

# CALL FOR PAPERS

## Hegemonies in Classification Processes

### Cases from Health Care and Online Interactions

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NEWSLETTER EDITOR

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Classifications serve as shared systems to organize and handle knowledge in a given domain. They act as infrastructures that "[enforce] a certain understanding of context, place, and time" (Bowker and Star 1999: 82). We therefore look at classifications as being one of the means to "establish, maintain, and transform mechanisms of power" (Foucault 2007: 2), while these same mechanisms of power are at the same time deeply inscribed into classifications. This mutual dependency of power and classifications raises the question how changes in the roles of the actors who negotiate classifications affect and maybe challenge power relations and hegemonies in a wider sense. The negotiation of classifications through discursive practices is one of the ways in which classifications depend on language. Language also takes on a central role in establishing, applying, and reproducing classifications. The repeated reproduction through language is necessary for classifications to stabilize and to gain recognition and explanatory power. Last but not least, language provides labels for classifications. The interpretation of a class crucially depends on the label and its connotations. Whether a specific illness is, for instance, referred to as GRID (gay-related immune disorder) or as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) has implications that go far beyond health care organizations.

The role of classifications in coordinating formal and informal social activities is becoming more evident with the spread of information and communication technologies (ICT). Since communication processes are increasingly taking place between dispersed individuals and groups, common understanding and coordination are not facilitated by co-location. Thus, classifications (are expected to) keep patterns of action aligned. Health care activities provide a clear example: information about patients needs to travel with and beyond the patients themselves, in order to allow consequent actions to be performed by a variety of actors (different specialized physicians, nurses, pharmacists, relatives, lab technicians, sometimes local communities and public opinion...). However, classifications do not travel across different contexts without being reinterpreted or changed. Instead, they are often locally renegotiated and given a different meaning, resulting in unplanned actions and consequences. Other examples of dispersed settings for social activities can be found in online communities, which enable the communication and collaboration of actors who do not share the same physical place. The Internet and related communication technologies provide laypersons with access to information, possibilities for participation, and reception by large audiences, which used to be restricted to experts only. Knowledge collections like encyclopedias and dictionaries,

which used to be compiled by small groups of highly instructed experts, are now written collaboratively online by large numbers of dispersed laypersons. Such collaborative authoring requires explicit and tacit negotiation of shared classifications – a process which sometimes even becomes a goal in itself, for instance in creating meta-information to organize the abundance of information online through social bookmarking (Bruns 2008: 171–178).

The role of laypersons in classification processes is thus becoming one of great interest: empirically because of increasing use of ICT in accessing, manipulating, and sharing information; theoretically because of the consequences for a constructionist view, which include the question of shifts in power between the different actors and the effects of this on hegemonic classifications. It becomes apparent that classifications are not 'natural' since they are themselves the product of negotiation and/or enforcement (Bowker and Star 1999: 44, 131). Therefore the "double hermeneutic" between those who are usually termed 'subjects' and 'objects' has to be revised, mutual dependency between classifications and their objects needs to be highlighted. Thus, we are not only interested in the way classifications construct their objects, but also in the co-construction of objects and classifications, in the unfolding exercise and unfinished task of mixing force and consent that create and support hegemonies, or challenge them. The consequences of this stance for health care and online interactions are not obvious. For the health domain, for instance, this would mean to go beyond the point of arguing that medicine constructs the patients. Rather, we would like to understand how and why patients and their environments enter into an active interplay with health delivery services, and the way they 'slice' reality, because the dynamics and power relations of the interaction between laypersons and experts can change considerably.

Given this frame, we invite submissions about how classifications are established and applied, as well as about their planned and unexpected effects. We especially welcome empirically rich research accounts from the field of e-health (exploring relations beyond physicians and patients, and including families, homes, social environment, technologies, etc) and online interactions in collaborative settings (addressing how dispersed social actors rely on and negotiate classifications and definitions). The articles could take their starting point from one of the following questions:

- Where are the "loci of negotiation" of classifications and their meanings? How are

negotiations affected by the respective locus?

- E.g. in medical research vs. at the "shopfloor" of health delivery; in medical institutions vs. in physicians-patients-families-society interactions; online vs. 'offline'; among experts vs. among laypersons...
- How does an increase in the accessibility of information affect power relations in classification processes?
- What role does language play in the construction and application of classifications?
  - How are power shifts between actors manifested in linguistic practices of negotiating and applying classifications?
  - How does the lexical meaning of labels influence classes and their applications?
- What potential do role changes of experts and laypersons imply?
  - Instead of assuming that 'empowerment' of laypersons leads to a loss of cultural values (Keen 2007) or to a shift towards more democracy: how do the changing roles affect the interplay of consent and coercion which "co-exist in a complex and shifting dynamic based on complex tactics of attempted domination and clever local resistance, conflict and alliance, imposition of meaning through discourse and antagonism" (Nicolini 2007)?

## Logistics

Please submit your article as a MS Word or Rich Text Format files (8000 words maximum, reference list excluded) to the newsletter editor and to both guest editors:

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### Schedule:

<u>31/03/09</u>	<u>Deadline for contributions</u>
30/06/09	Feedback to authors
30/09/09	Deadline for revised versions
End of 2009	Publication

## References:

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