

Saul Albert - Artificiality and Intelligence as Interactional Achievements

Väinö Linna hall, Friday May 8, 10:45AM

Public and scientific discourses about ‘AI’ treat ‘artificiality’ as an inherent property of machines, and ‘intelligence’ as an inherent property of persons. Drawing on conversation analysis and discursive psychology, I will argue that both are better understood as interactional achievements, produced turn-by-turn in the practical work of participants. This shift in analytic starting point opens up new questions for social psychology about agency, competence, and membership and how we conceptualise ‘AI’.

In everyday interaction, we often need to distinguish between ‘real’ or ‘hoax’, for example, when we receive spam calls or emails. Similarly, the ‘intelligence’ of some participants in conversation is contingent on interactional performance: a beat too long of silence, or one too many disfluencies can lead to the withdrawal of attributions of competence, agency, and personhood. These are not edge cases – they are the ordinary methods through which we constitute one another as competent, intelligent, accountable persons in the first place.

I will frame the argument with story of a study that shows how LLM-based systems are using social psychology to learn about and simulate the work of emergency dispatchers. I will then provide empirical grounding for the argument by presenting a study of how an LLM-based ‘smart speaker’ and a woman with a learning disability interact in a context where attributions of intelligence, agency, and personhood are at stake. Studying the details of interaction in these these settings can show us how categories like ‘intelligence’ are constructed through the “technology of conversation” (Sacks, 1984), rather than premised on the technical or cognitive (in)capabilities of participants.

The talk will pose a question for the conference more broadly: what becomes possible for social psychology if we treat ‘AI’ not as a self-evident object of study, but as a site for respecifying basic questions about agency, intelligence, and membership in interaction? I will close with some suggestions for researchers interested in taking up that challenge.