

Fakultetsopponenten sammanfattar

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Åsa Mäkitalo – Categorizing work: Knowing, arguing, and social dilemmas in vocational guidance (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2002)

Åsa Mäkitalo's doctoral dissertation deals with – by using the author's own words – human interaction and institutionalised communication, its socialising, organising and knowledge-producing dimensions. The purpose of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of institutional practices in a complex society. More specifically, the dissertation argues for the significance of analysing the role of categories and traditions of argumentation for how such practices unfold and are maintained over time. As a subtitle of the thesis tells us, institutionalised interaction and the categories and traditions of argumentation embedded in it are approached via one particular social institution. The empirical case is a public employment office, especially the practices of vocational guidance in it.

On the one hand the dissertation can be categorised as belonging to the tradition of ›institutional discourse studies‹, which tradition has got plenty of new members in recent decades. There has been and is a growing interest in studying the everyday practices of various institutions in the fields of education, health care, social welfare etc. Institutional practices in different organisations share a lot in common, for instance they are all heavily based on categorisation. From that follows that the studies of different organisations can fertilise each other and make use of each others' findings. Another tradition which this dissertation is part of, and which in fact is also most often in the background of ›the institutional discourse studies‹, is the one that stresses the significance of social interaction and dialogue among people as a core element in the creation of social reality. The origins of this tradition can be located in the writings of such well known scholars as Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Ludvig Wittgenstein and Michael Bakhtin.

The dissertation consists of two parts. Part one contains firstly a theoretical and methodological discussion related to the analysis of institutional discourses. Secondly it contains the sociogenesis of the studied vocational guidance practices in the public employment office. The last section of part one includes a description of a research project and an empirical field within which the data has been produced. Part two comprises four articles with independent research questions and analyses in each. The first two of them have been

written in collaboration with Roger Säljö. In spite of this division of the dissertation into two parts the dissertation does not split into theoretical discussions and empirical case studies. The work is characterised by the interplay between theory and empirical material. Every article brings some methodological developments or innovations which are then further developed in other articles and in the theoretical section of part one.

Sociocultural and dialogical perspective

Åsa Mäkitalo explores how categories are interactively used in doing vocational guidance and what is made or produced by them. She creates her own approach to studying categories by using two other approaches as an argumentative frame. These other two are named as a structuralist approach and as an ethnomethodological approach. The structuralist, »durkheimian», way of examining categories is treating categories as given to the individual by society. They are thus external and predefined factors that explain and influence individual action. As a consequence a researcher who is studying this action should be aware of these external categories and define them before collecting and analysing empirical data. The ethnomethodological approach, based on Harold Garfinkel's and Harvey Sacks's ideas, takes an opposite stance on categories; categories are defined as devices and resources that participants create and use jointly in ›here-and-now‹ interaction. So a researcher can catch the categories that the participants orient to only by examining interaction in situ and in order to succeed in this s/he should ›bracket‹ her/his own cultural knowledge. Åsa Mäkitalo argues that both of these approaches are problematic. The problem with the structuralist approach is that it separates categories from the practices of everyday interaction. The ethnomethodological approach for its part misses the material and cultural aspects of every interaction when stressing that the categories are always occasioned.

Åsa Mäkitalo proposes in her dissertation a third way for studying the categories in institutional practices. She calls her theoretical position as a sociocultural and dialogical perspective. The core idea of this perspective is that the categories used in institutional practices are both retrospective and prospective in character. They are retrospective because they have their sociogenesis in the history and culture of the social practices of a certain institution. So categories are dialogical in two senses. They are used and produced both in sociohistorical traditions of argumentation and in situ interaction. The prospective character of institutional practices means that our actions are consequential in a manner that goes beyond the conversation in situ. Categorising people in institutions have real consequences for the lives of the individuals.

Two traditions of argumentation

Following the above described premises of sociocultural and dialogical perspective, Åsa Mäkitalo provides a context for her empirical material from vocational guidance. She does this by explicating the dominant traditions of argumentation that preceded the institutionalisation and by introducing voca-

tional guidance as an institutional practice. This information is needed in the research in order to understand the present categorising practices of vocational guidance. In other words: the history of categorisation, the past dialogues of this institution are embedded in one form or another in today's interaction. Åsa Mäkitalo locates two dominant traditions of argumentation and writes (p 23):

In one tradition, the categories used predominantly as their point of departure the social dilemma of ›begging and poverty› and the people engaged in such activities. The other tradition, which emerged later, took as its point of departure abstract notions such as the ›labour force› and its role for productivity.

These traditions approach the issue from different angles, the first one from individual's own characteristics and the second one from the features of what we are nowadays accustomed to calling as a labour market.

In spite of this difference, both traditions have created more and more specified and to each other intertwined categories of people under scrutiny. The process of institutionalisation is the other side of this very same coin. Emerging institutional arrangements, including vocational guidance, both used and produced categories as tools in their administrative duties. People had to be classified in relation to available job opportunities, in other words to match their characteristics with requirements of different jobs. These category-rich traditions of argumentation provide thus a dialogical context or meaning potentials for the current practices at a public employment office. And that is why the researcher both needs to be aware of them and use them in analysing the practices of vocational guidance.

Data

The data of the research has been gathered in one employment office, which has a staff of about 50 persons and approximately 8000 applicants. Åsa Mäkitalo divides the empirical material into two groups. The first group consists of both so called frontstage activities of the office, that is audio-taped and documented material from vocational guidance in groups and from individual vocational guidance work, and backstage talk meaning audio-recorded meetings among vocational guidance officers. These materials of the first group serve as the main analysable data in the study. The other corpus of data contains ethnographic fieldnotes from different settings of the office's daily work, conversations with applicants and officers and textual vocational guidance material. These data are used as an informative support material in the dissertation.

