

Ethnomethodology

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BACKGROUND

Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011) studied for a PhD degree with Talcott Parsons at Harvard University while regularly meeting with Alfred Schütz in New York to discuss phenomenology and its import for sociology. In his PhD thesis Garfinkel examined Parsons's and Schütz's theories of reality and came to the conclusion that neither theory was suitable to investigate how actors practically organize the everyday. Garfinkel (2006/1948) used his analysis of Parsons's and Schütz's theories to develop a "sociological attitude" that allows the sociologist to reveal the "practical reasoning" that actors themselves deploy to produce an intersubjective social world. Adopting this attitude, it becomes apparent that intersubjectivity is ephemeral, dynamic, and contingent, produced in social interaction, and not prefigured by material or institutional arrangements.

Ethnomethodology requires a radical shift in perspective from an external observer of social action to the perspective of the participants or members in the situation under scrutiny. This shift in perspective is conceived as an actual, practical adoption of participants' perspectives, rather than as an imaginary act as suggested by symbolic interactionism and other "traditional" sociology. Garfinkel (1967) argues that despite the contingency and dynamics of action and events, the participants themselves produce and experience the social world as orderly

because actions are produced in a methodical and organized way. Ethnomethodology therefore concerns itself with the methods deployed by the participants to make their actions intelligible for each other.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

Garfinkel introduced the term "ethnomethodology" at the annual conference of the American Sociological Association in 1954. He and his colleague, Saul Mendlovitz, used the term in their paper to refer to the methods that jurors used to make their conversations in meetings intelligible as jury deliberations. When Garfinkel developed ethnomethodology further he reinterpreted Émile Durkheim's aphorism, "the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental phenomenon," by taking it literally and shifting the focus to the social and embodied practices through which participants produce "social facts." Ethnomethodology thus has increasingly become what, in 1948, Garfinkel (2006/1948) described as "sociological attitude." By adopting this attitude sociologists explore social action to reveal how participants produce the "concreteness of things" through mutually recognizable social practices. By taking Durkheim's aphorism literally Garfinkel (1996, 2002) contends that the social world is organized and orderly independent from the social-scientific observer. He suggests that ethnomethodology is concerned with investigating in detail how participants continuously recognize and accomplish "immortal ordinary society" (Rawls 2002).

In his doctoral dissertation and in later publications, Garfinkel (1967) uses "tutorial exercises" to uncover the "seen but

unnoticed” features of “socially recognized ‘familiar scenes.’” Sociological textbooks sometimes describe Garfinkel’s exercises as “crisis experiments” because they confront participants with unexpected situations, such as co-participants who break rules in a game without acknowledging it or glasses that visually distort the experience of the environment. These violations of trust have participants doubt the organization of the situation and allow the ethnomethodologist access to the “basic rules” that underpin the social organization of situations. These “basic rules” do not define participants’ actions and therefore do not prefigure the social organization of situations. They are the basis for “background expectancies” that participants deploy when they produce their actions and orient to the actions of others.

A central concern for ethnomethodology is its critique of the sociological presumption that norms and social conventions determine the organization of action. Ethnomethodologists view “rules” as too generic as to be able to guide or even define concrete social action. Rules are not able to completely describe and prefigure the complexities of concrete and specific circumstances. In his analysis of the work of the coding of information, Garfinkel (1967) reveals, for example, that the decisions of coders of information often require ad hoc considerations not mentioned or referred to in the coding instructions.

Having revealed that situations are not governed and prefigured by a normative framework, Garfinkel argues that social order emerges from participants’ methodical production of action. The methodical production of action makes their organization visible and thus generates “familiar scenes.” For example, a group becomes recognizable as a basketball team or a seminar not by virtue of the characteristics of the members or institutional arrangements, but by virtue of how the participants produce their actions,

how they orient to each other’s actions, and how they account for their actions. In other words, a ball game does not become basketball by virtue of a rulebook but by the social practices of playing basketball. The rules only become relevant when participants orient to them, for example, to sanction an action as deviant from the rules.

FEATURES OF THE ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL PROGRAM

From this brief introduction it becomes apparent that “accounts,” “accounting,” and “accountability” are of particular significance for ethnomethodology. Because shock and crisis are exceptional situations, participants are rarely required to account for their action through vocal explanations. Yet, Garfinkel (1967, 2002) argues that accountability is a feature of each and every action. Due to their visibility, audibility, and so on, actions are “observable and reportable,” that is, “accountable.” It can be explained why they have been produced in a particular way at a particular moment. In other words, the production and design of particular actions are expected to occur in a particular moment and, therefore, embody an “orderliness” that becomes observable and a resource for co-participants to orient to and align with (Garfinkel 2002, 2006/1948).

