Leadership and interactional construction of identities in business meetings

Magnus Larsson
Associate Professor
Department of Organization
Copenhagen Business School
Denmark
ml.ioa@cbs.dk

The focus of the paper is identity constructions through membership categorizations as a mechanism for leadership, seen as interpersonal influence. The empirical material consists of audio recordings of business meetings in two organizational contexts, one bank in Sweden and a hospital in USA. In the recorded meetings, typically 4-8 people talk about organizationally relevant issues for between 30 and 120 minutes. From recordings of a total of 24 meetings, sequences were identified where membership categories were actively negotiated, issues were debated, or choices on how to proceed made. These sequences are then studied in detail. Utilizing Membership Categorization as the primary analytical tool, we examine how constructions of collective identities are established in the interaction (Larsson & Lundholm, 2013) through use of pronouns, MCDs and category collections (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Jayyusi, 1984, Sacks, 1992). Typically, membership categories might be constructed in interaction by direct labelling, by descriptions, as well as by performing various actions associated with relevant categories. Of central importance to the analysis is the notion of relevance for participants, that is, the focus is on how participants of the interaction visibly relate to and make sense of categories, rather than on how the analyst might categorize what is going on.

We examine the role of membership categories in the negotiation of tasks, rights and obligations. Earlier studies have shown the use of formulations (Clifton, 2006) and persuasive elaborations (Larsson & Lundholm, 2013) as important leadership mechanisms. In this paper, we examine how these kinds of mechanisms depend on construction of collective and individual identities-in-interaction. Of specific importance for leadership and organizing of actions, is the construction of a local collective identity, a "we", that engages with a task at hand. This collective identity offers both rights and obligations to the persons included in it, and functions as a central device for accomplishing influence.

The study presented here analyses different way that such collective identities are constructed and negotiated in a group context. Based on chosen extracts, where tasks are constructed and negotiated, or where identities are at stake, micro level dynamics are examined and various versions of identities constructed are analyzed. We show how the collective identities function as interactional devices for offering individual identities, rights and obligations, as well as for resisting these. These dynamics operate on the level of turn-by-turn interaction, and is dependent on the evolving environment of the interaction, as well as on interactional competence of the participants.

These dynamics are discussed in in relation to a processual view on leadership, where leadership is understood as a process of interpersonal influence, rather than as structural roles. The study aims to contribute to the existing literature on talk-in-interaction in business meetings, as well as to the literature on moral implications of membership categories. Existing conversation analytically oriented studies of leadership has focused on establishment and enactment of social roles (for instance Pomerantz & Denvir, 2007; Vine et al, 2008), of the role of formulations (Clifton, 2009), or on identity constructions through membership categorization in dyadic interactions (Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), but so far no study has focused on the role of membership categorizations in
groups of people (as in business meetings). We expect the results to further add to the literature on
the moral functions of categories (Jayyusi, 1984, Hester & Eglin, 1997), as examplified by
negotiations of rights and obligations.

References

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