Four articles on categorizing work

Article number one titled »Talk in institutional context and institutional context in talk: categories as situated practices» contributes to a theoretical and methodological discussion about the issue how to conceive the relationship between collective institutional practices that have a long history on the one hand and individual action on the other. Or to put it in another way: the

article concentrates on what can be regarded as a context when studying institutional conversations. Is it something that can be identified from the conversations as such or is some ›external‹ information needed? The empirical examples in this article are taken from vocational guidance conversations. On the basis of her analysis Åsa Mäkitalo ends up to arguing for a sociocultural perspective. She claims that it is not possible for an analyst to understand or locate the institutional categories used in the conversations without having any knowledge about the sociohistorical genesis of the studied institution. So it is not sufficient just to concentrate on the participants' orientations (as is done in conversations analysis) in analysing the conversations.

The title of the second article is »Invisible people: institutional reasoning and reflexivity in the production of services and ›social facts‹ in public employment agencies». It concentrates on how a categorisation system is used as a discursive tool in the backstage activities of an employment office. The article introduces the idea of people-processing when looking at how a computer-based ›applicant category system‹ is used reflexively in the meetings among the vocational guidance officers and in their other administrative activities. The analysis shows the political nature of the categorisation; as an officer depresses the keys on the computer keyboard and places an applicant in a certain category, she or he simultaneously produces several outputs that are used in different settings and for different purposes. A special attention in the article is given to the use and role of a so called ›residual category 14‹ in a computer-based classification system. It is used for the cases that do not fit the logic and tradition of the office, often the people categorised as number 14 are marginalised in the labour market. The people put into the residual category are seen as low priority cases, which shows what a powerful and consequential tool this classification system is.

The third article »Accounting practices as situated knowing: dilemmas and dynamics in institutional categorization» is based on a view that when people enter into some situation, in this case into an employment office, they need to deal with a pre-understood reality. From that it follows that they also need to learn certain accounting practices that actors employ in a specific setting. This is what Åsa Mäkitalo calls as situated knowing. The article examines situated knowing in the face-to-face encounters between officers and applicants in vocational guidance. A special focus is on such instances of conversations where there seems to be a gap between action and expectation, in other words there is no shared interpretation about relevant categories in situ. Usually the parties use and produce categories fluently, they know what positions to take in the conversations and what the meanings of used categories are. The analysis proves that sometimes the participants, however, need to elaborate and negotiate the meaning of a category in order to establish such circumstances that can continue their business. So situated knowing is not just mechanical knowledge about the routines of certain institutional encounters but also the participants' capability to act creatively and productively in the social circumstances within which they have to fit their actions.

In the last article »Effort on display: unemployment and the interactional management of moral accountability in vocational guidance» Åsa Mäkitalo's

interest is on the sequences of vocational guidance conversations in which a participant explicitly notices that an event has not occurred, that is a ›negative event‹. She poses three research questions. What kinds of negative events are commonly reported and made into topics in these conversations, what discursive moves and rhetorical forms are used to constitute them as morally sensitive and how are these descriptions of morally sensitive actions or events handled? Three kinds of events are established as morally sensitive by the participants: when a person had failed in a knowledge test, missed an appointment or activity and failed in getting a job. The analysis shows that the most usual ways to handle these morally sensitive issues are to normalise or pre-empty them.

Normalising strategy is used especially in cases where the applicant has failed a knowledge test. Åsa Mäkitalo explains this to be due to the fact that the employment office is not accountable for the results that applicants achieve in such tests. Pre-emptying is the applicants' typical way to handle their misses and failings to get a job, which means that they present themselves as misfortunate victims of circumstances. In a limited number of cases in the material the officers produce the events as problematic and mark transgression. This means that they put the focus on the applicants' own conduct, will, effort and intention. This is the case especially when the accountability and the reputation of the institution itself is at stake.

Categories and institutional practices

Åsa Mäkitalo stresses that when studying categories and traditions of argumentation one should not take categories as coherent and ready-made. Quite the opposite, since categorisation is a dynamic and living process in situ any argument is never really brought to an end but reflexive situated knowing is always needed. The dissertation makes it visible that categorisation is an inherent part of institutional practices. Categories are operative, powerful and consequential tools. They carry moral dimensions in themselves and can be changed under political debate and public criticism. Categories are something that cannot be escaped or shaken off, but the study of how they are used in the everyday practices of institutions can shed light on how they tend to produce certain kind of strictly and simply defined people on the one hand and how the situated knowing of both applicants and officers is always sensitive and reflexive on the other hand.

Åsa Mäkitalo's dissertation is without doubt a scientific work of high quality. The dissertation as a whole comprising of two parts is well organised. Everyone of the collection of four articles provides an independent, clearly defined and innovative study. In spite of this independence, they add to each other and form a coherent whole together with the concluding theoretical discussions in part one. Åsa Mäkitalo is clearly an expert in the areas of institutional discourse studies and category analysis. The way in which she constructs her own approach, dialogical and sociocultural perspective, is convincing in regards to both the theoretical discussions presented and empirical analyses conducted. Also, the way in which the author uses her empirical material from vocational guidance practices is skilful and exciting.

All the arguments are clearly and convincingly based on the data selected for the analysis. This is not to say, however, that there would be nothing else to be found in the data. Surely there could have been lots of other categorisation activities to be located from the data corpus. But when doing a detailed empirical analysis, well defined and strictly delimited research questions are an inevitable precondition for a successful result.

In the field of institutional discourse and categorisation studies Åsa Mäkitalo's dissertation is a remarkable contribution. It makes it visible how categories and institutions are bound together in many complicated ways and in doing so the dissertation offers plenty of materials and inspirations for other institutional discourse researchers.