

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

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The reception of ethnomethodology's proposals amongst sociologists has been and still remains plagued by interpretations often based on misunderstandings which sometimes seem totally amazing. And this problem is hard to do away with since Garfinkel has wilfully refused to fix the official doctrine of ethnomethodology. This lack of canon has a consequence : a great diversity exists among avowed ethnomethodologists and no one knows who rightfully applies its putative program.

According to Michael Lynch's ironic comment, these misunderstandings have warranted the permanence and relative success of ethnomethodology in the academic world of sociology. And one of these misunderstandings has for long turned around a question : does ethnomethodology belong to sociology or is it a completely different discipline ?

It is true that the sum of the charges that have been pressed against Garfinkel and his followers' work should have taken away any credit from it : ethnomethodology has been accused of being particularistic (since it disqualifies the generalizability of social facts), of being localist (since it denies the historicity of social phenomena), of being subjectivist (since it endorses the agents' point of view), of being artificialist (since it disregards the centrality of political institutions, power relations and violence of domination), of being interpretativist (since it limits its analysis to accounts or conversations), of being phenomenological (since it describes individual experience and ignores the conditions of possibility of such an experience). Indeed, how could an approach burdened with so many flaws survive and establish itself as part of the discipline?

However, the fact is that sociology has now absorbed some of the major concepts of ethnomethodology (like indexicality, reflexivity, categorization, common sense knowledge, practical reasoning, routine, etc.) and several of its propositions belong to the common sociological toolbox, like "the actor is not a cultural dope"; "the topics of sociology are resources for action", "treat social facts as practical accomplishments". And, driven by weariness rather than by conviction, the official institutions of sociology have eventually consented to give ethnomethodology a stool in the discipline.

We therefore find ourselves today in a paradoxical situation in which the theoretical and methodological issues that ethnomethodology has raised in the 1970's in view of improving sociology's practice are more relevant than ever today, but that the answers it has offered a while ago are still by and large ignored. I feel in particular that ethnomethodology's proposals would be of great help to solve one of the problems that a new generation of sociologists is facing, namely : what analytical status should one confer on ordinary

practices and individual action in an explanatory model which remains dominated by causal determinism (under different disguises) ? I think ethnomethodology's proposals to discard causal determinism are still valid but they have to be clearly spelled out anew to be rediscovered.

This is what I will try to do by discussing the new perspectives in ethnomethodology that have been devised in the 1980s. And as you would expect, I will insist on the one I favour, according to which ethnomethodology should necessarily develop into a sociology of ordinary knowledge. To begin with, going back to Garfinkel's breach with the tenets of Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism seems to be a useful step. This is the first point I will discuss.

Putting back Parsons' theory on its feet

The deep mark that Parsons has left on sociology lies in that he has achieved to turn action into the subject matter of the scientific investigation of sociology. In his theory, action is seen as the product of the structured application of a set of rules (theory of rationality) that the system of norms and values of a society requires all its members to follow (socialization thesis) since they have incorporated a motivation to comply with all these requirements (internalization thesis). The validity of this model of explanation has been admitted all the more quickly that it provided its "structural variables" (his famous AGIL system) to the growing quantification techniques that were implemented at that time to establish the legitimacy of sociology as a science.

For Garfinkel, this theory of action is totally illusory. Against a way of doing sociology devised for "accountants and mathematicians" - to cite his terms - and drawing his intuitions from phenomenology, Garfinkel has claimed that accounting for action can only be done by considering how individuals caught up in its realization are able to engage and accomplish it in the circumstances and in the time in which it is accomplished. The originality of Garfinkel's outlook, and what distinguishes it from the one Goffman or Becker proposed at the same time, reside in the way he turned the watchword of phenomenology into a motto for sociology : "go back to the practices themselves". This change has radically transformed the nature of empirical inquiry : to explain action, one should not turn to statistics, but to collect data during an in situ observation on how people do and say what they do and say while they act together. And the object of such data collection is the discovery of the "methods" ordinary people use to accomplish the practical activity they are mutually engaged in.

