Book Review


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I will begin with general comments about the author's writing style and his concern for readers, which impinge on the content of the book. I will then focus on what I think to be an unstated theme of the text, Erickson's style of exposition of involving and then resolving (bridging) a group of dualisms. Finally, I move on to the content of the book, and review the chapters in order.

The style in which the book was written and organized is directly related to its content. It is organized into an organic whole, creating a continuous flow that richly connects the concepts exposed, demonstrating the author as a writer concerned with readers. Erickson is comprehensive through being specific, and each chapter richly foreshadows and reflects back on the others.

Erickson begins gently, introducing ordinary-language descriptions and explanations, and gradually and almost imperceptibly, builds into a more academic register. First encountered, is a preface, a broad-spectrum synopsis of talk versus social theory, followed by four different sets of data, ordered from less to more familiar contexts. The first data set comprises an incidence of a family dinner conversation, followed by one exposing elementary school interaction. Subsequently, interaction between a counselor and a junior college student follow, and finally, the most technical of the four sets, talk between a medical intern and a patient.

Because of the way the data sets are presented, readers not very conversant in either talk or social theory can latch onto the main ideas of the subsequent data analysis and theory. Structuring the book so, creates a heuristic tension, fostering in the reader a state of anticipation gradually satisfied as they move on in the text. Readers find themselves understanding; facilitating their growing into the more challenging content of the theory section (Part II).

Another device the author employs in his sensitivity to readers' needs is personalization of the content, maintaining readers' interest on a level apart from their academic concerns. Personalizing statements such as, 'All of us have lives that extend beyond the particular situation of the moment.' (p. 5), draw the reader into the content of the book. Erickson also includes a personal story of his son David working 'below the radar' by the son manipulating the timing of his own talk to prevent a negative response from his father (p. 136). Additionally a bit later in the book, Erickson employs an image of a cultural icon, Charlie Chaplin, and his innovative cane manipulations, a context familiar to many readers (p. 143), to make a concrete point about a rather abstract concept, bricolage.

Furthermore, his writing style exemplifies his data analysis by continually reflecting on itself, innovating, and adding new terms as it progresses. Each newly introduced term is sensitive to its particular context, has a slot waiting for it, and simultaneously adumbrates related terms.

Tensions

Throughout the book, the author constructs various heuristic tensions that provide the prevailing leitmotif. He first presents and then resolves these seeming antinomies. Through doing so, the author gradually builds his argument. He neither destroys nor ignores the two terms comprising the pairs, but rather works to bridge the gap between them. Many pairs are used to make the author's points: 'fluidity' and 'stability' (p. 6), 'social microscope' and 'social telescope' (p. 16), acting unreflectively, yet not machine-like (p. 10, 11), 'local' and 'global' (pp. 13–14, 107), 'social constraints' and 'enablements' (p. 17), 'individual aggregate' (p. 19), change happens as things remain the same (p. 20), 'voluntarism' and 'determinism' (pp. 112–113), 'practice' and 'theory' (p. 134), 'tactics' and 'strategy' (p. 140), simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' ritual order (p. 145), Goffman's separation of 'interaction' and 'social' orders (p. 157), 'innovation' and 'conformity' (p. 162), simultaneously 'conservative' and 'progressive' (p. 162), human history is comprised.
of 'change' and 'stability' (p. 162), and the idea that phenomena can be 'new' yet 'not new' (p. 162).

I will review a number of these pairs to provide readers with an orientation with which to approach the book. These dualisms and antimonies, coupled with their subsequent bridging, are in a sense, the underlying theme of the book.

The first and most obvious pair is the author's counterposition of 'Talk and Theory,' taken from the book's main title. Overall, this pairing adumbrates what is to come in the entire work, and creates a certain tension in the reader concerning the type of phenomenon to be bridged. Erickson through his 'middle-way' approach, bridges rather separates various dualisms. As we will see, bridging constitutes an implicit theme throughout.

Next, we find the opposition of local and global (pp. 13-14, 107), two concepts widely employed in the social science literature. Erickson bridges this gap by making it clear that when we act, we do so locally, in this particular spate of talk, at this particular time. While at the same time in each particular case, we employ non-local resources, such as knowledge, personal history, and so on to accomplish that talk. In short, talk is done locally but '...is also profoundly influenced by processes that are non-local...' (p. 107).

In the next pair, social 'constraints' and 'enablements' (p. 17), (related to 'affordance' and 'constraint' p. 143), we find that, seemingly paradoxically, the former allow for the latter in face-to-face interaction. Thus, constraints form a sort of limit within which action is enabled. We find again that the non-local allows local to occur.

