

# ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

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## By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- **Outline the theoretical underpinnings of the ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic challenge to social research.**
- **Understand the practical and methodological basis by which these related approaches seek to study human interaction.**
- **Identify and comprehend a number of key studies which highlight how both approaches operate in**

**practice.**

- **Critically evaluate the practical strengths and limitations of both approaches.**
- **Engage with the ethical issues raised by both approaches.**

## **Ethnomethodology: ‘qualitative experiments’**

### **Sociology, but not as sociologists know it!**

Ethnomethodology, according to Graham Button (1991: 1) represents ‘a foundational respecification of the human sciences’. It may be seen as sociology, but not as sociologists know it. Ethnomethodologists refuse to get to grips with what has traditionally been seen as ‘the problem’ and have adopted methods appropriate to dealing with ‘their’ respecification of the problem. Ethnomethodology seeks to find the methods used by ‘members’ in everyday interaction which achieve the sense of order often called ‘society’ (hence ‘ethno’ methods). Ethnomethodology’s focus upon the achievement of a sense of order through the actions of participants in that interaction requires an empirical focus upon the micro-processes of everyday life. Ethnomethodology does not seek to explore macro patterns of social ‘structure’ and seeks to exclude from its ‘explanations’ of events all attributions of prior or unobservable ‘social processes and forces’. In drawing upon external ‘causal explanations’ from beyond the data at hand to the researcher, the conventional social researcher stands accused by ethnomethodologists of engaging in a deception. Conversation analysis emerged out of the ethnomethodological challenge to mainstream sociology.

Harold Garfinkel and a circle of students and colleagues in California founded ethnomethodology in the 1960s. Garfinkel’s *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, published originally in 1967 (reprinted in 1984), represents the definitive founding text. Garfinkel’s early work on suicide and mental illness set his approach on a collision course with the founder of sociological method, Emile Durkheim, whose use of variations in suicide statistics represented perhaps the most influential foundation of sociological method. Garfinkel adopted a number of innovative research strategies in order to explore the methods actors use in everyday interaction to build and sustain the sense of social order commonly perceived to exist before the interaction. Durkheim used suicide statistics as a resource for exploring the social forces ‘causing’ suicide. Garfinkel wanted to know how the statistics were put together. Garfinkel suspended judgement over any relationship between the figures and a supposed ‘real’ level of self-inflicted death. Such was the nature of Garfinkel’s challenge to conventional social research, both as an institution and as a set of methods.

Ethnomethodology still generates extreme reaction. In some quarters it is a heretical nonsense, while in others it has achieved an almost cult-like status. With its own agenda, language and methods of practice, ethnomethodology still appears 'strange' to those schooled in other ways of researching. This, combined with a certain insularity amongst its core adherents, means that the insights gained within ethnomethodology are poorly communicated. Here, it is shown how ethnomethodologists work.

## **Key concepts**

Emerging from the tradition of phenomenology (see 'Phenomenological ontology'). Garfinkel's ethnomethodology was to reject the value of 'grand theories' of social structure in favour of a focus upon the practices of participants. As such the key concepts within ethnomethodology refer to forms of action, not to forms of social structure/institution. It is the exploration of forms of action that directs ethnomethodological research. The key nexus of actions hinges around what Garfinkel referred to as 'indexicality' and 'reflexivity'. The two combined make up what Garfinkel called 'the documentary method (or accounting)'.

Indexicality refers to the way explanation is often offered in terms of illustration. Indexing, in its crudest form, involves pointing at something and saying, 'That's what I mean'. Indexicality involves an appeal to something tangible and shared when engaged in clarifying some point of dispute. Abstract issues require grounding in concrete examples. It is in agreeing about the correct examples that a sense of agreement over more abstract ideas is generated.

Reflexivity refers to the way specific things or events are explained with reference to 'general patterns'. In its crudest form, reflexivity involves saying, 'Ah, what you are looking at there is an example of X'. Particular events and objects are thus rendered meaningful by placing them within categories, locating them within our general theories of the world. Things are made to make sense this way.

