

Ethnomethodology

FIELDWORK

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FIELDWORK

From the beginning of the movement, ethnomethodologists have devoted most of their studies to social problems. As we have seen, in his earlier writings Garfinkel was interested in the problem of trials and criminal justice. His work continued with studies about jurors' decision making and with research about suicide. All the dissertations that have been submitted in the ethnomethodological current deal, as has been seen, with a social problem along the lines generally borrowed from ethnography. But the break with positivist sociology is not located in field techniques: The break is in the fact that for each field studied, the ethnomethodologists emphasize the interactional activities that constitute the social facts.

Social facts are not objects but, in Garfinkel's language, practical accomplishments; this is the new sociological paradigm that is the outcome of a whole current in American sociology and that serves as a thread in every ethnomethodological field study.

The following fields are among the great domains of sociological investigation:

In addition, ethnologists such as Moerman (1968), Bellmann (1975, 1984), Jules-Rosette (1975), and Castaneda (1968) showed interest in ethnomethodological orientation, and Bittner (1963) studied radical political movements.

I now illustrate the range of ethnomethodological investigations by reviewing some of the fields that have been studied.

Education

Most studies in the sociology of education, wrote Mehan (1978), treat social structures as if they were constrained and objective "social facts." It is as though education, as a process, had been treated as a closed system, the analysis of which has been deliberately ignored, by investigators who have been interested only in the inputs and outputs of the system. At the entrance of the system, the researcher notes a certain

number of factors (sex, age, parents' socioeconomic status, ethnicity); then he or she describes the patterns at the exit point, for example, school failures and dropouts, and concludes that “the son will do his father's job” and that inequality is reproduced. But such work does not demonstrate how this inequality is reproduced inside the closed system, that is, the school. Although educational interactions must play a major role in the outcomes they attempt to explain, sociologists of education have not examined the educational processes directly.

Mehan (1978) contended that the study of the concrete conditions in which the everyday education process occurs is necessary for anyone who wants to understand the influence of school on people's future lives. He wanted to demonstrate concretely how such factors as the number of pupils per class, the pedagogical methods, or the size of the classrooms “operate in practical educational situations.” In the same way, the influence of such factors as social class, race, and teacher's attitude has to be shown in the situation itself, in the interactions between the partners within the educational act:

Students' performance in school is not independent of the assessment procedures that produce accounts of students' successes, abilities, and progress.

[p. 52 ↓]

The constitutive analysis of the structuring of school structure has been conducted in school settings that typically have consequences for students' careers: classrooms, educational-testing encounters, and counseling sessions. In each case researchers have demonstrated that the educational facts peculiar to the settings are assembled in the interaction among the participants.... Constitutive studies of counseling sessions have examined how students' career choices are structured in the interaction between counselors and students during guidance interviews. (Mehan, 1978, p. 40)

INTERACTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

When we observe a class, Mehan said, it appears to be organized: Teachers and students speak in turn, at precise moments. The students write, they work in small groups, or they read in silence. In short, we see a real social organization. It is of course an instituted order. What has to be analyzed is the way these institutions are born and structured. Mehan and his collaborators videotaped a class, with students of different ages and ethnicities, for a whole school year. They analyzed nine classes, and they showed that it is the interactional work between teachers and students that produces the class organization. Teachers and students mark the borders of interactional sequences, of thematic exchanges, of the phases and of the lessons themselves, by modifications in their gestures and by paralinguistic as well as verbal behaviors. The functions of these changes of behavior are to indicate to the partners where they situate themselves during their exchanges. They structure the exchange situation. We can say that they are markers of the situation. They enable each one to know where he stands in the temporality of the class.