In relation to 'voluntarism' and 'determinism' (pp. 112-113), Erickson advocates individual agency as part of the construction of a particular stretch of talk, but is certainly not advocating voluntarism; he agrees that social processes influence moment-to-moment talk, yet is not a determinist. In preference to negating these extremes, he bridges them, by positioning the social process of particular interaction between them, and argues that that face-to-face interaction, functioning as a middle-phenomenon, requires analytic consideration in its own right.

The author writes that 'It is difficult to deal with these tensions affirmatively, without [what is usually done in academia] collapsing them or reducing them to one another.' (p. 21, brackets mine). The author also writes that his stance appears paradoxical (p. viii) yet the book '...presents an attempt to live with this paradox by affirming both propositions [of a dualism] rather than favoring either or reducing one to the other.' (brackets mine). This statement may be applied to all of the tensions Erickson introduces.

Preface

Moving on to the preface, here Erickson explicitly reveals his strategy for the text, 'I will present elements of the book's argument mainly in lay language, so that readers without special background knowledge can follow the line of reasoning and basic issues that are being introduced.' (p. vii). He was able to accomplish this difficult self-assigned task even though he investigated '...disparate 'schools,' moving quickly from functionalism, structuralism, and conflict theory to post-structuralism and some of its successors.' (p. viii).

Throughout the text, Erickson works data into theory, and theory into data. He lays out a general strategy realized through individual tactics, and revisits and extends "...the main themes in the book's argument...[eventually] using more technical language ..." (p. vii, brackets mine).

Part I

Following the preface, 'Sketching the terrain' (chapter I), does just that. This chapter crafts a sketch, as in drawing or painting, by providing essential features without detail. "Sketching" is an introductory chapter crafted for the readers' benefit. This is stating the obvious, but I do so explicitly here because countless authors appear to write for themselves or a very specific audience, rather than writing to educate and be understood, as does the current author.

'Sketching' begins with a general discussion of talk and its definition, and expands on an essential detail of the book, that talk is performed in real-time. Understanding the implications of real-time talk is crucial to understanding the entire text.

The author divides this chapter into three parts. In the first, the author keeps his promise; by largely employing everyday terms to attract and to avoid intimidating the reader. Terms such as 'now,' 'next' 'while,' 'trajectory,' 'social ecology,' 'adaptation,' and 'mid-course correction,' are applied to talk and begin to relate to theory.
In the second part, the author introduces a slightly more challenging set of expressions: 'timing,' 'contextualization,' 'dialectical,' and 'chronos,' and 'kairos.' Also in this chapter, he introduces the work of three scholars, Giddens, Bourdieu and Foucault, who play a strong role in the upcoming theory chapters of the book. In the third and final section of 'Sketching,' Erickson hints at the connection of how real-time (local) instances of moment-to-moment interaction, are connected to how society (global) is accomplished.

Chapters 2-5

The titles of the data chapters are taken directly from the data. The author continues his consideration for readers by concluding all four data sections, as a group, with an Excursus (pp. 101-104). The data chapters are comprised largely of actual talk, realistically transcribed and highlight features that he discusses, forms with which all readers would be familiar.

Upon arriving at this the first data set of chapter 2, 'Seventy-five dollars goes in a day,' we are prepared to scrutinize the talk in the light of the everyday yet informative terms introduced in 'Sketching.'

Erickson begins this chapter (and all subsequent data chapters) with a vignette, and this first one with a welcoming opening 'It was a warm sunny afternoon . . . ' (p. 22). As ethnographic background to the upcoming talk, he narrates the story of a family, the 'Pastores,' and their interaction at an evening meal, an activity to which all readers can relate. The vignette also includes a reflective section, on how the author came to collect this data set with a grad student.

Erickson discusses this talk at three levels of organization, locally: the moment-to-moment dinner interaction, local-globally: the local history of the family, and finally, globally, how their interaction relates to the more global history of what was happening in the American economy at that time.

In 'I can make a P' chapter 3, again, the author begins with a vignette of 'First Circle' interaction in an elementary school, and focuses on one student's learning to take the floor and hold it. He then contrasts this case with a second student's unsuccessful attempt at the same, and how this type of early interaction impinges on students' educational careers, since students' interactional styles are formed early in elementary school.

In chapter 4, 'You wrestlin?,' the talk is between a student and his community college advisor. The concept of 'co-membership' was introduced here. An example from the data suffices as a definition: Both counselor and student are Italian American, the student was a wrestler, and the counselor a former wrestling coach, who had coached the student's older brother, and so on. The student, according to the talk was not performing well academically, failed grades, and so on, yet there were various incidences of 'paradoxical positiveness' (p. 82) on the part of the counselor that could not be explained by analysis of the talk alone. Erickson encourages us to go beyond and see that something larger than the talk, co-membership, affected the moment-to-moment interaction. In addition, the larger social context impinged on the talk. The counselor was colluding with the student to keep him out of the draft. The larger social context of the talk was early 1970's USA.

