Module – Sociality
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1. Why teach this module?

Sociality is core to all human life. Through social interaction and intersubjectivity people gain personhood, forge relationships, create and maintain social forms, institutions and social order. Phenomena as different as curriculum reform, learning disabilities and schoolyard bullying are all historical artefacts of human social interaction.

Sociality is also the medium of all learning. Through social interaction, children experience 'what matters' and learn how to interpret 'what is going on'. Children pick up on where, when and with whom it is 'usual' to behave in certain ways - to shout, sing, keep silent, run, or make trouble for a teacher. For their part, teachers work to promote idealized forms of sociality, such as *class community* and *egalitarian sociality*. They monitor children's behaviour, interpret 'what is going on' and guide and direct as necessary.

This module is designed for exploring social interaction and reflecting on social interaction in educational settings. Paying close attention to fine-grained details of social interaction, and to 'usual' assumptions about 'what's happening' allows us to understand sociality as concerted action, i.e. the joint work people do to interact appropriately. It also allows us to rework our 'usual' assumptions and reflect on how we might proceed differently toward achieving valued pedagogical goals.

2. Ethnographic Entry Points

While sociality is at the core of all human life, participating in particular forms of social interaction in specific contexts requires familiarity with local norms of appropriate conduct and social position. Entering a new and unfamiliar setting is always fraught with the risk of inappropriate behaviour or of being ignored while others enjoy a sociable moment together.

Studying interaction is useful for gaining in-depth understanding of culturally specific ways of doing things. In *How to ask for a drink in Subanun*, Frake describes what a stranger, in this case an anthropologist, has to know to interact appropriately with local people in a particular sociable setting (1964:127). Frake's step-by-step description of procedures for 'getting a drink' (and getting ahead socially) is useful for thinking about procedures in comparable situations in which newcomers attempt to 'join others' to eat lunch, play football or jump rope. Detailed descriptions show the complexity of procedures and reveal differences of opinion about the 'right, ' best or 'most usual' way to proceed.

This classic approach may be fruitfully applied to contemporary work on children with autistic spectrum disorder, whose capability of acting 'ordinary' in accordance with the

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expectations of consociates' is not ready-to-hand. Anthropologists, Ochs and Solomon use this approach to ask what teachers, classmates, parents, and siblings need to know to interact successfully with children diagnosed with autism. By paying close attention to the details of social interaction between these children and their human and animal caregivers, Ochs and Solomon explore the limitations and competencies of 'autistic sociality.' Through this they suggest ways of enhancing the social engagement of children with this disorder (2013: 69).

In the *Waltz of Sociability* (1995), Amit-Talai addresses the question of how young people carve out time and space for more intimate and personal sociability in schools that prescribe a more generalized sociability – of all with all. She describes how youth create 'space' for close 'friend' relations in a school that greatly restricts student movement in time and space. She describes the student's relational work of making friends and the emotional work of worrying about the quality and realness of friendships. She gives a detailed look into the ways students create small windows of time and space in which to negotiate friendship, and how they work to convert some classmates into 'best friends' while maintaining 'more distant' relationships with others. Amit-Talai's work gives food for thought about how schools structure student sociality by regulating where and with whom they spend their time. She shows the challenges students face in their efforts to carve out more intimate and meaningful relationships in the constant company of 'others' in social arenas that restrict their movement and take up much of their time.

Highlighting some challenges of social interaction, these ethnographic articles provide different ways of thinking about sociality in a range of environments. Juxtaposing the articles allows us to grasp how anthropologists learn by comparing and contrasting phenomena across times and settings, with the aim of gaining genuine insight and applying this insight to questions and concerns in their own field of work.

3. Ways of understanding

In Schegloff's view (2011: 70) coordinated *social interaction* is the fundamental embodiment of sociality, the 'infrastructure' that grounds all human life and social institutions. Social interaction figures centrally in the economy, the polity, in institutions of marriage, family, education, law, religion and more. It thus has to be sufficiently robust, flexible and self-maintaining to sustain social order at family dinners, in coalmines, on operating tables, in Paris and Vanuatu and virtually everywhere that human life is found.

Drawing on linguistic and non-linguistic interaction, conversation analysts and anthropologists have outlined specific organizational problems that are generic to interaction. For example, interaction requires *turn taking* and *nextness*. Taking turns always entails the question of who should speak, move or act *next* and how long to pause between turns. It also involves questions of coherent sequencing. What the *next* speaker says should follow coherently from the first speaker 's utterance, such that successive turns create a coherent course of action framed by a *working consensus* about what is going on. Coherent interaction also involves ways of repairing misunderstandings along the way, to restore forward progress such that the interaction does not freeze or fall apart (Schegloff 73-77).

