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What was radical about Ethnomethodology? A look back to the 1970s

Ethnomethodology was invented by Harold Garfinkel: both the name and the distinctive approach to the study of social life to which it refers (see Garfinkel 1968:5-11). We might note that there is a contrast here with Comte's invention of sociology since, while he was the first to use that term (in print in 1839), in many respects what he proposed was not radically different from what is to be found in the writings of Saint-Simon and Condorcet. Indeed, histories of sociology often go back even beyond these writers; for example Aron (1969) begins with Montesquieu. In the case of Garfinkel, however, ethnomethodology is a line of thinking and a form of practice invented by him that is strikingly at odds with all previous types of social inquiry.

Of course, ethnomethodology did not emerge out of nothing. In crude terms, we can say that it was the result of combining a focus on the concept of social order, derived from Parsons, with a phenomenological conception of the task of rigorous inquiry, while also drawing – for both issues and resources – on contemporaneous forms of empirical research in sociology. While combining elements from these sources, Garfinkel modified each of them in significant ways.

In the case of Parsons' work, this involved a re-specification of the problem of social order as necessarily grounded in people's capacity to make sense of one another's behaviour and to produce actions that are intelligible to others. Parsons had taken for granted the intelligibility of social actions, focusing instead on the motivational question of why people conform to social norms and values, rather than pursuing impulses and interests that conflict with these. Garfinkel insisted that social order is produced and sustained in and through mundane action, that this generates both intelligibility and morality.

In the case of phenomenology, Garfinkel drew on the work of Schutz and Gurwitsch as well as on that of Husserl. But here too there was a 're-specification': where Husserl treated the meaning that people find in the world as constituted in and through processes of individual cognition, albeit on the basis of transcendently given essences, Garfinkel argued that the intelligibility of the social world stems from shared methods by which people both display what they are doing in a way that is 'accountable' and read others' actions as having been produced to be accountable; in other words, as actions of

particular kinds having relatively clear purposes and rationales. In this he draws particularly on Schutz, who moved away from a focus on individual cognition towards recognition of intersubjectively shared practices designed to establish a reciprocity of perspectives. Also drawn from phenomenology, though from Mannheim too, was an emphasis on the importance of recognising temporality: that the sense we make of the world is developed over time, prospectively as well as retrospectively.

Finally, the empirical sociological work of the 1940s in which Garfinkel was involved, and with which he was familiar, initially provided contexts and methods by which, and in relation to which, his phenomenologically-influenced concern with social order as intelligibility could be pursued. Much of his early work was concerned with problems that arose in such work, for example in coding records or in using data produced by bureau officials. In addition, Garfinkel deployed informal experiments, perhaps modelled on some of those in small group research at the time, to reveal the practices in which people engage so as to make sense of situations, even when these have been intentionally disrupted.

Despite his reliance on these sources, as already noted, the line of argument Garfinkel developed about the sources of social order, as well as the mode of inquiry he proposed and practised, was significantly different from any previous social science. So, this is the fundamental sense in which ethnomethodology might be seen as a radical departure.¹ To take what may appear to be the closest stars in the galaxy, while he shared with Simmel a focus on the mundane aspects of social life, Garfinkel's approach was quite different in character, and much the same can be said in relation to Goffman, his contemporary, who shared that focus and drew directly on the work of Simmel.²

In order to elaborate on the sense in which ethnomethodology can be judged to have been radical, I will draw particularly on Zimmerman and Pollner's (1970) early article 'The everyday world as a phenomenon'. These authors had been students of Garfinkel, and in this article they present

¹ In the case of his breaching experiments, here was a sociologist *instigating* social disorganisation, rather than studying it with a view to finding a remedy for it. In the 1970s this was misguidedly taken by some as a form of political radicalism.

² Simmel offers an interesting comparison, since his work differed in key respects from much other nineteenth century social science, though in his case too we can, of course, identify the sources from which it arose.

themselves as following the course set by him, and by Sacks. Of course, there may be respects in which they re-interpreted or extended ethnomethodology in distinctive ways, but their article is an unusually detailed and clear presentation of the case for ethnomethodology, and one that was extremely influential at the time.

Their central point is stated in a dramatic opening section:

In contrast to the perennial argument that sociology belabors the obvious, we propose that sociology has yet to treat the obvious as a phenomenon. We argue that the world of everyday life, while furnishing sociology with its favoured topics of inquiry, is seldom a topic in its own right. Instead, the familiar, common-sense world, shared by the sociologist and his subjects alike, is employed as an unexplicated resource for contemporary sociological investigations. (pp80-1)

And in a footnote they present the work of Schutz, Garfinkel, and Sacks as their point of departure, describing this as ‘being directed precisely to the task of making the world of everyday life available to inquiry as a phenomenon in its own right’.