In short, Garfinkel's project has been, paraphrasing Marx, to put Parsons's theory back on its feet when it walked on its head. No more no less. One reason for the misunderstanding of ethnomethodology's program (that must be distinguished from that of conversation analysis with which it is often confused) may be the deliberately narrow empirical aim

Garfinkel has assigned to ethnomethodological studies, namely : providing an analysis of what he has called the formal structures of practical actions.

What has shocked the first readers of Garfinkel is that he insisted that the description of the way an action in common is sequentially accomplished should be totally dissociated from any interpretation about the meaning and outcomes this action might have in the “real” social world. For most sociologists, erecting such an infrangible wall just defied common sense and entrenched habits : what should an analysis of action look like would it refuses to consider its consequences and its historical relations to a power structure ? And the answer given in the famous article he wrote with Harvey Sacks in 1970 did not help convincing mainstream sociologists and I think it still raises the same perplexities today as it did then. This is the second point I would like to clarify by analysing two charges pressed against ethnomethodology : its alleged subjectivism and localism.

From practical reason to the ordinary

Let us start with “subjectivism”. One of the most common misinterpretations done about ethnomethodology is to credit it, positively or negatively, with a major innovation : the rehabilitation of the “actor’s point of view”. However, anyone knows that, as Bauman has noticed it, Garfinkel has absolutely rejected the idea that what an individual says about what he has done cannot be regarded as an explanation of what really happened. One has to recall that he proclaimed that common sense explanations should be ignored by a sociologist since what he collects is just what he called “formulations” (the way someone puts in “so many words” what one says). And, as Habermas has lamented, Garfinkel has shown no interest in the communicative contents people exchange while acting together as a factor allowing to understand how coordination of action is achieved. Neither did Garfinkel say that sociology might provide a description that would enable to explain how a practical activity has given birth to an emerging reality. The phenomenon he has urged sociologists to account for is of an entirely different nature. This phenomenon is the unremitting production of an order always transitory and constantly revised in the very course of an action in common being mutually accomplished and as this action accomplishes itself.

Garfinkel has always cautiously distinguished two uses of the notion of order. First, its ethnomethodological use, in which it names a provisional and approximate intelligibility attributed to elements of a context of action the validity of which is revealed in the course of practical activity and is tested by the fact that it ensures its continuity. Second, its current use in formal sociology, where it refers to a state of things which is theoretically constructed and which confers stable properties to things and objects and enforce determination. To mark the difference between these two uses, Garfinkel has later appended an asterisk to the concept and did speak of “phenomena of order *.”

The program of ethnomethodology cannot be reduced to the opposition between quantitative and qualitative approaches in sociology. Garfinkel has radicalized the stakes to the point of making this opposition disappear altogether. In his view, analysis should be devoted neither to account for the construction of a social reality by individuals engaged in the common task of producing a “definition of the situation” nor to explain how an explicit agreement on what to do has been reached by rational actors, but to identify and describe the “methods” that individuals make use of in order to directly apprehend elements of an environment of action (things, people, facts, statements) while achieving what they are up to. And that is exactly what Garfinkel has specified in his preface to *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, where he sets two goals for the type of empirical investigation he advocates : “... learning how members’ actual, ordinary activities consist of methods to make practical actions, practical circumstances, common sense knowledge of social structures and practical sociological reasoning analysable ; and discovering the formal properties of commonplace, practical common sense actions, “from within” actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings.”

There is no hint here at any attention given to the “actor’s point of view”. The kind of data to be collected in an empirical investigation pursuing these two objectives should simultaneously and inextricably feed two analytical veins : on the one side, accounting for the rational properties of practical activities ; and on the other side, accounting for the forms of practical reasoning individuals do display in adjusting their moves to these properties (that is to say, the “work” they continuously and publicly have to do to identify, typify and categorize things and events that occur in their surroundings while ensuring the continuity of action in common).

This program is confusing for two reasons at least. First, it invites sociologists to apprehend the attribution of intelligibility to what is going on in a particular social world (and the revision procedures that invariably accompanies it) by empirically studying the step by step procedures - or “methods” - which ensure the continuity of action in common. Secondly, it reverses the order of priorities traditionally acknowledged in sociology : the fragments of practical activity that the sociologist has decided to study have to be used firstly to describe these procedures - or “methods” -, and it is only additionally that this analysis would account for the actual course of action (the ways it starts, unfolds and ends) in which these procedures are apprehended. I must add that this second phase of description is unavoidable (i.e. accounting for what people do in the real world), since the contextual character of empirical data collected during fieldwork requires a careful consideration of the type of practical activity in which a series of details of interaction are picked up to feed analysis.