A chicken-and-egg situation is thereby revealed. Clearly, if indexicality and reflexivity are brought together, what is created is a circular process. If particular events and objects are explained by members in terms of the general theories held to be shared by members, while at the same time the members' 'general theories' are being held up through indexing particular events and objects as examples of those theories, it becomes clear that each is dependent upon the other. Members sustain the sense of an order through such circular processes. This is what Garfinkel calls the documentary method. This is the members' method (an ethno-method). Garfinkel's research, and that of other ethnomethodologists, highlights the active nature of such accounting in sustaining the sense of social order.

Why is this significant to the conduct of social research? Garfinkel suggests that social researchers are not that different from everybody else when it comes to the use of the documentary method. Social researchers, Garfinkel suggests, use examples to justify their theories, and theories to explain their data (that is, their examples). This applies to the quantitative researcher who justifies their prescriptive categories on the basis of the very data such categories structure the creation of, and which are then used to explain their results. The accusation also applies to the qualitative researcher whose selection of quotations and descriptions will be driven by what they think they have found, even while what they think they have found is said to have emerged from their quotations and descriptions. In each case appearances are said to explain what lies beneath, even while at the same moment appearances are said to be explained by what lies beneath.

### **The ethnomethodological method**

Garfinkel sought to step out of this trap. To do so he proposed a stance of indifference towards the truth claims made by members and, furthermore, he proposed that the study of members' methods would address the uniqueness of particular interactions, rather than seek to prove overall patterns behind all such interactions. These two dimensions map onto the questions of depth validity and generalizability. Indifference towards the truth value of claims made by members, whether lay members or professional sociologists, made such claims a topic for research rather than a resource. Such claims did not take us beyond the interactions they were a part of. What is of interest to Garfinkel is how such claims are 'achieved' and 'sustained', not whether they are true. Garfinkel is not interested in whether members' knowledge is valid. He seeks to describe how it happened. Of course, we should be concerned as to whether Garfinkel's data has depth validity. Garfinkel (and others) developed an array of tactics in their attempt to achieve this end. As regards the claim that ethnomethodology seeks only to describe the unique nature of each particular creative achievement they research, there is scope for dispute. Ethnomethodologists do seek to make generalized claims about the nature of social interaction based upon specific research, itself driven by particular theoretical motivations. Ethnomethodologists use experiments, participant observation, interviews and case studies along with other techniques in their own way and to their own ends. Outlined below are some empirical techniques used by ethnomethodologists to explore members' methods.

#### **BOX 1 THE FAKE STUDENT COUNSELLOR 'EXPERIMENT'**

Garfinkel used a number of experiments to explore actors' methods of sense making. In one such experiment 10

students were asked to pose questions to a supposed student counsellor by means of an intercom system (Garfinkel, 1984: Ch. 3). Each question was answered either 'Yes' or 'No'. The student was then required to turn off the intercom and write their interpretation of the answer they had been given. The yes or no answers were, in fact, random, yet in each case the students managed to interpret the response in a way that was meaningful to them. Drawing upon the transcripts of the students' responses, Garfinkel sought to show the work that each student put into the interpretation. Sense making, or reflexive accounting, requires an active attempt to bring order to the situation. The students appeared naturally disposed to the creative use of such methods. Each student felt they had 'understood' the intentions of the counsellor, despite the fact that there were no 'intentions' to be understood. Even when students repeated a question and the fake counsellor gave the opposite answer on the second occasion to that same question, the students actively sought to make sense of the reversal in terms of differences of interpretation of changes that had arisen due to intervening factors that had emerged between that answer and the previous one. Just as human beings attribute meaning and sense to clouds and natural disasters, so they seem incapable of not 'making sense' of interactions that are in fact sense-less.

