Membership Categorization Analysis

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What is it?

Membership categorization analysis (MCA) is a method by which researchers explore how speakers use language to group people, objects, or actions into common sets. Some of these sets, or collections, rely upon stereotypes. Researchers study a speaker's choice to employ a specific category, over many other options. For instance, an occupation may be considered an obvious, or "omnirelevant," category to refer to a doctor or police officer. Similarly, certain actions or other categories, such as gender, may be "category-bound" (e.g. male police officers), and MCA reveals these taken-for-granted category assumptions.

Who uses the concept?

Those who study social interaction within communication, sociology, or linguistics, in order to examine everyday uses of language and its implications, have been drawn to MCA research.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Rather than beginning with categories conceived of by researchers, including those relevant to intercultural dialogue, such as ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality, MCA studies how people use language to create and interpret the meaning of categories. How members are ascribed to, or implicated in, categories and the affordances (or disaffordances) provided as members of certain categories is considered a matter for empirical investigation through MCA.

What work remains?

MCA research has produced robust analyses of work within a single culture with commonly indexed categories. However, recent work has turned to the task of learning about intercultural category-work, whereby persons from diverse countries or backgrounds may be intertwined with or tied to the categories they use. Expanded MCA research explores diverse language use to illustrate alternate ways of categorizing people, relationships, and actions uniquely.

Resources

Hansen, A. (2005). A practical task: Ethnicity as a resource. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, *38*(1), 63–104.

Shrikant, N. & Sambaraju, R. (11 Aug 2023): Membership categorization analysis, race, and racism, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *21*(4), 375–401. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2023.2245348

Stokoe, E., & Attenborough, F. (2014). Ethnomethodological methods for identity and culture: Conversation analysis and membership categorisation. In F. Dervin & K. Risager (Eds.), *Researching identity and interculturality* (pp. 89-108). New York: Routledge.