Studying Interpersonal Interaction (Book Review).

By: Mark A. Fine

Abstract:

Studying Interpersonal Interaction. Barbara Montgomery & Steve Duck (Eds.). New York: The Guilford Press. 1991. 346 pp. Hardcover ISBN 0-89862-312-X. $36.95.

This volume is an overview of current research methods in the study of interpersonal interaction. It was not designed to provide specific details of the various methodologies; however, the chapters include excellent references for readers who desire more detail. Having limited expertise in this area, I found the book to be extremely interesting and informative.

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Article:

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A creative feature of this book is that contributors were asked to consider a common sample research problem--a brief interaction between a husband and wife in the presence of another couple. However, attempts to integrate the sample research problem into the chapters met with limited success. Authors often indicated that the sample research problem provided too little information to be of much help.

Part 1 consists of six chapters that consider assumptions about the nature of social interaction. A strength of these chapters is that they openly and clearly state that there are few "hard and fast rules" regarding how to study any particular phenomena; rather, there are multiple methodological approaches guided by a number of theories. Further, the authors explicitly state

their particular stance(s) on these issues. For me, particularly helpful chapters were the introductory one by Montgomery and Duck, which provides a very useful "philosophy of science" context for the rest of the book, and that by Catherine Surra and Carl Ridley, which describes how perspectives from participants, peers, and observers are similar and dissimilar with respect to describing interaction.

Part 2 contains six chapters that present ways to gather data related to interpersonal interaction, including accounts, narratives, diaries, logs, retrospective self-reports, discourse, and behavioral observation. These chapters are generally clear, concise, and balanced reviews of the strengths, limitations, and appropriate uses of each of these methods. The chapter on behavioral observation seemed particularly well-written and thorough. The final chapter in this section, on experimentation, is misplaced, as it addresses an approach to research design and not a data gathering method per se. It is also written for a less sophisticated audience than are the other chapters.

The third part of the book reviews strategies for analyzing data gathered on interpersonal interaction. These chapters were somewhat uneven in quality and depth, with some addressing topics in a general fashion (e.g., chapters on content analysis and meta-analysis) and others focusing on techniques in a detailed manner (chapters on analyzing categorical data and phasic analysis). Particularly disappointing was a chapter on meta-analysis which did not actually describe the technique until the final several pages. Although this may be an unreasonable expectation for an edited volume, a closer continuity between the data-gathering methods presented in part 2 and the data-analysis strategies reviewed in part 3 would have been useful.

The final chapter, written by the editors, is a well-taken plea for "methodological pluralism over ethnocentrism." The authors encourage researchers to recognize the value of open dialogue among those who have different and seemingly incompatible approaches to studying interpersonal interaction. This is one of the most important messages in the book.