One may object to the validity of such a reversal (analysing the procedures - or what I will later call “epistemic operations” - which organize members’ formulations instead of accounting for the reality of action). But I nevertheless think that it is useful to have this reversal in mind when one assesses ethnomethodology’s program. It enables to understand

what is at stake when this program claims that its object is the ordinary, i.e. the current and sequential way practices are accomplished. And I surmise that understanding this analytical swap would help specifying the terms of a present-day thorny question of method : what analytical status might sociology grant to the individual and how should it deal with his/her ability to make the moves he/she makes the way he/she does it ?

Ethnomethodology and the social world

The second charge against Garfinkel's outlook concern its "localism" - which currently amounts to scorning the fact that ethnomethodology denies the historicity of social phenomena. The least one can say is that Garfinkel did not displayed the critical bent one expects sociology would demonstrate. And it is true that he has not exhibited a major interest for the existence and effects of social stratification, or for the arbitrariness of established hierarchies, or for the reproduction of power relationships. But there is no evidence that he was opposed to the possibility of producing an ethnomethodological description of inequality, power, alienation or domination. His key preoccupation was to legitimize the empirical investigation into the "phenomena of order*"; that is, as I have already recalled, the fact that the accomplishment of any activity depends on a sustained ordering work which obeys the formal structures of practical actions. For Garfinkel, this work is the phenomenon that sociologists should be careful not to "lose" in the course of their examination. To prevent such a fate, Garfinkel has set a basic rule of method : sociologists should limit their inquiries to examining, in detail, the ordinary and inventive ways trough which "members are using the collaborative activities of daily living to recognize and demonstrate the rational properties of indexical expressions and actions, that is to say, to recognize and demonstrate that we can isolate them, that they are typical and consistent, can possibly be repeated, that they are apparently in connection with each other, are consistent, equivalent, substitutable, anonymously describable, that they have an orientation and are projected [...]"

A crucial argument lies underneath this definition : the principles of rationality that organize action in common should not be located in the minds of actors but rather in what Garfinkel called, following Schütz, the "rationalities of the action". What confers a sociological quality to this move is another recommendation : the intelligibility - i.e. the order* - that is attributed to things and events does not emanate from individuals alone but do immediately proceed from the obligation to discover "each time anew again" the specific content that should be assigned, according to the circumstances, to the properties of typicality, consistency, equivalence, substitutability, logical independence, etc. (what Garfinkel named the "formal structures of practical actions").

As Bloor noted, this recommendation is ambiguous. On the one side, it urges to admit that the accomplishment of an action in common requires a constant and mutual rediscovery of an appropriate order ; but on the other side, the very idea of "rediscovery" implies that a certain type of order does preexist to action. Bloor infers that the order locally constituted

is subordinated to a pre-given order, whose existence allows for the very possibility of each new configuration. Garfinkel's work bypasses more than it resolves this ambiguity by assuming that people are "naturally" able to rediscover the order that must prevail in a given situation since they possess what he calls a "sense of the social structure". The problem is that Garfinkel has never answered a question : where does that sense come from in the first place ? It is not impossible to say that he adhered to Sacks's outlook which consisted in admitting that "members" cannot be but already socialized individuals and leaving aside the question of how does socialization work and how does it actualizes itself.

In brief, I think that ethnomethodology's localism points more to a matter of method than to an ideological bias. It amounts to a recommendation : since the unequal and hierarchical structure of a global society is of very little practical relevance to the analysis of the sequential unfolding of an action in common, the empirical data collected to account for this phenomenon have no logical connection with traditional sociology's explanatory rules. And to demonstrate the validity of this recommendation, I have tried to show that an ethnomethodological analysis of the State (or, more precisely, of the practical activity of government) is not an unachievable task. This will be the topic of my next talk. Let us go back to ethnomethodology's principles.

