instead, the proposals prefaced with thought expressions become part of an introduction sequence, through which the support worker holds the conversational floor and the other participants act as listeners. Therefore, although by initiating the sequence with a relatively soft proposal form and accounting for it, the support worker displays sensitivity to the problem of them dominating the decision-making process; this sensitivity is not an impression that remains highlighted during the sequence. In fact, before discussing the theme together as planned, Support Worker 4 ends up giving a 16-min-long monolog on the topic, thus taking a clearly dominant position in the conversation.

To conclude, support workers' position grants them the ability to chair the conversation and control the topic shifts and decisions. They can make plans for the whole group, elaborate their ideas, and return to them later as they wish. Being in charge of the interaction trajectory makes self-expression less face threatening for support workers than it is for clients. However, the underlying aim of the Clubhouse rehabilitation to promote joint decision-making requires support workers to refrain from acting in an overtly dominant manner. Prefacing their proposals as thoughts is one of the means support workers resort to in order to mitigate their directive actions.

4. Conclusions

In our data comprising mental health rehabilitation meetings, support workers produced four times more thought expressions than clients did. As our analysis has shown, support workers also used thought expressions differently than clients did. While clients' thought expressions served as peripheral remarks, support workers' thought expressions were often embedded in their institutional tasks related to coordinating the meetings and maintaining their agenda (cf. [Henricson and Nelson, 2018](#)). In other words, the social actions in which the explicit thought expressions typically occur seem to demand institutional power. The idea of control also reflects in the sequential position of the thought expressions. Clients tend to express their personal stance only when they are explicitly asked to (i.e., *I think*-formats appear in second-pair parts) or when their opinion does not concern the group's activities (e.g., narrative sequences), whereas support workers can offer their ideas and opinions unsolicitedly and in contexts where they have clear implications for others. In other words, support workers' thought expressions are at the core of decision-making, whereas clients' thought expressions are less relevant to these domains.

Another noteworthy issue regarding power is that the support workers utilize *I think*-formats to both soften and strengthen their authority, depending on the context. On one hand, thought expressions seem to soften support workers' directive actions and guide the interaction toward decisions. In this manner, the thought expressions' function of mitigating conflicts (cf. Rauniomaa, 2007; Endo, 2013) is related to the use of institutional power. Prefacing a proposal or a request with a subjective *I think*-format conveys awareness of other options and thus mitigates the imperativeness of the action. On the other hand, the *I think*-formats used in assessments seem to highlight support workers' authority and present them as agents whose plans and views matter, and are worth bringing forward. As support workers often use first-person thought expressions to convey their professional opinion, expressing alternative views can be difficult for clients who lack such expertise (see Extract 3). Expressing thoughts as an institutional party may thus indirectly diminish clients' opportunities to express contradicting opinions, as their decision-making power is inherently lower. In our data, support workers' thought expressions in assessments and proposal prefaces rarely evoke alternative opinions from clients.

The support workers themselves do not seem to orient strongly toward exchanging views either, although previous studies on casual conversations have underlined that calling for other opinions is a core function of the *I think*-formats (Rauniomaa, 2007; Kärkkäinen, 2003; Endo, 2013). In our data, the support workers' thought expressions merely call for the clients' acceptance or refusal, and in some cases, the support workers do not seem to expect the clients to respond at all (see Extract 6). Moreover, even when the clients do express other ideas, the support workers may ignore them and pursue their own agenda (see Extract 4). This indicates that the power distribution in institutional conversations affects not only thought expression but also the way it is managed in the conversation. The thought expressions of institutional agents generate different participation dynamics than those of the lay parties.

This study aims to increase the understanding of stancetaking as a practice. We demonstrate that in institutional settings, the distribution of power can affect stancetaking at multiple levels and create an unequal starting point for exchanging views. This notion poses a challenge for ideological concepts that aim to improve customer orientation in institutional interaction. For example, endorsing client participation in decision-making in practice may be difficult due to the inherent differences in the way institutional agents and clients express thoughts and opinions. Thus, one way to improve client participation is to acknowledge and identify the differences in stance-taking practices and use this information as the basis when designing the decision-making protocol. In mental health rehabilitation, for example, it can be beneficial if support workers refrain from presenting proposals from their own viewpoint whenever they do not aim to use their institutional power, as the clients can interpret their thought expressions as authoritative actions. Paananen et al. (2020) also demonstrated that support workers could make the opportunities for clients' self-expression perceptible by soliciting their views explicitly (e.g., *mitä te aattele* 'what do you-2PL think'). They also showed that addressing clients as an outgroup in view-elicitors prevented support workers from answering their own proposals (second-person plural vs. first-person plural), and made clients' participation anticipated and even normative. These findings suggest that in addition to mitigating their own directive actions, support workers can foster shared decision-making by increasing explicit attention toward clients.

As interpersonal self-expression is both a way to make oneself heard and a way to construct solidarity and kinship, studying the practices used to accomplish it adds to the understanding of human interaction in general. *Cogito, ergo sum*—thinking is being, and when we think together, we interact.

Relevant CRediT roles

Jenny Paananen: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Investigation, Writing: Original draft, Review & editing.

Melisa Stevanovic: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Validation, Writing: Original draft, Review & editing.

Taina Valkeapää: Data curation, Writing: Original draft, Review & editing.

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Transcription Symbols

[]	overlapping talk
=	latching
(.)	micro pause

(0.1)	timed pause
-	cut-off of preceding sound
:	extension of a sound
°word°	quieter voice
<word>	decreased speaking rate
>word<	increased speaking rate
@word@	smiley voice
(word)	uncertain transcription
.hh	aspiration
↑	rise in pitch
?	rising intonation
!	animated tone
'	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
(- -)	transcriber could not hear what was said
((sitting))	transcriber's descriptions of phenomena or additional information
"name"	suggested name
*	asterisk indicates the position of an embodied action

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