## **BOX 2 ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: WORKING WITH THE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED**

In parallel 'experiments' (Garfinkel, 1984: Chs 1 and 2) students were asked to insist on clarification in a number of exchanges with others not party to the instruction. If asked 'How are you today?', students would reply: 'What do you mean exactly?' or 'Can you clarify that question for me?'. The result was confusion and often anger. Garfinkel highlights the sense of expectation that is violated in such an exchange, as well as the sense of something shared but unspecified that underpins such expectations. Without formal agreement people have a sense that they all know what X means. Even if 'How are you today?' can be read in different ways, to deviate from the impression of 'something understood' is to open up the whole fabric of social order, this fabric being the fiction that everyone really does know what everyone else means when they ask 'How are you today?'. Similarly, when students were sent home to act as lodgers in their homes, the resulting confusion and anger was said to highlight the taken-for-granted, yet unspecified, and in an important sense unspecifiable, 'rules' that were assumed to govern normal home life. When challenged, the rules could not be clearly specified. Garfinkel (1984: 70) draws a parallel with Wittgenstein's claim

that no rule contains within itself the rules of its own interpretation. We think there are rules we all agree to, but as no rule can ever be fully and exhaustively set down such that no divergence can emerge over interpreting it, we are forced to rely on the assumption of a common understanding. The repair work done in day-to-day life, which sustains this illusion of solid foundations and rules, is exposed in these experiments. Garfinkel called such experiments breaching.

### **BOX 3 PASSING: THE CASE OF 'AGNES'**

Based on over 30 hours of interviews, Garfinkel researched the sexual identity of 'Agnes', born with male genitalia, but who at puberty developed breasts and later had reconstructive surgery in order to have a vagina rather than a penis. Garfinkel was keen to explore the social reconstruction that Agnes had had to undergo in order to take on the public role of a woman. Agnes asserted that she had always been a female, and had always known that her identification as a boy was a mistake premised upon having a penis. Garfinkel was not interested in whether Agnes had or had not always been a female. For him, what Agnes performed was the work necessary to maintain the social status of female. Before and after reconstructive surgery Agnes had to consciously take on the female role. The rituals and the routines of maintaining the binary distinction of masculine and feminine involve much more than simply having a penis or a vagina. Garfinkel is interested in the social actions involved in 'passing', managing identity. For him Agnes reveals much about the nature of managing gender. Garfinkel suggests (1984: 180) that Agnes 'highlights how normal sexuality is accomplished through witnessable displays of talk and conduct', not simply by means of hidden biological facts. Agnes is the doer of the accountable person who is Agnes. Such effort illustrates the surfaces by which supposedly biological identities are attributed.

### **BOX 4 THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF JUVENILE JUSTICE**

One of Garfinkel's collaborators, Aaron Cicourel (19, used a comparative study of two areas, using a mix of secondary sources and interviews, to investigate how classification of young offenders impacts upon the construction of criminal statistics. Cicourel wanted to investigate the process by which criminal statistics were generated. How were rules interpreted? What would be the consequences? What Cicourel showed was that the processing of a 'crime' involves a series of interpretive filters. Was the event observed? If so, was it interpreted as a

crime? If so, was it reported? If so, was it recorded? If so, was it investigated? If so, was someone 'caught'? If so, were charges pressed? If so, did it come to court? If so, was there a conviction? If so, was there a custodial sentence? If statistics on the composition of juvenile criminals are based on so much interpretive work, can we trust that the figures give us the 'truth'? Cicourel is suspicious of using 'truth' as a benchmark. What he is able to highlight is that in the more affluent neighbourhoods particular events are less likely to progress through all the stages. At each stage there is a greater rate of 'dropping the case' in the more affluent area. Rules are interpreted more harshly in the poorer areas, and there are higher conviction rates there.

### **Some comments on methods in ethnomethodology**

As can be seen in the above examples, ethnomethodology, while often associated with forms of naturalistic experiment, has involved a range of data collection methods: interviews, case-study work, comparative analysis, and secondary data analysis. Ethnomethodology can also be carried out by means of ethnography (Zeitlyn et al., 1999). In this sense, ethnomethodology is not a method in itself; it is an investigative orientation towards members' methods. However, while not a singular method, ethnomethodology has challenged the conventional assumptions about what social research should investigate. Garfinkel's naturalistic experiments offer insights into how such a reorientation of focus can be taken up empirically. Taking up these insights has led to innovations within more traditional methods, such as interviews and ethnography.