Ethnomethodology distances itself from sociological approaches that conceive “social order” as based on a normative order that defines or prefigures the organization of social action. Garfinkel thereby takes aim at “traditional” sociology that in light of the analysis of Talcott Parsons develops and deploys analytic models of social action to arrive at *objective* and *generalizable* propositions about the social world. In his view, this kind of sociology considers the social world as messy and disorganized and requires the

use of theories, concepts, or typologies to generate scientific descriptions that show the organization of society. Such scientific descriptions rely on theoretical models that prefigure and structure the outcome of the studies to guarantee the generalizability of the findings. From this kind of sociological perspective, theoretical preconceptions coupled with social-scientific methods of data collection and analysis are necessary to be able to create a body of (social-)scientific knowledge that can claim superiority over the participants' knowledge.

Garfinkel pursues a program of research that aims to reveal the social order in the contingency and complexity of the social world. He argues that the dynamic and ever changing features of the social world are ignored by a sociology that relies on preconceived theoretical models that have nothing or little in common with participants' in situ experience of this world. Rather than arriving at objective and generalizable propositions about the social world, ethnomethodological studies produce propositions that describe the *indexical* properties of objects and events. The ethnomethodological interest in the "indexical" and "contingent" is problematic for "traditional" sociology as it does not conform to its concern with generalizability.

"Traditional" sociology describes the social world by using theoretical concepts and models that allow for comparison between phenomena across different groups. Ethnomethodology challenges the adequacy of sociological descriptions that rely on preconceived theories and concepts of the social world as they necessarily differ from the concrete experience that participants have of the social world. The purpose of ethnomethodological studies has always been to avoid creating a new scientific reality, but instead generate analyses and descriptions that are relevant to the participants whose actions are subject to scrutiny. Garfinkel and Wieder

(1992) introduce "unique adequacy" as a key quality of ethnomethodological descriptions. To arrive at such descriptions, in an ideal case, ethnomethodologists acquire the skills and competencies of participants in the respective fields of research. They take an *emic perspective* in the strictest sense and produce descriptions that reveal the organization of social action from the participants' point of view. Examples for ethnomethodological studies that produce uniquely adequate descriptions of social practice are, among many others, Stacy Burns's (1997) examination of "practicing law," David Sudnow's (1979) "ways of the hand," and Kenneth Liberman's (2007) studies of Tibetan philosophical culture. These ethnomethodologists who follow the hard definition of the unique adequacy criterion undergo training in the domain they are studying to acquire the skills and competencies that allow them to produce adequate descriptions of the social practices under scrutiny. This complete involvement in a population, in order to understand the organization of its social action firsthand, is one of the ways in which ethnomethodological research is being undertaken.

Garfinkel's (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology* shows the breadth of methods that he applies to pursue his research interests. At the center of his studies is always a concern with the reflexive constitution of order in situations. This concern requires an understanding of "reflexivity" that differs from sociology and social theory where for long there has been an interest in how knowledge, power, and agency reflect on action. Ethnomethodologists have criticized this concept of reflexivity as it relies on the assumption that meaning is a stable property of "objects," such as symbols, words, or physical things, rather than emerging from the *reflexive* relationship between action and context. They highlight that in their argumentation sociologists overlook that their accounts themselves also emerge within and

contribute to specific rather than to generic circumstances (Wilson and Zimmerman 1979).

Garfinkel's (1967) examination of jury deliberation in court illustrates well the ethnomethodological concept of reflexivity. In his analysis Garfinkel explains how in the course of their deliberations jurors discuss and argue about material and evidence submitted to and statements made in court. Garfinkel shows how these discussions and arguments become recognizable as jury deliberations, rather than as meetings of any other group of people. Thus he demonstrates the reflexive relationship between the participants' actions and the organization and proceedings of their meetings.

The reflexive constitution of meetings as jury deliberations through the participants' action also reveals another ethnomethodological observation, namely that for such groups the presence of particular people is not constitutive for their existence. They are *phenomena of order* that become intelligible as such, not by virtue of the people present but through social action. Other examples of such *endogenous populations* are waiting queues or traffic jams. The analysis of how these populations are constituted requires the researcher to become fully involved in the action, that is, join a traffic jam, wait in line, or become a pedestrian crossing a road, in order to experience the production of the actions' organization firsthand because only then the reflexive relationship between participants' actions and the organization of the phenomenon can be grasped.

The phenomenon of order that Garfinkel (2002) talks about in his writings is reflexively produced in and through the participants' actions. It can be observed wherever participants organize their action with others. For the researcher it is critical to understand that the participants themselves analyze the situation in situ and produce and design

their action in response to it. Becoming a member of a population is one way in which ethnomethodologists study phenomena of order.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY AND CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Another form of ethnomethodological research, and probably the most widely known one, is conversation analysis (CA). It has emerged from a cooperation between Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks who jointly examined audio recordings of conversation to reveal what they (1970) called "formal structures of practical action." Over the past few decades CA has been further developed by Sacks (1992), who unfortunately passed away in 1975, Emanuel Schegloff (2007), and others to a field of research in its own right.

