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The Work of Difference: Dialogic Identity Construction in Workplace Interaction

In this talk, I bring together perspectives from intercultural, organizational, and interpersonal communication to rethink how we understand and research "difference" and the idea of "overcoming differences" in social interaction at work. While traditional intercultural communication theory often treats difference as fixed—tied to stable, pre-existing categories that determine people's identities—I argue for the value of seeing difference as socially constructed: actively produced and negotiated, talked into (and out of) being in everyday interaction within the context of organizing. More than that, I propose viewing "overcoming differences" as an ongoing process of navigating alternative (and sometimes incompatible) ways of being oneself in relation to others at work.

I build on Deetz's (2001) dialogical paradigm, which sees organizational life as shaped by competing, multivocal, and often contradictory discourses, and connect this with recent developments in critical interculturality (e.g., Dervin, 2023). This shift in perspective moves us away from static notions of identity and toward the dynamic, messy processes through which people co-create fractured, turbulent, and even paradoxical identities in situ.

To examine how people navigate difference dialogically, I introduce three interaction-focused, metatheoretical approaches: the underutilized but powerful frameworks of membership categorization analysis and critical discursive psychology, along with a new analytical method my colleagues and I have developed—blocking and threading analysis (Karppinen et al., in press). Together, these lenses offer a richer understanding of how people collaboratively make sense of being both differently different—and similar—in workplace interactions, and what kinds of social actions this navigation work accomplishes. My aim is to show how a closer study of these processes can open up new possibilities for fostering more ethical and inclusive relations in the context of organizing.

References:

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