However, it is important to point out that many of Garfinkel's experiments would be considered unethical today. Other experiments of his involved secretly taping the deliberations of juries in criminal trials and recording conversations with people telephoning suicide prevention lines. Often Garfinkel's experiments involved deception. There is an argument that deception is essential in any experimental method involving human subjects. Others suggest that the value of qualitative research lies in its avoidance of the experimental deception, regardless of whether the experiments are in a lab or in everyday contexts (see 'The qualitative inside all research: measurement').

It is worth noting that in pointing to the income differences between the neighbourhoods in his study of juvenile justice, Cicourel deviated from the orthodox ethnomethodological premise of looking only at what is present in data collected in observed interactions. Cicourel's use of externally produced theoretical models to locate his data and to structure his choice of sites is a classic instance of reflexivity. Such a violation of orthodoxy may lead some to reject the attribution that 'affluence'/'poverty' is a causal factor in accounting for juvenile conviction rates and only retain

the observation that rates vary because interpretations vary. Others may take Cicourel's deviation from the orthodox ethnomethodological prescriptions as proof of the need to abandon such a dogmatic school of social research. Perhaps the most useful interpretation is that social researchers can learn from each other, and that the gulf between ethnomethodology and other forms of social research is not as absolute as it is often said to be.

### **Conversation analysis: fine-grained recording of naturally occurring talk**

Taking advantage of small-scale cassette recording technology, conversation analysis sought to revolutionize social research with a refocusing of attention upon the mechanisms at work in, and the achievement that is, everyday naturally occurring human conversation.

#### **Harvey Sacks' mission**

Harvey Sacks (1992) created conversation analysis (not to be confused with content analysis – see *Chapter 19 and particularly Chapter 21*) from within and yet beyond ethnomethodology. The two approaches share many fundamentals, but conversation analysis (CA) developed a particular formal approach to the examination of everyday interaction, the search for 'machinery' which generates the natural organization of talk. CA seeks to replace general theory with a general methodology (see Box 11.5).

#### **BOX 5 BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CONVERSATION ANALYSIS**

David Silverman (1998: Ch. 4) outlines a set of basic CA methodological principles:

- 1 Avoid summary representations – provide detailed transcripts to the reader (such that they can examine your claims about the data fully).
- 2 Pursue data sets which allow study of fine detail (that is, tape recordings).
- 3 Question reliance upon interview data (seek naturally occurring talk).
- 4 Address the most basic details of interaction rather than relying upon 'glosses' (appeals to supposed taken-for-grantedness). Make common sense a topic, not a resource.
- 5 Be hyper-scientific and behaviourist (study only what can be seen, avoid the tendency to attribute meanings and motives that cannot be seen).
- 6 Don't introduce theoretical concepts and constructs: seek out the real members' categories, the machinery that actors actually use.



7 Focus on the routine, not the unusual.

### **BOX 6 FEATURES OF TALK**

This list of features is taken from Silverman (1998: Ch. 6).

- 1 People talk one at a time.
- 2 Speaker change recurs.
- 3 Sequences that are two utterances long and are adjacently placed may be 'paired' activities.
- 4 Activities can be required to occur at 'appropriate' places.
- 5 Certain activities are 'chained' (sequences of expectation ensue).

Actors generate order within and through interaction. Sacks sought a method of capturing those methods. This involved the taping of conversation and then the analysis of what were often tiny fragments of that talk to demonstrate the complexity of the interplay.