CA is not a research method like content analysis or survey methods. It does not aim to produce descriptions from the perspective of a social-scientific observer, but it is a method to reveal how the participants themselves organize their talk, that is, how they make the organization of talk "observable-and-reportable." In this sense, the participants themselves are conversation analysts. The ethnomethodological researcher uses audio recording or later audio/video recording of naturally occurring interaction and examines in detail the production and design of actions, including even minute, seemingly unimportant vocalizations or pauses in talk. The analysis reveals the "sequential organization" of talk and shows how the meaning of an action, that is, an utterance, is indexically linked to the interactional context in which it is produced.

The analysis of talk proceeds on a "case-by-case" basis and involves the detailed inspection of particular actions and their

emergence within an interactional environment. It thereby examines the immediate context of an utterance, its specific location and character. The purpose of the analysis is to unpack the interactional environment of specific utterances and explicate how in particular circumstances participants come to accomplish a common sense of what it is they are currently concerned with. Actions are not seen to arise within a stable context but they are considered to be at the same time shaped by the context in which they are produced and renew the context in and through their production (Heritage 1984).

In light of developments in other social-scientific fields, ethnomethodologists, since the 1980s, have increasingly become interested in bodily, material, and visual action. This is reflected in a shift in Garfinkel's writing who in his analyses more prominently than before, took into consideration bodily aspects of participants' action and experience. Some of the tutorial exercises discussed in his *Ethnomethodology's Program* (Garfinkel 2002), for example, require participants to reflect on their bodily being and acting in the world; for example, in one of these exercises he asked participant to pour water in a cup while wearing lenses that show the world upside down.

The growing ethnomethodological interest in the body and the material and visual environment is reflected also in the growth in studies using the analytic and methodological framework developed in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis for the examination of audio/video data. These studies begin with the examination of participants' talk by deploying techniques from conversation analysis before turning to participants' bodily, visual, and material action and analyzing their emergence in relationship to the talk (Goodwin 1981; Heath 1986). While CA often had to make assumptions

about people's bodily, material, and visual actions, the use of audio/video recording provides access to the fine detailed organization of situations. It allows the researcher to reveal how nonvocal action is produced in relationship to the talk; for example, referential talk can be examined in how it is organized with respect to the production and design of gesture (Hindmarsh and Heath 2000). Thus, as with talk before, the researcher's principal concern is the unpacking of short sequences of interaction to reveal how participants accomplish "intersubjectivity," such as the momentary simultaneous orientation to the same object in the same way (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010).

When conducting their research, be it as participants to understand phenomena of order firsthand or as analysts of recorded data, ethnomethodologists never begin their analysis with theoretical concerns, concepts, or models but remain "indifferent" (Garfinkel 1967) to the existing social-scientific corpus. Ethnomethodological studies also are indifferent to the participants' attitude and orientation with regard to practical or political problems with which they are dealing in a situation (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). Instead, at the heart of ethnomethodological studies is the question of how the phenomenon of order is constituted in and through the participants' action. They investigate how participants themselves systematically and methodically produce and design their action moment by moment.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY AND SOCIAL THEORY

This focus on the participants' perspective and the ethnomethodological indifference to sociological and social theory has led to the critique that ethnomethodology has

nothing meaningful to contribute to discussion about theory and theory development. From the start of the development of the ethnomethodological program in the 1940s, however, Garfinkel (2006/1948) showed strong interest in theory. Yet, the emphasis on the problem of sociological description (Sacks 1963) or social order, and therewith the shift in perspective to the theories and methods that participants deploy to constitute phenomena of order, not surprisingly have rattled sociologists and caused sometimes hostile responses to the ethnomethodological program.

One of the key contributions of ethnomethodology to social theory lies in the re-specification of reflexivity as the foundational feature of social action. It reveals that phenomena sociology is concerned with the reflexivity of interaction between people. Inevitably, the meaning that sociologists ascribe to these phenomena is related to the meaning the participants themselves ascribe to them (see Wilson and Zimmerman 1979). When conducting sociological research, it is critical that the analysis recognizes this relationship and makes sure it is reflected in the sociological descriptions it produces (Lynch 2000; Macbeth 2001).

While “traditional” sociology often differentiates its theories of society from the theories that participants themselves bring to bear in their action and interaction, ethnomethodology contributes to sociology analyses of how participants themselves continuously “theorize” (Blum 1974) and examine situations, produce action, and, thus, bring about society. Participants can accomplish social organization because they deploy their everyday or mundane reasoning when producing appropriate action. They themselves are analysts of the situations they are in, and therefore do not need sociologists to theorize on their behalf about the

organization of the social world (Helm 1989; Wilson and Zimmerman 1979).

For ethnomethodology, therefore, social theory is not an abstract endeavor but it derives from concrete moments in which participants produce social order. Ethnomethodologists produce sociological descriptions that are relevant not only to a sociological audience but also and in particular to the participants themselves who accomplish the social order. By providing participants with detailed descriptions of the social order, ethnomethodologists allow them to reflect on the social theories they deploy and use to account for their social action.

SEE ALSO: Conversation Analysis; Durkheim, Émile; Garfinkel, Harold; Parsons, Talcott; Schutz, Alfred; Social Interaction

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