By centering on the interactions that occur during the class, Mehan (1979, 1980) showed that a great number of activities simultaneously take place. The students consciously develop their own strategies to achieve goals independent from the teacher's and to carry on their own affairs. Thus the students show their "interactional competence." A certain number of rules are set by the teacher, such as "not to run in the class," "be clean," and "respect others," but none of these rules indicates when and how it has to be applied. The students have to find out in situ, in their interactions with each other and with the teacher, the signification and the functioning of these rules. A competent student is, therefore, one who can make a synthesis between academic content and interactional forms, which are necessary to the accomplishment of a [p. 53 ↓] task. Any separation between form and content is immediately interpreted by the teacher as the sign of incompetence. This should enable us to give a new definition to a student's ability, as ethnomethodological studies of exams and counseling have shown.

TESTING AND EXAMINATION

Mehan (1979, 1980) studied the way answers are produced during testing. I have shown already that the significance of questions is not the same for everybody, contrary to one of the founding hypotheses of the principle of testing. Their meaning is not shared by the testing adults and the tested children. What are considered wrong answers very often represent a different interpretation of the conceptual material and not a lack of knowledge nor an inability to reason correctly. Treating the testing results as objective facts hides the processes used by the students to construct their answers. Yet it is this very construction that should be judged as fundamental by educators, because its analysis would enable them to evaluate the real reasoning capacities of the students.

Mehan videotaped WISC (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children) testing of rural children in Indiana. Formally, the testers are supposed to assign grades immediately after the student answers by assigning the answer a 0, 1, or 2, according to its quality; then the testers are supposed to proceed to the next question. The analysis of the video record showed that, in fact, the responses to 21 of 65 questions had been influenced by the tester's interventions. In these 21 cases, testers either repeated the question, gave indications as to the proper answer, or urged the student to give a second answer. Such intervention resulted in an elevation of the child's score from 1 to 2 in 50% of the cases. The final score of one student was 27% superior to what it would have been if the tester had not helped him. In another testing experience, the children, responding to the urgings of the testers, increased their correct answers by 44%.

Taking the testing results as an objective fact hides three mechanisms:

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COUNSELING

Counselors play an important role in student guidance, particularly in high school. Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) showed how arbitrary decisions, based on racism and

socioeconomic prejudices, could be made by counselors in high schools with regard to admissions in colleges. Ethnomethodological works in education seek to analyze how these decisions, which are very important for the students' future, are made.

Frederick Erickson (1975) examined the role played by counselors in the process of advising students on courses and course sequences of varying ranks. After having worked as a counselor in a black suburb of a large American city, the practices involved in racial discrimination and differential selection, which he witnessed daily for 3 years, led him to question the role of counselors of all kinds. He came to see their role as maintaining the social order of the whites. Later, when he was a professor, he decided to analyze the encounters of the high school students with the counselors. The role of these counselors is ambiguous: They are at the same time the students' defenders and judges employed by the administration:

To some students, school and society can be described as an open structure in which they will be able to decide what they want and act effectively to reach their goals. To others, the social structure can be presented as a closed one in which individuals do not choose for themselves, in which many hurdles and problems lie ahead. Depending on what counselors select to emphasize about society, students may experience counselors' advice as encouragement or as restraint.
(Erickson, 1975, p. 46)

The counselors do not treat all students in the same way. Their interviews with students are supposed to be based on objective and universal criteria, but in fact, the participants, in the course of their interactions, constantly give particularistic information. Erickson noted that the students who established good rapport—by talking about themselves, their sport activities, and interests they have in common with their counselor—got more positive counseling. By minutely analyzing recordings of the interviews, he found that there was at times an embodied harmony—breathing with the same rhythm, harmonious and soft voices, synchronized gestures—between the counselor and the student.

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The orientation decisions that are made during the interaction depend on the subjective judgment of the counselor and on his or her representation of the student. Some characteristics of the student are taken into account, others are not. They are arbitrarily, subjectively sorted out. The counselor will sometimes take into account a student's school marks, the way the student dresses, his athletic build; sometimes his race, sex, beauty, language; sometimes his ease, probable social class, distinction, and so on. Most of these attributes are determined by birth and have nothing to do with school merit. But the real process of selection disappears behind the counselor's diagnosis.

