The Hidden Moralities of Knowledge: Negotiating Expertise in a Post-Truth Society

Hedwig te Molder

Saturday, May 13, 2017, 1:00-2:00 p.m., ZB 418

The Dutch documentary Raw (2008) features a child, Tom, who has eaten raw food since he was five. The mother is blamed for not having fed her child properly and ultimately even charged with child abuse. While experts publicly accuse the mother of having an anti-scientific attitude, she herself is constantly referring to the (scientific) evidence that underpins her actions. This discussion resembles many other current debates in which science is - or seems to be - at stake, such as discussions on vaccination, climate and ADHD. I will argue that these conflicts should not be understood as a collision between two worlds apart, namely between the world of scientific truth on the one hand, and that of lay concern on the other. Nor should the key question be formulated as how to convince ‘people who persist in believing things that just aren’t true’ (The New Yorker 2014).

To understand this, we need to shift our attention to the hidden moralities of knowledge. Rather than being neutral, knowledge and technology are mediators of human relations and practices, in short, of morality. If we want to conduct a more fruitful discussion, uncovering this moral dimension is crucial. Conversation Analysis (Sacks 1992) and Discursive Psychology (Edwards & Potter 1992; cf. Te Molder & Potter 2005) offer unique perspectives for doing so, as they view knowledge as both mundane and deeply moral. They reveal how people in their day-to-day interactions refer to what is normal or proper, thereby making sense of their own and other people’s actions. Knowledge claims do not merely reflect the world out there, but are used to attribute or deny responsibility (Potter 1996) and negotiate identity (Raymond & Heritage 2006). Paradoxically, scientific facts are often resisted so as to not appear naive, or lazy and uncritical (Versteeg, Te Molder & Sneijder 2017).

I discuss a study of British radio phone-ins on ADHD (Versteeg & Te Molder) that shows how mothers’ knowledge claims regarding their children’s problematic behavior simultaneously negotiate their identity as a good parent. The mothers typically claim knowledge about their children’s intentions but refrain from making claims about the ‘ADHD-ness’ of their behavior. By only claiming the knowledge appropriate for a concerned parent, they treat the behavior as a matter of expert knowledge and therefore as ‘doctorable’. As soon as the radio host treats the same problematic behavior as externally observable, and thus describable by lay persons, it becomes vulnerable to being formulated as ‘normal disobedience’. The mothers in our corpus are caught between a rock and a hard place: they can be accused of being overprotective, or just wanting the ADHD label as it is ‘convenient’. It is discussed how Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology can help reveal how participants negotiate their epistemic-moral territories in real-life situations, and how this perspective is important to create a more fruitful understanding of what the societal dialogue on ADHD is about.

Hedwig te Molder is full professor at Wageningen University (Strategic Communication Group) and the University of Twente (Philosophy Department) in the Netherlands. Her work focuses on how people communicate issues of science and technology in their everyday lives, using Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology. Email: hedwig.temolder@wur.nl

The lecture will be followed by LANSI’s monthly data session, also open to the public, from 2:00-3:00 p.m.

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