Switching from description to explanation

One of Garfinkel's founding insights posits that the current descriptions of the action - done whether by ordinary people or professional sociologists - are systematically ignored. This is what Garfinkel called the "missing what", that is the most practical dimensions of an action in common which quite systematically disappear from the descriptions formal sociology are used to give of it.

A great deal of Garfinkel's anti-theoreticist and anti-intellectualist stance resides in his stubborn refusal to endorse this disappearance and his absolute rejection of any attempt to build an analysis on it. For him, sociology's task is to give these forgotten elements of interaction (that is its most minute details) their compelling importance in the way an action in common takes the shape it finally takes. In his view, these details are the stuff the "phenomenon of order*" are made of. And this is the stuff a sociologist should inquire into. What does this way of doing sociology change ? It obliges a sociologist to apprehend an action in common only through a detailed description of the practical conditions (material, temporal, linguistic and conceptual) under which it emerges and unfolds in a given situation without resorting to external elements of intelligibility (that is sociological explanation categories) to account for what happened. In other words, one should respect a methodological rule : substitute description for explanation (to use Wittgenstein's motto). The problem is that this rule can be followed in two different ways. For some ethnomethodologists, this substitution justify an absolute preference given to the singular (i.e. the local versus the general). A position which is sometimes accompanied by a questionable petition of principle : there no science but of the particular (no generalization

is ever possible). From this perspective, order is always a contextual production that takes place in the sequentality of interactions in a given situation. One of the risks of this way of doing sociology is that it may lead to a complete seclusion of analysis from the world at large by circumscribing its scope of interest only to the very circumstantial conditions of emergence of a given action in common. Other ethnomethodologists simply admit that the description *is* the explanation. This option rests on a postulate according to which the way we see the world and the way we talk about it irremediably and completely inform and reflect the way we relate to the world and to others. This decisive difference is not the only dividing line in present-day ethnomethodology. Let us inquire deeper into that matter.

What are the methods ?

Up to this point, one specification has been made : ethnomethodology seeks to expand sociology's domains of investigation by turning the "phenomena of order*" into a subject of empirical inquiry. As I said, its program consists - whatever the practical activity under study is - in identifying and describing the "ordinary methods" people make use of to establish and maintain a mutual sense of order to allow for the accomplishment of coordination of action. Now, I would like to specify the import of ethnomethodology's program for sociology at large. And I will try to do so by considering three different ways to practice ethnomethodology that have flourished on Garfinkel's common heritage.

The first one is a methodological critique which aims at introducing, in the toolbox of sociological ethnography, sound and appropriate techniques to analyse the data which are usually collected in fieldwork (interviews, observations, informal conversations, records, documents, files, etc.). This is partly what Cicourel, Wieder, Garfinkel, Lynch and many others have done in their early works. They have actually and empirically demonstrated what the qualitative method in sociology should look like to be rigorous and accurate. In particular, their critique has imposed the necessity to analyse each kind of data collected in its proper context of emergence (indexicality) and in direct relation to the dynamics of the action in common observed (reflexivity). This way of demonstrating ethnomethodology's import for sociology does not always avoid two pitfalls : endorsing a kind of hyper-constructivism (i.e. the analysts believes that their detailed description of what happens is far more closer to reality than any explanation given by a formal sociologists - which one of the dangers workplace studies may incur) ; or locking up analysis in endless or tautological narratives about how what actually happened did happen the way it has happened.

The second way to specify ethnomethodology's import for sociology at large is the radical critique based on its anti-theoreticist and anti-intellectualist stance. It consists in turning the sociologist's conceptual apparatus into an object of sociological investigation by applying the notion of reflexivity to its own forms of reasoning. This approach - which is advocated by Pollner, Woolgar or Ashmore - develops, at best, as a devastating refutation of sociology's claims that it is a scientific discipline and, at worst, as a quite inconsistent self-absorption of sociologists in their own work.

The third way an ethnomethodological twist would upgrade sociology derives from its anti-mentalistic vein. This is the option I favour. It consists in elaborating (some steps further than the way Anne Rawls proposes to do it) on the sociological theory of knowledge Durkheim has outlined in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. What does this option urge to do ?