Thus ethnomethodological studies of the classroom and of the school as an institution help us understand the daily, ordinary mechanisms by which social stratification is created within the school itself. These mechanisms of “making inequality” are enacted in numerous interactional situations at school everyday. The stratification of students within the school, which feeds the reproduction of inequalities beyond the school, is not produced out of thin air. The ethnomethodological demonstration does not aim at accusing the educators, the counselors, or the school administrators, or at making them feel guilty; however, by giving them access to the mechanisms of the interactions, it could help modify them. The works of the sociology of education rarely escape an objectivist physicalism, which tends to represent the world as being constituted by a series of objective classifications, independent of the sociologist's intervention. That is why ethnomethodology seems so rich. By opening the closed system of the school, ethnomethodology reveals, as Mehan said, a whole interactional machinery, usually hidden, that is made up of verbal and nonverbal relationships. It shows how the “objective” educational facts emerge from structuring activities that are hidden in a process of reification. It shows “the steps whereby the society hides from its members its activities of organization and thus leads them to see its features as determinate and independent objects” (Garfinkel, 1967/1984, p. 182).

BEING A STUDENT IS A JOB

This phenomenon is particularly visible when one examines the affiliation practices that enable a freshman to learn his/her “job” when he/she changes from the status of high school pupil to the status of university student (Coulon, 1990). The affiliation is a process that [p. 56 ↓] consists of discovering and using the routines, the matter of

course actions—the ethnomethods—that are hidden in the everyday practices in higher education. If he/she fails to do so, the freshman will be unable to join the new group, and will rapidly fail or drop out. I have shown that being unable to see, to decipher, and then to embody the hidden codes that regulate social relations in the university constitutes one of the main reasons for dropping out and for failing, phenomena that occur massively during the first year of university study in France. To succeed at a university, the freshman has to show competence as a student by learning to make practical use of the rules on which university work is based; the student must learn to use university rules metaphorically. A student reveals competence by showing that he/she has become a member. This is done by displaying that he/she can categorize the world in the same way as does the university community.

Juvenile Delinquency

Among the various ethnomethodological studies on delinquency, I have taken a detailed look at the study that Cicourel (1968) made in two Californian towns for 4 years. In this study, he aimed at demonstrating that juvenile delinquency, as a social phenomenon, is socially constructed. More precisely, he wanted to show how the police, the judge, and the courts, but also the researchers themselves, transform the youths' actions into documents, texts, and written reports, which are then used as evidence to characterize certain acts or activities as being delinquent, illegal, dangerous, or suspicious. Cicourel examined the inquiries of police, educators, and judges because their inquiries, with their contingent features, establish the social classifications that designate and enable one to recognize the categories of deviance and conformity.

Cicourel (1968) first presented a number of statistics and questions their relevance to understanding crime, because the categories are inaccurate, ambiguous, or heterogeneous. They are ad hoc categories, far from the notions of precision and lucidity usually associated with the idea of the work of justice. Some of them are even rather curious, such as, for instance, the categories of fights between teenagers, or runaways. As Cicourel put it, these categories and the numbers associated with them have a “negotiable character” although they have a “‘solid’ appearing nature.” Cicourel then showed the structure of juvenile [p. 57 ↓] justice in the form of its verbal representations by educators and the adolescents and their parents. He then presented

several cases of delinquency that he encountered during his research. I will present two.