Finally, in 'He has no history or IVDA,' chapter 5, the talk took place between a medical intern and a patient, both African-American. The intern was attempting to perform two things simultaneously, which were not immediately available in the talk: To present himself to his superior as being able to make an accurate diagnosis, and to distance himself from the 'medically stigmatizable patient' (p. 101).

One major point of these four data sets was to demonstrate that what happens on the surface in talk, can be connected to larger contexts, and to adequately understand what is happening in the interaction, analysts must attend to both.

Part II—Thinking about talk and social theory

Early on in the theory section, (Part II), Erickson indicates that analysis in social science is biased towards either side of the local/non-local controversy, (p. 108). As alluded to, his stance differs from the mainstream, in that it may be described as that of the middle way.

From time to time in the theory chapters, the author provides readers some relief by anchoring his discussion in data, and returning the reader to rough ground from the rarified air of theory.

Again, in Part II, Erickson counterpoises and interweaves the work of many social theorists (p. 146). To accomplish this, he performs a good deal of contextualizing work for the reader, as a pair of in-
terlocutors would (inadvertently) do for each other in interaction.

In this part of the book, Erickson begins with and devotes quite a few pages to Bourdieu. At first, the author seems to agree with Bourdieu's claims, since the latter "...succeeds in escaping between the two extreme positions in classical social theory [voluntarism and determinism]." (p. 123 brackets mine). However, Erickson points out a number of problems with this putative escape. His main criticism is that Bourdieu over-relied on socialization for the orderliness of social life (p. 117). However, as readers would know by this time in the text, off-the-record 'under the radar' (p. 144) actions are common, and by their nature have not been accounted for by theory.

The author then advances on to Foucault, and quite appropriately invokes the panopticon. According to Foucault this phenomenon is all encompassing, but for Erickson, as expected by those who have followed the argument in the text, again, such theoretical structures miss off-the-record, 'below the radar,' (p. 144) action. Such an action is beyond the detection capabilities of the panopticon, and other such abstract structures, and thus remain unaccounted for, until the type of analysis of moment-to-moment, face-to-face, social interaction, as that practiced by Erickson, is performed. The author throughout preaches what he practises.

In this vein, the book's further contends that human actions are not structured into oblivion. Rather, humans are shown to be just that, human, through their innovating, creating, and changing of society.

Thus, the author's conclusion that there are limits to control from above. History is messy and cannot be handled by theory. Interactors of any stripe escape this control by again acting 'below the radar' (p. 134-135); for example, open resistance by participants may not be apparent in a particular interaction, as is its opposite, a demonstration of open deference. Being openly deferential may be coupled with a hidden confronting of authority: killing a master's dogs at night (p. 135), pilfering, slander, or arson (p. 136), or some such. Erickson is not claiming that actions under the radar are not activities in their own right, but that they are not viewed by many analysts as part of comprising the original interaction, and thus missed by theory. As Erickson explains, theories "...tend to obscure the complexity of what actual persons are doing in the conduct of social interaction with others." (p. 133).

In chapter 6, the author argues that both local and global need to be accounted for. To accomplish this accounting, he states that '...it is necessary to range across disciplines and literatures that are often held separate.' (p. 108). As alluded to, the contents of this book demonstrate the bridges that resolve those tensions. In relation to bridging, Erickson makes it clear (p. 108) that both local and global ecologies exist within the processes and content of talk, and he demonstrates to us how this is so in an extended argument (pp. 112-126).

Erickson argues that the accounts of Bourdieu and Foucault, as well as that of Gramsci, attempt to account for all participants' actions (p. 135). The panopticon of Foucault as well as the habitus of Bourdieu do not in fact explain everything in modern life. Local zones, or ecological niches exist in everyday life, since ordinary social action is "...robustly tactical [local], manipulating the structures [global] within which it takes place..." (p. 143).

Finally, Giddens' work seems to be more constructive than either Foucault or Bourdieu's ideas at showing us how change takes place. However, Erickson argues that even Giddens does not look deeply enough since Giddens' work does not show us the how of talk in the particular here and now (p. 160).

In sum, the book is valuable contribution to both social science theory and analysis of talk. The author's mode of presentation, coupled with his data analysis and its interpenetration with different theories, clarify and dissolve many thorny issues extant in the study of social interaction.

The book deserves at least one reading, and once done, will serve as a valuable reference for anyone concerned with in social interaction and its relation to different levels of social experience.