By opening up an entirely new field for sociological inquiry (the detailed description of the “methods” individuals necessarily use when they mutually accomplish action in common), ethnomethodology has given some legitimacy to an empirical analysis of the ways practical reason materially operates. Jeff Coulter has given a name to this field : “epistemic sociology”, assigning to it the task to analyse what he called the “grammars of conventional conceptualization” that individuals do immediately and unreflectively make use of in and for acting in common. In this methodological framework, “Knowing what people are doing (including oneself) is knowing how to identify what they are doing in the categories of a natural language, which requires knowing how to use those categories in discursive contexts, which includes knowing when to utter them.”

Another formulation of a very similar specification can be found in Lynch’s proposal to investigate what he defines as “the primitive structures of accountability that make up the intractable reproducibility of social actions”. The kind of investigation he recommends to engage in turns around what he names “epistemics”, a neologism he introduces in his studies of science to describe observing, measuring or representing as practical activities that have to be locally accomplished. It leads “to examine how an activity comes to identify itself as an observation, a measurement, or whatever without assuming from the outset that the local achievement of such activities can be described under a rule or definition.” Lynch claims then that epistemics do frame all forms of practical reasoning, whether in scientific practice or in ordinary action.

In line with Coulter and Lynch, although more radically, I contend that the sociologist’s empirical object of analysis should primarily be the “epistemic operations” that give a practical content to the concepts and principles individuals make use of in and for action in common. To do so, I think we have to admit a postulate : the mere mastery of ordinary language endows individuals with a vernacular language which is matched to a particular type of practical activity ; and when one demonstrates his/her mastery of it, he/she directly manifests his/her acquaintance with the acceptable ways to behave in the circumstances of an ongoing action in common (provided he/she has experienced it once). One can thus suppose that individuals acting in common in a familiar context already know what they are to expect from one another (even if this knowledge is incomplete or defective), how each endorsed role specifies what they are to do (even if these specifications - and the endorsed role - can change during the course of interaction) and what are the standard anticipations one can base his action on (even if this anticipation is ceaselessly revised in the sequentiality of exchanges).

On this account, one can defend - as I do at any rate - the following methodological position : mutual comprehension must be conceived of as a contextual phenomenon that fires up (in a quasi neurobiological sense) in and for the accomplishment of an activity and comes to a halt once the activity stops. In other words, it is not a matter of culture, interiorization, learning or information computing. It is a sociological phenomenon : practical reason stems, as Durkheim claimed a century ago, from the natural fact that human beings are a species which is bound to live and to be raised in groups. Moreover, living together the way they do compel them to master an ordinary language, hence to share prior and unstated (i.e. implicit) agreements about what the requirements of coordination do imply in a vast number of current circumstances of action in common.

Thus, reviving Durkheim's sociological theory of knowledge by engaging in empirical inquiries into the epistemic operations implied in action in common is the third way one can made use of to reveal ethnomethodology's import for the social sciences. It might, in particular, bring sociology back into a crucial debate that has recently been fuelled by the progress of cognitive neurosciences about the nature of thought. Sociology's contribution to this debate should consist in demonstrating the irremediable social nature of the activity of knowing. This way of doing ethnomethodology has to control any drift towards two biases Garfinkel sought to eradicate from sociological analysis : psychologism and mentalism. To conclude, I will sketch the answer I have devised by developing an analysis of the activity of knowing that avoids these two pitfalls.

Instructions for an ethnomethodologically oriented sociology of knowledge

1. Knowing is not a theoretical activity based on reasoning and abstraction the aim of which being the quest of objectivity, definition or truth. It is a practical activity which inheres in the dynamics of any action in common. In other words, knowing is directly exercised in action, and even if one can claim to master one form of knowledge (erudite, academic, theoretical, professional, etc.), knowing as a practical activity exists only when it is exercised.

12. The exercise of knowing is, like any other practical activity, socially organized, which means that it invariably takes place in a structure of constraints defined by a situation and in the course of interactions which are normatively oriented and under the constant control of partners who fulfill the role obligations they have to abide by in given circumstances. This structure of constraints (i.e. the situation) is the relevant fragment of organization of daily life that has to taken into account for analytical purposes.

13. It is only within the natural setting in which the exercise of knowing takes place - an action in common in the making - that this activity should be apprehended.