In the first case, Audrey, a 15-year-old black girl, has committed several petty thefts from her classmates. She belongs to a middle-class family and lives in a tidy house, but her parents do not control her activities, the police say. In addition, she has had sexual intercourse “with at least two boys,” the police say, who add that she is “a very appealing and attractive girl, ... friendly, ... not antisocial or psychotic.” Although she often steals, Audrey does not behave as the usual chronic thief. Her look, her physical appearance, her behavior—her absence of insolence, for instance—cannot be used as “documents” to explain her thefts. Thus she is a candidate for clinical interpretations. A psychiatric report suggests that she is “emotionally disturbed.” She is sent for observation to a psychiatric hospital for 90 days. Having thus been labeled, her future behaviors will always be interpreted in regard to this label by the police or social workers. It is cited in the case of an insignificant fight at school in which she took part to defend one of her friends. Every incident, however minor, is used to confirm the social and psychological initial diagnosis, and the categorization of each incident in turn builds up Audrey's delinquent identity.

Cicourel (1968) showed in other cases how delinquency cases are negotiated during the court trials. The destiny of the teenager depends on a large number of factors, such as the description of the case made by the police, the attitude of parents and that of the youth, and the presence or absence of an attorney.

In the second case, Linda is 13 years old. One evening, her mother takes her to a party that has been organized by her school for Christmas. Linda, however, does not actually go to the party; instead, she leaves with three boys and gets back home 2 days later. Her parents, who are worried about her being gone, call the police. Linda has left the school with the three boys, has been drunk on the whiskey stolen by one of the boys, has had sexual intercourse with them, and has not come back home because she was too drunk. The case is described by the police as being “juicy”; the detailed report runs several pages. The juvenile police, Cicourel says, have been very interested in Linda's sexual activities. One of the boys, Robert, who is 13, is seen as being the organizer of the encounter. His school behavior had caused him to be labeled as a potential delinquent. In school, he is considered to be a hopeless case. [p. 58 ↓] Robert has

been involved in 15 school “incidents,” such as “smoking,” “continuously chatting,” “leaving class without permission,” “interrupting other classes,” “showing his friends a switchblade knife,” and “having a continued defiance.” The police report casts him as the only boy having had intercourse with Linda. In fact, the boys describe her as “a little whore who only thinks about sex.” But the police report describes Linda as a pretty girl, polite, whose dress, hairstyle, voice intonation, and demeanor designate her as belonging to the middle class. She gives the impression of being “a nice girl.”

The case is made more complex when, 2 months later, Linda's father arrives at the police station and declares that Linda has not come back home since the day before, when she went to a party where there was a lot of alcohol. When Linda's parents, accompanied by the police, arrive at the address, 30 to 40 boys and girls run away. Inside, Linda, who is drunk, is getting dressed, and she declares that she has just made love with 10 boys, among them Robert. The police report indicates, according to Linda's declarations, that all the boys pretended that they were Robert. For the boys of her school, Linda had become, since the previous incident, an “easy girl.” They only had to make her drink.

The judge, during her questioning, asks Linda about her school performances, her school marks, her first sexual intercourse, her religious feelings, and so on. All this information documents the inquirer's opinion. Linda is very cooperative in the inquiry, she answers “well” to the questions, she seems to feel guilty. She says that she regrets what she has done, she will not do it again “until she gets married”; the boys have a wrong opinion of her, she says. She protests because now the whole school regards her as a “whore,” because Robert has told everyone that she had completely undressed and then let them do “their own way.” She was not so much denying the act she had committed, Cicourel notes, as worrying about her reputation. The interview shows us that the inquirer has an a priori favorable opinion of Linda. The questions she asks constitute a guide so that Linda can give the “good” answers, which show her will to reform, to make her “accidental” behaviors be forgotten: “Do you think God forgives you? ... So, you think it was wrong? ... Will you wait until you get married? ... Will you change then?” The inquirer seeks also in the parents', and even in the grandparents', lives factors of stability and instability that could be related to Linda's conduct. In later interviews, Linda declares that her father gives her alcoholic drinks at home and has asked her to describe in detail her [p. 59 ↓] sexual experiences with the boys. Thus the

