

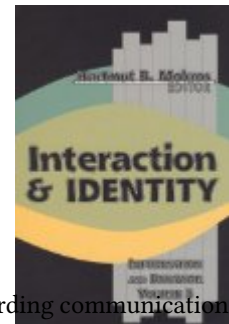
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Harmut B. Mokros, ed. *Interaction & Identity*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56000-191-1.

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This is the fifth volume in the *Information and Behavior* series inaugurated in 1983 “to provide an interdisciplinary forum for examining the implications and increasing centrality of information in contemporary life and scholarship.” The introductory essay, “From Information and Behavior to Interaction and Identity,” places the collection *vis-a-vis* previous volumes in the series. More importantly, it locates the collection in a conversation about identity so that it will be of use to participants in that conversation even if they are not familiar with the earlier volumes.

As a collection of essays, the book suffers predictably from a degree of unevenness. But it also benefits from presentation of multiple perspectives that intermittently approaches what Clifford Geertz, the famous renegade anthropologist, seems to have had in mind when he urged “transdisciplinary” rather than simply “interdisciplinary” approaches to culture. The disciplinary range is staggering, from psychoanalytic theory (orthodox and heterodox) through philosophical studies of communicative action, literary criticism, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, social constructivism, feminist film criticism, and library science. As a technical work, it is occasionally jargon-laden; but readers who wade through the jargon will be richly rewarded. Selection of material is intended to lean toward empirical studies, but theoretical insights may prove most valuable to students of popular culture.

In his introduction, Mokros describes “two paths for discussing the linkage between communication and information, with the first emphasizing information and the second communication” (p. 2). The first path is marked by the assumption that “information enables the *cognitive capture* ... of reality out there.” The second path

challenges that assumption by regarding communication as primary, thus making it a “constitutive” process rather than a process of exchange (p. 3). This second path runs like a thread through the diverse contributions to the book and marks its concern “with changing notions of self from single and unitary to multiple and overlapping” (p. 411). Identity is not some “thing” out “there” (or in “here”) so much as it is a *process* continuously reconstituted in communicative action.

Thomas Scheff’s discussion of part/whole discovery is a wonderful appreciation of Goethe’s still-neglected contribution to scientific inquiry. Combined with a brief reappraisal of Wittgenstein, it is a richly suggestive methodological proposal congenial to studies of popular culture that are more “organic” than “mechanical.” Bateson’s introduction to *The Natural History of an Interview* is a classic, here made readily accessible in print for the first time. Though it was written almost forty years ago, it is perceptive and relevant both theoretically and methodologically: students of popular culture should appreciate it as a commentary on Rainer Maria Rilke’s unicorn, if nothing else! Nancy Roth’s variations on the themes of identity, subjectivity, and agency illuminate practical methods of conversational analysis, film criticism, and rhetoric without implying that the methods are mutually exclusive. In the process, she initiates a conversation among Goffman, Foucault, and Giddens that is one of the most insightful transdisciplinary moments of the book. Steven Pratt’s discussion of “ritualized humor as a form of identification among American Indians,” Tamsin Lorraine’s discussion of “ambiguous bodies” and “believable selves,” and Kim Wittenstrom’s exploration of “the identification of women’s activities” all contribute to both theoretical and practical insights into the poly-semantic character of categories too-often

treated as though they were fixed. Wittenstrom's examination of family day care is an especially interesting exercise in category shattering investigation. The concluding essay on indexes by Ira Kleinberg is also fascinating—a provocative look at one aspect of the “popular” culture of scholarly communities.

This is a useful collection, as a whole or in pieces. There is much to be said for reading Mokros' introductory essay as a road map, then wandering through the book

without sticking to the beaten path(s). Don't be surprised if you find more than two.

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