

## Book review

**Account Episodes: The Management or Escalation of Conflict.** By Peter Schönbach: Cambridge University Press. 1990. Pp. 222. ISBN 0 521 35017 4.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of theory and research on the topic of accounts and account making. Social scientists from various disciplines have been increasingly concerned with the definition, structure, function and theory of accounts and account making. Some of these scholars have focused on accounts as naturalistic story-like constructions in a variety of social situations, containing plot, characters, attributions and affect; while others have concentrated on accounts as people's tendency to protect self, regain control, or justify/excuse their behaviour in a failure event or situations that are potentially blameworthy. The second auspicious focus is evident in the theoretical framework and findings presented in the book *Account Episodes*.

Theoretically, Schönbach pursues the concept of accounts in the traditional 'Goffmanian way' and defines an account 'as a special explanation: an account is an answer to an explicit or implicit question guided by a normative expectation' (p. 5). His approach extends and broadens past theoretical endeavours on accounts by depicting an episode as interactional in nature and assuming that participants in an account episode are vulnerable in their needs for control and self-protection or enhancement. Each account episode contains minimally two agents, an actor and an opponent, through four phases: a failure event in which the actor is held at least partly responsible for the violation of a normative expectation; a reproach phase in which the opponent reacts to the failure event with a mild or severe reproach; an account phase in which the actor offers an excuse or justification; and an evaluation phase in which the opponent evaluates the account, the failure in light of the account, or the actor's personality in light of the failure and the account. These processes can occur at both socio-cultural and interpersonal levels.

The book as a whole is well organized, tightly laid out in terms of its flow and style, and extremely thought provoking. The book begins by focusing on theoretical considerations and then moves to experimental investigation. One is struck by the breadth and depth of empirical research introduced in the book. Over 12 separate research studies are represented, all conducted by Schönbach and his colleagues. Schönbach reviews literature relevant to his accounts work; logically and coherently introduces his theoretical arguments; solidly links testable hypotheses to his theoretical assumptions; presents study designs, vignettes and coding strategies in detail; and discusses interpretations and future directions for research based on the results of the studies. Schönbach does an admirable job in recounting an integrated and extensive research programme. He should be praised for the meticulous and conscientious manner in which these interconnected studies were designed and conducted, and further, for the clarity by which they are explained and presented in the book. In addition, his passion for the work and theory are quite evident throughout the book. At the end of the book, Schönbach offers limitations and challenges others to pursue this extensive line of work.

There are several core insights that a reader is likely to glean from this book. First, for the young scholar or student, develop an organized research programme early in one's career, so that a presentation as such is possible. Second, according to Schönbach, account making is an interactive process, whether or not opponent/actor is directly engaged in the stages of reproach or evaluation. Third, this integrated research programme was designed to manipulate situational, procedural and dispositional variables at the reproach, account and evaluation phases of the account episode. Thus, rather than address the entire account episode in one general study, each experimental study paid careful attention to a specific phase/variable in the account episode. This approach was fruitful in the end. Lastly, Schönbach argues that persons have a desire for order and reliability in the world around them, and when that doesn't occur they restore order and justice by developing an account. Given this argument, what might scholars who focus on accounts as story-like constructions in a variety of social situations learn from Schönbach's theoretical approach on accounts? Can Schönbach's theoretical arguments and account episode phases be applied to different social situations, including situations that are not typically labelled as failure events and situations that are not confined to involving people's

concern with protection and maintenance of self-esteem (e.g. events such as the death of a spouse, loss of partner due to divorce, or sexual assault—situations that also may involve the loss of reliability, order and control)?

If there are any regrets about this book, it is the fact that the *construction of meaning* at each phase of the account episode is not given more attention, which from a symbolic interactionist perspective is at the core of interaction and perceptions of interaction. In addition, although mentioned briefly in the conclusion of the book, little attention is paid to the issue of the degree of intimacy between actor and opponent and the duration of their connection before and expected after the account episode. As Schönbach admits, in experimental studies such as his, actor and opponent are strangers; whereas, account episodes are typically presented in natural unfolding sequences between persons who have some previous connection. In sum, these latter issues are suggestions that can be addressed in future research/theory, rather than limitations of the book. All in all, this book makes a worthwhile contribution to theory on accounts and represents valuable reading material for any scholar interested in accounts, communication, interaction, sociology and/or social psychology.

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