father starts to be suspected of being responsible for what happens to Linda. He is, it is said, very keen on psychology; he has reputedly even once hypnotized Linda. She undergoes various psychological tests. The two investigators working on the case agree to recommend to the court that Linda should be sent to a psychiatric hospital for 3 to 6 months, with intensive therapy, and then should go home. The interviews with Linda and her parents are more numerous, but also with the juvenile judge and with Linda's teachers. The first report of the inquirers tended to criminalize the case. Then the elements about the father progressively made a psychiatric case of Linda. The dialogue occurring during the trial shows that the judge uses, in the file, elements that have already been judged during the interviews that informed the case. The parents accepted the court decision: Linda was sent to a psychiatric hospital, where she spent a month before coming back home. Because no charge was pending against her anymore, she was no longer under probation. Three months later, Linda failed to go back home again after a party.

According to Cicourel, these cases reveal, among other things, how the process of judicial inquiry is dealt with and negotiated. Police officers and judges, like any members of society, do their jobs with “background expectancies and norms of the social structure,” which enable them to decide what is normal and what is not, to distinguish a “good guy” from a “hooligan,” to define “defiance to authority” or what a “good family” is:

The “delinquent” is an emergent product, transformed over time according to a sequence of encounters, oral and written reports, prospective readings, retrospective readings of “what happened,” and the practical circumstances of “settling” matters in everyday agency business. (Cicourel, 1968, p. 333)

Contrary to what seem to indicate the police activity and the judicial statistics, the delinquents are not natural social types that can be encountered. Delinquency is the result of a social negotiation.

Laboratory Life

Ethnomethodology considers that social facts are produced, but people “forget” the practical activities by which they have produced them. Garfinkel and two of his students, Lynch and Livingston, applied these insights to scientific activity (Garfinkel et al., 1981).

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The question of “making science” had already been treated before. The ethnomethodological approach reorients the problems studied in the sociology of science, which had been interested, for instance, in the influence of social factors on scientific discoveries and products. The ethnomethodologists' studies of science do not aim at showing how the social structures act on the scientific activity. They are interested in the scientific activity itself.

Garfinkel and his collaborators described the discovery of the optical pulsar made by four American astrophysicists on January 16, 1969. They analyzed three data sources: a recording of the conversations between the researchers during the night of their discovery, their notebooks, and the publication in a specialized journal of an article giving an account of their results. Garfinkel and his collaborators asked this question: What does the discovery of an optical pulsar consist of? They used a “Gestaltist” metaphor to explain it:

Their discovery and their science consists of astronomically “extracting an animal from the foliage.” The “foliage” is the local historicity of their embodied shop practices. The “animal” is that local historicity done, recognized, and understood as a competent methodic procedure....
Their science consists of the optically discovered pulsar as the procedured practical observability of their ordinary night's work.
(Garfinkel et al., 1981, p. 132)

It is obvious, in the recorded conversations as well as in their notes, but not in the scientific article, that the result is obtained only during a series of historicized observations done in an actual length of time and in a precise order. During

Observations 18, 19, and 20, they had to focus the telescope's objective, adjust the diaphragm size, start the computer program, and check the information given by the oscilloscope so that the pulsation of a star could be recorded during Observations 21, 22, and 23. The pulsation then stops, as the work goes on to a 37th observation. That is precisely the object of their work: We can perceive it through a series of gestures, words, deductions, doubts, uncertainties, or in a state of mental excitement. The scientific work is indeed the object of a localized construction.

To a stranger, their work of discovery appears to be a whole set of competent, analyzable practices. Their discovery consists of extracting [p. 61 ↓] a “cultural object”: the pulsar. But it does not mean, Garfinkel et al. insisted, that this object, the pulsar, is an account; it makes the discovery work accountable: “The pulsar is not to be found in the words, but it cannot be found without them. The pulsar is attached to nature, not the account” (Garfinkel et al., 1981, p. 142). For Garfinkel et al., astronomy, in that it is a “discovering science” of objects of the real world, remains a science of practical action.