### **From adjacency pairs to the general machinery of expectation**

The most basic facet of conversation is the fact that one person saying something to someone else will often contain an expectation of a response. Call and response expectation establish what Sacks calls adjacency pairs, basic units of naturally occurring talk. The first part of the pair creates a conversational space which the second party to the conversation is expected to fill. It is not the case that the first person compels the second to respond, or that the nature of the response is determined by the first part of the pair. As Silverman (1998: 99) points out, it is possible to ignore someone if they say hello to you, though it is interesting to note that it is not as easy as one might think to do so. If, however, one does choose to reject the request contained in an invitation to respond, this is likely to be taken as an insult. The fact that offence may be taken from a 'snub' lies in the force of the expectation. Butting into a conversation or speaking out of turn are morally regulated in the action of conversation. Silverman (1998: Ch. 6) highlights a range of sequential features contained within conversation (see Box 11.6)

Once again it is important to note that the machinery is not what makes people do what they do. The machinery is

what the people use to do what they do. Expectations can be broken, but they are nevertheless expected.

## Trivia?

Sacks was keen to argue that it is precisely the seeming triviality of talk that makes it so important. It is the bedrock of social life and yet it is so often taken for granted. The fine-grained analysis of talk allows for the micro-machinery upon which all else is built (in Sacks' view) to become available to us. Recording natural talk allows very mundane things to take on a great significance precisely because they at first seem so obvious. The example of putting a 'Hm!!' into a conversation allows for the study of turn-taking, and the general requirement to be oriented to the other within a conversation that is essential to the maintenance of social action. Benson and Hughes (1991) highlight the fact that for Sacks it was not a question of generating large samples, but of identifying the machinery in every individual interaction. In so far as a set of general themes emerged, these were always to be subordinate to the need to ground all claims in the particular data (and the ability to defend any such claims by recourse to a full and detailed transcript of the talk). Hyper-detailed transcription, published alongside any analysis, is the foundation upon which CA seeks to identify and justify claims concerning the machinery at work in talk.

## Transcription notation

Sacks began the process of developing a system of transcription notation that would allow the process of conversation to be formally represented. This work was taken up by his collaborator, Gail Jefferson. It is Jefferson's version of CA transcription notation that has formed the basis for most subsequent CA work, though there have been many adaptations and additions to take into account novel interactional situations (such as human-computer interaction). CA has developed a descriptive capacity through which the complexity of talk can be captured for the purposes of fine-grained analysis. For an example, see Box 11.7.

### BOX 7 CONVERSATION ANALYSIS TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION IN PRACTICE

Example of CA transcription notation in use, from Alison Pilnick (2002: 341):

204 C: If it was (.) shown that you definitely (.) have the gene for ° Huntington's°=

205 Cl: =Mmhmm

206 C: Ehm (.) that would open up the possibility of testing an unborn [baby

207 Cl: [Mmhmm

208 C: by a test which could be carried out on (.) at around about tw- (.)

209	eleven to twelve weeks [°of your pregnancy° and it would
210 Cl:	[Mm (.) can check that
211 C:	involve removing a very tiny piece of the placenta (.) by a
212	well established technique which involves passing a very fine
213	catheter (.) through the birth canal °into the placenta° (0.2) and
214	pulling out a little piece and sending it off to the lab (.) [and then
215 Cl:	[Mmhmm
216 C:	testing for DNA (.) genetic material in that placenta=
217 Cl:	=Mmhmm
218 C:	and if you get (.) a good result that's great (0.2) if you get
219	a result back that's uhh bad (.) the::n you know (.) that
220	they have inherited the gene for Huntington's disease (.)
221 Cl:	[Mmm
222 C:	[and you then are faced with this awful decision of what to
223	do (.) and that's your business=
224 Cl:	=Mmhmm=
225 C:	=we'll support you whatever you [decide
226 Cl:	[yeah
227	(2.0)

This system is best summarized by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (1984: ix–xvi). Here only the key notations are outlined and a number of examples are given, based upon Atkinson and Heritage's account.

- 1 *Simultaneous utterances*: where two people begin to speak at the same time. Here a pair of square brackets is placed at the start of the lines of transcribed conversation indicating that the two lines of talk occurred at the same time (see Box 11,7, lines 221 and 222).
- 2 *Overlapping utterances*: where a second speaker starts to talk while the first speaker is still talking. Here the square brackets are placed at the point in the first speaker's talk where the second speaker begins. Both speakers'

talk is then written one above the other after the square bracket. The square bracket is closed at the point at which one speaker stops talking while the other continues (see Box 11,7, lines 214 and 215).

