Book Review

Advances in Membership Categorisation Analysis

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Visual Methodologies is online at:
http://journals.sfu.ca/vm/index.php/vm/index
...MCA approaches members’ category work in interaction as embedded within a multi-layered and multi-sequential environment while embracing the complexity of interaction and the orientations of, and to, those present

Fitzgerald & Housley, 2015, p. 18

The notion of categorizing humans and their interactions can evoke visceral responses, particularly given consequences that have resulted from such categorizing historically and scientifically. Studying how such categorizing occurs and is accomplished through social interaction was part of Harvey Sacks’ (1995) innovative research program now known as conversation analysis (CA), and its methodological cousin, ethnomethodology (EM). Both methods focus on how social life is done, and membership categorization analysis (MCA) involves making sense of people’s interactions based on their use of humanly constructed categories. Typically, such MCA interactions, as the quote above indicates, are quite complex, and occur within layered, multi-sequential interactions. And such complex sequences of MCA interactions are what Fitzgerald and Housley consider and include in their recent edited volume.

Category membership work is something that interactionally occurs on the fly – in micro-interactions that largely escape notice. We make inferences within such interactions about the kind of person we are dealing with, for example, and act accordingly. Given that such “category work” happens in mostly taken-for-granted micro-interactions, the observational methods of CA and EM have been brought to MCA. In the words of editors, Fitzgerald and Housley:

MCA is interested in observing, uncovering, and detailing the methods, techniques and orientations employed by members as they go about their routine tasks. Thus MCA is not so much a method of analysis but rather a collection of observations and an analytic mentality towards observing the ways and methods people orient, invoke, and negotiate social category based knowledge when engaged in social action. (2015, p. 6)

From the outset, I should mention that the title word “Advances” categorizes the read one should expect, given CA and EM’s highly technical and theoretically challenging ways of making sense of social interaction. The “analytic mentality” in MCA referred to in the quote above is one attuned to the subtleties and nuances of how people interact around categories and categorical differences – observably and across varied sequences of interactions. Translated to the present volume, that mentality is adapted to reviewing transcribed and video-recorded interactions, studied with CA’s attention to making evident how category work in interactions is performed. Use of detailed transcripts to make analytic inferences is one example here of where things get technical. The theoretical challenges may arise in reading further nuances to MCA, should MCA be new to readers (in that case, readers can check out David Silverman’s Harvey Sacks: Social Science and Conversation Analysis) and there have been theoretical debates within CA and EM research communities over “proper” MCA that are somewhat revisited in the first two chapters.

Applying the analytic mentality mentioned to the MCA studies showcased, readers find chapters on how category work is done in social interactions within illustrative contexts. How are such categories worked up and conferred in rolling newscasts, such as during the mass murders by Anders Breivik in Norway, or when neighbours report on each other’s purported criminal activities? Calling someone a terrorist, murderer, or pervert is not an idle speech act, and the sequences building and following such category work focus interest in one chapter (Stokoe & Attenborough). Another chapter (Licoppe) examines how videocamera work helps to identify sequences within courtroom testimony where lawyers, defendants and expert witnesses categorize the “nature” of the person on trial, according to emotional and verbal responses within the trial proceedings. Here, MCA work clearly has consequences but
the same could be argued when, for example, someone’s reputation is at stake, or that they are classified, say, for employment purposes—other examples of category work. Of course, research teams, when doing group data analysis, can also be involved in doing MCA, and Reynolds and Fitzgerald contribute a chapter focused on the contestability of team qualitative data analysis. How do norms develop within such teams, and what happens when a member deviates from such norms to contest an analytic interpretation. Such a phenomenon is hardly research team exclusive; people hold views departing from everyday group norms, and can be faced with dilemmas as to how to make their views ‘hearable.’ Finally, MCA can help to make sense of how people, in CA terms, “do being normal” when disruptions occur to normal activities. Normal, in Rintel’s sense, is a context-appropriateness, a social “omnirelevance” for what people attempt to maintain—for example, to stay appropriate with each other. Rintel studied couples disrupted when making videocalls, and his MCA interest is with what they do to maintain the omnirelevance of affectionate and respectful relating in the face of disruptions to their communications. Again, the studies are technical but give readers useful examples for understanding how MCA studies can be done.

MCA offers visual methodologists ways of making sense of how cultural and intercultural interactions are done in tacit or taken for granted ways. To that end, Fitzgerald and Housley’s edited volume refines and advances an “analytic mentality” of potential value for better understanding important social and cultural issues, as they are transacted. While their volume will be most appreciated by readers familiar with EM and CA studies, it succeeds by highlighting, through its theoretical and empirical chapters, the potentials for MCA research at a time when it is becoming obvious that we need to better understand what goes on within and from the experienced but unnoticed subtleties of social and cultural interactions.

References