For ethnomethodology, the question raised by the sociology of science is therefore no longer to evaluate the sociocultural influences on the researchers, nor to know whether science is a social activity like any other. The aim of ethnomethodology in the scientific field is more ambitious. It seeks to demonstrate that the scientists use, in their research, a certain number of resources that they consider as natural (theories, logical reasoning, and results of past experiments), whose objectified character they forget, and which they no longer relate to the practical laboratory activity that has constructed them. The scientific work can only be transmitted because of this reification, as any scientific article on discoveries can show.

This field of research on science, opened by ethnomethodology, appears to be extremely fruitful and promising. It can, doubtlessly, lead to concrete applications. If we succeed in analyzing the activities through which the researchers find their fundamental results, we are entitled to think that this new understanding can result in greater scientific productivity. In the field of applied sciences and techniques, one can also guess what the object of an ethnomethodological work could be, if we bear in mind a certain number of catastrophes, more or less recent, in which human errors have been detected: nuclear (Three Mile Island and Chernobyl); maritime (oil slicks, North Sea ferry-boat or Black Sea cruiser accidents); airline (Tenerife, Washington, Madrid

plane crashes, among others); and ecological (major chemical pollutions: Bhopal, Seveso, etc.). In this field as well as in others, ethnomethodological research could have implications for training and consequences of prevention.

Bureaucracy

The modern theory of bureaucracy began with Max Weber. But, according to Bittner (1965/1974),

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[Weber] failed to explore the underlying common-sense presuppositions of his theory. He failed to grasp that the meaning and warrant of the inventory of the properties of bureaucracy are inextricably embedded in what Alfred Schütz called the attitudes of everyday life and in socially sanctioned common-sense typifications. (p. 74)

It is not enough, to prove one's birth date, to write it down on a piece of paper, especially if this proof is necessary for the constitution of an administrative file such as one that is required to obtain financial aid, a scholarship, or a pension. It is usually necessary to give a more reliable proof of one's age, when age is a condition of eligibility. As Zimmerman (1969/1974) emphasized, the administration bases its action on objective proof. But what gives a piece of paper official validity? How do its agents attribute to a document sufficient value as proof, and conversely, on what basis do they reject another one, whose content is seemingly identical?

In studying the working processes and the arguments used by a social work agency in a large city in the western United States, Zimmerman noted that for the employees of the agency, the documents often have an obvious character. For them, they are naturally relevant to establish the validity of, for instance, an application form. However, in spite of an existing, precise list of compulsory documents to provide, there are always staff-applicant negotiations entailed in judging the validity of an application form. There is a reciprocal interaction between the routines and the deviations, between the "obvious," unquestioned use of administrative documents and the endless incidents that make

this use observable as part of rational processes. The obvious character of a document depends in fact on the representations that agents and applicants have of the world. Recognizing the obvious character of a document is the sign of the agent's professional competence. When a document is problematic, it is then the occasion of an analysis of the rules and procedures by which the decisions, either refusal or acceptance, are made.

In another publication concerning the same fieldwork, Zimmerman (1970) analyzed the practical application of the rules that agents in charge of information have to follow to direct the public in the various services of the social work agency. They have to judge the problem to efficiently direct people in their transactions. The agents use a whole set of routine rules to do their work. They have to make choices in [p. 63 ↓] “commonsense situations.” The competent use of a particular rule to solve the problem in a “normal” way is based on the agent's understanding of the case. This use, which is the agent's special working knowledge, is based on experience and on a capacity to apply the rules, adjust the rules, or even make up ad hoc rules that permit him or her to treat the cases correctly. This possibility of deviation, and deviation when it occurs, is not the sign of a transgression from the rules but proof of the agent's competence and of a capacity to judge the situation and produce “reasonable” solutions, in light of the rules and of the problem posed.

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