Sacks (1984: 429) argues that "working at being usual" is a *technology* people apply to accomplish orderly interaction. Acting in 'ordinary' ways is not about *being* ordinary, but about *doing* 'being ordinary.' It takes work, and people engage in coordinated interaction such that all appear to be ordinary person" (Sack 1984: 415). The question for Sacks was not so much how people go about doing being ordinary persons but rather how they *know* what 'being ordinary' is in any given situation. What is 'usual' (or unusual) is culturally and temporally distributed; as Frake might note, asking for a drink in Vienna or Subanun are likely to be two very different procedures.

An enduring question is how children and other newcomers gain competence in locally situated social forms and practices, in appropriate ways of sustaining coherent interaction (Ochs and Solomon 2010: 69). To grasp this aspect of sociality, it is useful to think of all actions, movements, and utterances as symbolic communication. Non-linguistic signs, such as a slightly arched eyebrow, a half-raised hand, or a brief silence are all indexical of something. What they are indexes of is open to interpretation, to informed guesswork based on experience of similar situations and the forward progression of the action at hand. While prior knowledge of a child's tendency to hit others when provoked helps us imagine what *could* happen, it is only in the action at hand that small pats on the back may become *real* hits that start a fight rather than sustain a convivial tussle between to boys (Cf. Batson 1972).

Geertz (1973) illustrates this difficulty by asking how we might discern a *wink* from a *twitch*. If we decide a brief eye contraction is a wink, we still have to infer whether it is an ironic, flirtatious, or secretive wink. To do this we need to know something of the specific situation in which the winking takes place, the persons involved, the ambience and whether or not there is a viable working consensus about what going on. Nonverbal signs (smiles, frowns, etc) help us discern what is happening and whether it is ordinary or unusual. Yet once settled on an interpretation, we still have the work of figuring out what to do next.

Because we (still) cannot get inside each other's minds, social interaction requires intricate negotiation and concerted action. Even the simplest greetings are extremely complex, as we have to figuring out how close to stand, who goes first, whether to high-five of cheek-kiss and how many times, how low to bow, to whom and in which situation, how to repair bumped heads or missed hands and how to gracefully end a greeting are joint *achievements* that take subtle collaboration from all involved to succeed. Accomplishing successful interaction involves collusion, concerted acts of playing along, tactfully not noticing breaches of conduct or generously ignoring a *real* hit.

Ethnomethodologists, symbolic interactionists and linguistic anthropologists (Goffman, Kendon, Garfinkel, Birdwhistle, Schegloff, McDermott and more) have developed a vocabulary for talking about social interaction. Terms like *collaboration*, *achievement, gaze direction, joint attention, concerted action, synchronization of movement, spatial coordination, collusion, facework, front stage, back stage, working consensus, framing, everyday constitution of meaning* point to different aspects of the intricate work of social interaction. In paying attention to these, we become better discerners of what is (also) going on.

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4. Suggested Exercises

- Read two ethnographic articles, identify main questions and points, and contrast and compare the ethnographic settings described. Discuss how you might apply insights from these articles to specific issues of social interaction in your own work. Prepare a brief presentation of your example and reflections for class discussion.

- Reflect on and discuss how ordinary acts, such as walking down the street, coming to class, going to the store, eating dinner – are organized and what cultural assumptions, ideologies or values help to keep them organized in this way.

- Have two members of your group carry on a two-minute conversation, while all others observe and note how the two, who are speaking, work to coordinate their interaction. Reflect on what techniques make the conversation 'work,' what makes it 'ordinary' and identify points where the conversation 'gets into trouble' and try to explain why this is.

- Identify one pedagogical ideal for classroom sociality. Describe how 'school class' organization structures, shapes and restricts children's social interaction. Compare and contrast the pedagogical ideal and your attempts to facilitate it with what 'actually' or 'usually happens. Explain how what 'actually' happens makes sense in this in this particular social arena. How might you revise, adjust, reformulate your ideal goal or facilitation to take 'what actually happens' seriously?

5. Learning Prospects

- Students will become familiar with different anthropological approaches to studying and understanding human sociality and social interaction and be able to reflect on how to apply these to teacher work.

- Students will better understand the intricate coordination required of participants to achieve successful interaction and a better appreciation of all that can go wrong.

- Students will gain respect for the challenges newcomers face in learning and appropriating unfamiliar ways of acting 'as usual'.

- Student will gain a vocabulary for talking about and reflecting on coordinated social interaction that is relatively free in the first instance of pedagogical ideology and moral evaluation.

6. Literature

Theoretical articles

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Sacks, H. (1984) On Doing 'Being Ordinary.' In *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversational Analysis,* J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 413-429.

Ethnographic articles

Amit-Talai, V. (1995) The Waltz of Sociability: Intimacy, Dislocation, and Friendship in a Quebec High School. In *Youth Cultures. A Cross-cultural perspective,* ed. V. Amit-Talai and H. Wulff, New York: Routledge, pp. 144-165.

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Salomon, O. (2010) What a Dog Can Do: Children with Autism and Therapy Dogs in Social Interaction. *ETHOS,* 38(1): 143-166.

Further Readings:

Amit, V. (ed.) (2015) *Thinking Through Sociality. An Anthropological Interrogation of Key Concepts.*

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