- 3 *Contiguous utterances*: where there is no gap between one person's talk finishing and another person's talk starting. Here the equals sign is placed at the end of the first speaker's talk while another equals sign is placed at the beginning of the second speaker's transcribed talk (see Box 11.7, lines 223–225).
- 4 *Intervals within and between utterances*: where there is no talk. Here the time interval in tenths of a second is placed inside round brackets, that is, (0.8) or (3.4). This may be either in the line between two speakers or within the transcribed talk of one speaker depending on whether the continuation of talk comes from a second speaker or from the same speaker as last spoke. Very brief pauses are indicated with a dash, that is, – or a dot in brackets (.) (see Box 11.7, lines 218–220).
- 5 *Characteristics of speech delivery*: here it is the character of the speaking that the transcription seeks to highlight. A falling tone, intonation, rising inflection, animated tone and abrupt cut-off or stammering are indicated by full stops, commas, question marks, question marks with a comma rather than a stop at the bottom, exclamation marks and dashes, respectively. Upward and downward arrows are used to indicate intonation, underlining is used to show a tone of emphasis in the talk, capital letters identify louder than usual speech, while elevated circles indicate quietness. A stream of similar formal notation devices has been developed. A word stretched out will be written with a series of :: marks to indicate its elongation (for example, hel:::lo).
- 6 *Transcription doubt*: where the transcriber is unsure what has been said exactly. Here the whole portion that is in doubt is placed in parentheses (round brackets). Sometimes alternative possibilities are presented one below the other.

Analysis of data in CA is addressed in Chapter 19.

## **The value of CA**

It may seem that the value of a conversation-analytic approach is to highlight the creativity of everyday interaction and thereby to demonstrate the significance of the micro-interactional competence of people, as distinct from the drive to show how people are the unknowing products of macro-structural forces. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it was Sacks' intention to use CA to build a general methodology for discovering the machinery of human interaction. CA has been used to show how and when breakdowns occur in everyday interaction, and how repair work is carried out. It has also been used to show how humans interact with machines (see Zeitlyn et al., 1999;

Turkle, 1996; Button, 1990). This often leads to interactional breakdowns because humans transfer the conversational expectations they have of other humans to machines that do not operate according to the same machinery. As a method of recording talk, CA has great significance. As a challenge to conventional assumptions about inference, CA can also be questioned. To the extent that CA suggests it is possible to study talk with no reference to the motives of speakers or the context in which speech occurs, it has set for itself operational limits that are almost never fully adhered to. To focus only on what is manifest in the talk itself, with no attempts to infer to or from motive or context, may be impossible. However, the call to pay attention to what and how people talk should be heeded.

## **Summary**

Ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts seek to identify general practices within micro-level social interaction. While sharing common origins and much else in common, conversation analysis has sought to develop a far more formal approach to recording micro-instances of naturally occurring talk (talk that is not generated by a researcher-driven interaction), while ethnomethodologists have pursued an approach that is less formal in its recording of data, but which is more interventionist in selecting, intervening in, and even setting up the micro-interactional situations they wish to study. Both approaches seek to highlight how ‘social order’ is achieved by the interaction of people, rather than order being the framework within or stage upon which action takes place.

## **Questions**

- 1 How and how far can ethnomethodological and/or conversation-analytic techniques be integrated with other forms of qualitative data collection?**
- 2 In what ways do ethnomethodology and conversation analysis differ, and to what extent are they compatible?**
- 3 In what ways do ethnomethodology and conversation analysis challenge the validity of other forms of social research data, and is such a challenge itself valid?**
- 4 What are the ethical strengths and weaknesses of conversation analysis and ethnomethodology?**
- 5 Are the things that ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts study trivial?**

## **Further reading**

- Atkinson, J. Maxwell and Heritage, John (1984) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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