

Affect Control Theory as a Qualitative Analysis Schema

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Affect Control Theory has long been recognized as an insightful theory using equation-based predictions and simulations. However, the propositions and dimensions of ACT can also be used as a means of coding unstructured data within a wide variety of qualitative methodologies, including participant-observation, documentary, and interview studies. It is also amenable to combination with grounded theory, ethnography, and mixed method approaches, largely because it is not a philosophy of analysis so much as it is a powerful tool for coding interaction. It is, in that sense, not a “coding scheme” in the traditional qualitative sense of the organization of codes in a particular study, but rather a “schema,” which is a way of approaching analysis more generally.

In recognition of its growing role in qualitative work, this presentation will make a first attempt to formally codify and describe the use of the ACT dimensions and concepts in qualitative analysis. In brief, this process entails working backwards from the manifest situation (the equivalent of the simulation result in quantitative work). As Lively and Heise (2013) point out, “the relations between identity, impression, and emotion allow any one of these to be inferred, given the other two” (p. 52). The key endeavor involves identifying the event being observed, and then the actor(s), behavior(s) and object(s) (ABOs) in that event. Both the event and the identities being enacted may not be immediately obvious and often require careful evaluation. Once identified, each ABO can then be assessed for EPA dimensions, though numeric values cannot be assigned. In ethnographic or other research involving ongoing interaction, the entire event can also be analyzed for change over time, processes of negotiation, and evidence of deflections (as seen in actors’ reactions). The results of the analysis should produce insights into how actors define the situation such that it calls forth the actions and emotions evinced.

This presentation will draw from semi-structured interviews of elders with dementia and their primary caregivers. Researchers conducted these interviews with a combination residents of a nursing home and an assisted living facility, participants in a low-cost Alzheimer’s day program, and guests at a community senior citizens’ center. Such diverse sources of data permitted interviews with people at wide-ranging levels of impairment. The 26 interviews with elders were 20-90 minutes in length, and the 21 interviews with caregivers were 40-90 minutes in length. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, then uploaded into a qualitative text-analysis software program for coding. Sample interview excerpts are shown, with EPA coding, on the next page. As will be evident, qualitative applications of ACT produce contrasting but complementary contributions to the quantitative use of the theory. Moreover, ACT as a qualitative analysis schema has potential for any study of human interaction.

Sample Analysis

Daryl: I worked in many different places because I just loved the job, you know. I'd do it so much when I got to the top, then I'd move over and get the job here, and get the job there. See I had my wife died, before that 6 years ago... there an accident and stuff like that so I was all alone. So...I still have a big home that I own but I stay here and work here all the time with the people and I am pleased with it. I got to the place where I started here, was be nice to the people, that's what I had. ...I really enjoy it. Even now. With the people, with the girls and stuff like that. Just talk to them and all about, you know, nothing. Tell them what they have to do and you stand up to their standards and have no trouble.

I: so, have you been here for 6 years then, since your wife died?

Daryl: no, I was here, I have only been here 8 months... Because, I was working in a... with some boats and I didn't like that. So anyways... I came here just for rest. I was going by and I stepped in here out there. I was looking around like this and a man came out and said could he help me. I said no just looking around. He said, do you want a job? Oh-h yea. I said okay! I said yea I'll take the job. So he came in, 15 minutes he came out, and he said "you got the job!" (laughs) I said: what?! Jeez I don't even know where I am! I just wanted to see what it looked like.

I: What is your job here?

Daryl: I look after all the girls.

I: Uh, okay ...all the girls.

In the above interview excerpt, Daryl is a nursing home resident with Alzheimer's, but thinks he works at the facility. Having lost his cognitive grounding in the definition of the situation, he recreates the situation in way that makes sense to him. With the information just in this one instance, we can infer quite a bit about Daryl's self sentiments and impressions.

First, we can see that Daryl defines himself as an employee, not a resident, of the nursing home. He claims that his job is "to look after all the girls," "talk to them," and "tell them what they have to do." From this, we can derive a basic ABO (actor, behavior, object) event: "employee takes care of girls." In this sentence, the behavior is the most ambiguous, so we need to tentatively choose an action that approximates what seems to be happening. Our ABO sentence is thus a kind of working hypothesis about the interaction, and is subject to change given additional information. Later in the interview, for instance, he emphasizes his success as a monetary provider, an identity which is echoed above in his mention of still owning "a big home," indicating that "good provider" or "breadwinner" might also be important identities.

We can also see in this excerpt that the defined event confirms Daryl's established sentiments in a way that generates positive emotion. He describes himself as "pleased" with his position, and expresses happy and contented emotions throughout the interview.

So "employee/breadwinner takes care of girls" makes Daryl happy and content. We can estimate EPA ratings for each ABO element (or obtain them from Interact, if available). Knowing the EPA ratings and resulting emotion, we can infer Daryl probably sees himself as somewhat powerful, very good, and slightly active. We now have a basis for predicting how he might react in other situations.