2. The sociological analysis of the exercise of knowing (which ethnomethodology enables to produce) admits three hypotheses that empirical investigations verify :

21. Human beings are incapable of not knowing what they are doing while they are doing it. And the attention individuals give to “what is going on” around them which manifests itself in their commitment in action (their “engrossment” as Goffman would have it) should be conceived of as the elementary form of the activity of knowing.

22. The exercise of knowing (in actions in common as well as in the use of concepts or sets of concepts, or in the formulation of statements, proposals, or articulated sets of proposals) is always accomplished within a particular ordered practice. In other words, no content of knowledge exists which might be detached from the very course of the action in common in which it is put in use, since these contents are invariably things or ideas are be necessity objects of the social world ; and it is this social world, organized as it is, which gives their meanings to these objects according to the way they are habitually made use of.

23. The exercise of knowing expresses itself simultaneously under two aspects : the ability to immediately give intelligibility to an environment of action (through a series of what I call “epistemic operations” : identifying, abstracting, generalising, categorizing, typifying, connecting, etc..) ; and the mastery of a practical knowledge (which enables to recognize “what is going on” and further anticipate “what to do next” in a particular situation). This exercise is a compound of identification and anticipation practices allowing to act in a way which should be deemed acceptable in each sequence of the flow of everyday life.

24. This relentless identification and anticipation “work” is largely dependent on the presence of others, in the sense that they constantly check - passively or actively -the acceptability of each move an individual makes in a given interaction. Moreover, one can indeed show that individuals assess the details of each move their partners make in the course of an interaction only through the prism of what they assume to be the way the others would expect them to behave in this circumstance. Thereby I surmise that there is no thought an individual might be able to conceive of which should escape the social form that is imposed on it by a previously known and given social organization of a practical activity.

3. The idea of social forms of thought implies the impersonal nature of current meanings individuals directly attribute to the things and events they observe in the environment of joint action in which they find themselves (in the literal sense of the verb, said Mead).

31. Impersonality refers to all the things that the partners of a practical activity know (or ought reasonably to know) about the world’s order (the social world’s in general and the world of this practical activity, in particular) without necessarily knowing that he knows it but which he immediately makes use of to act with others without thinking about it (as one follows a rule blindly, Wittgenstein would say). Impersonality names all these elements of intelligibility - which it would be pointless to make list of - that enable people to understand what is happening in an action in common and whose mastery is acquired through familiarization with the environment in which they live and evolve.

32. Impersonality is a catalog of ordinary ways of reasoning and acting in which individuals pick up the one that appears best suited to speak and act publicly in given and changing circumstances.

33. A huge part of this catalog is incorporated in the role obligations individuals have to abide by when acting together (and they have every reason on earth to assume that these obligations are collectively shared). These obligations are external to individuals, but they get their binding force from the fact that people confer authority on them and hence conform to their prescriptions. In short, what is required of anyone engrossed in an action in common is an ability - not a competence - to make personal use of impersonality.

4. The elementary basis of individual action is neither the will of a subject (intention), nor the rational choice of an agent (decision), nor a competence in communication (intersubjectivity), nor cognitive mechanisms determining a reaction or reflecting the adjustment to an environment (cognition), but what I call the immediate production of “direct inferential practices” which materially constitute the conceptualization activities implied in the flow of the action.

41. These “direct inferential practices” depend on a series of epistemic operations which instantly pick up a series of clues in the environment of action and combine them to establish a provisional (and constantly revised) intelligibility to what is going while ensuring the continuity of a current practical activity i.e. accomplishing coordination of action.

42. One can say that this is the perspective of a sociology at the second person (the impersonal You), neither at the first (the I of the rational actor or the narrator) nor at the third (the It of the positivist). I surmise that ethnomethodology’s program (as well as Goffman’s) develops such a sociology at the second person.

To conclude

I have tried to give an answer to a question which is seldom asked though it lies at the heart of the ethnomethodological enterprise : what should be the ultimate aim of the analysis of the “methods” that any participant in a form of collective activity uses to accomplish the intelligibility of what occurs in an action in common and to correctly orient their moves in it ? I hope to have managed to substantiate my claim that this aim is to provide a major contribution to a renewed sociological theory of knowledge.