At face value, what seems to be being proposed here is a new area of investigation for sociology, one that has previously been neglected: the study of ‘everyday life’. However, it was much more than this. Along with the work of Goffman, ethnomethodology amounted to a challenge to the prevailing ‘news values’ within the discipline. From the nineteenth century onwards these had been structured around social problems, primarily those generated by the new forms that Western societies were taking in the wake of commercialism, industrialisation, and democratisation. Even Parsons’ abstract attempt to formulate the central problem of sociology as that of social order was, in effect, a reformulation of an earlier focus on the dangers of social disorganisation and the need for social control (Carey 1975): for Parsons the opposite of order was conflict and violence, very evident features of Western society at the time he was writing (Gerhardt 2011).

The call for a sociology of everyday life took a range of forms in the 1960s and early 70s, often stimulated as much by the work of Goffman as by that of Garfinkel (see Psathas 1980). Where other interactionist work had focused on ‘social problems’, such as various forms of deviance, or on types of occupational work, Goffman was primarily concerned with processes of face-to-

face interaction and their organisation in mundane settings. This was sometimes criticised as a turn away from sociology towards social psychology, and as reflecting the ethos of the 1960s, with its individualism and emphasis on personal freedom and identity. In fact, the work of both Goffman and Garfinkel predated this cultural trend. Nevertheless, it was true that what was involved here was the thematising of issues that were marginal, at best, in terms of the main framework within which sociology operated.

There was another kind of radicalism involved in some of this work on everyday life, including ethnomethodology, besides its attempted reorientation of sociology's 'news values'. This was that it challenged the claims of social scientists, whether functionalists or Marxists, to have superior knowledge about the social world to that of lay people. In much of this work there was an emphasis on the rationality and sophistication of ordinary people's perspectives and the need to explore these. It was pointed out that social scientists often do little more than selectively translate commonsense ideas into what purport to be novel and superior understandings of social events, dismiss the commonsense views they do not accept as false, and then – to rub salt into the wounds – explain away these views in terms of ignorance and ideology. However, there were important differences between ethnomethodology and other work on everyday life, these heightening the radical challenge to conventional sociology it posed.

One aspect of this is signalled in the quotation from Zimmerman and Pollner I used earlier, particularly their claim that 'the familiar, common-sense world, shared by the sociologist and his subjects alike, is employed as an *unexplicated* resource for contemporary sociological investigations' (pp80-1, my emphasis). I have italicised the word 'unexplicated' here because its implication is that reliance on unexplicated resources is problematic. In their article, Zimmerman and Pollner also formulate this point by suggesting that conventional sociology confounds topic and resource: it studies the social world but at the same time relies on it for essential resources in doing this. They write that:

Sociology's acceptance of the lay member's formulation of the formal and substantive features of sociology's topical concerns makes sociology an integral feature of the very order of affairs it seeks to describe. It makes sociology into an eminently folk discipline deprived of any prospect or hope of making fundamental structures of folk activity a

phenomenon. Insofar as the social structures are treated as a given rather than as an accomplishment, one is subscribing to a lay inquirer's version of those structures. The 'givens' of professional inquiry, the fundamental availability of the social structures to study as such, are then coterminous with the 'givens' of lay inquiry. (p82)

This charge is reiterated later in their article, they write that: '[...] sociology apparently is in the position of providing a professional folklore about the society that, however sophisticated, remains folklore' (p93). They insist on the need for a 'principled respect for the distinction between the world of common sense as a resource and the world of common sense as a topic', implying thereby that conventional sociology is unprincipled in this respect (p84).

While Zimmerman and Pollner do not spell out exactly why relying on unexplicated resources is a problem, it was not difficult at the time to understand the implications of their argument. Indeed their characterisation of sociology as a 'folk discipline' gives the hint. The predominant methodological views within sociology in the 1950s and 60s were what could be broadly described as positivist, and a key element was the idea that scientific knowledge is founded on empirical givens accessed by scientists employing objective methods. This necessarily implied a contrast with the informal and 'subjective' modes of perception and cognition of non-scientists, of 'ordinary folk'. To show, as Zimmerman and Pollner go on to do (pp86-92; see also Cicourel 1964), that, in practice, sociologists rely on commonsense knowledge and members' methods for making sense of the world, amounts to critique, in the sense of documenting the failure of sociology at the time to live up to the precepts that were its scientific credentials. If it could also be shown that what is wrong here is not simply a technical problem that can be resolved by better methods or by more effective use of existing ones, that in fact sociology could *never* match those precepts, then the rationale for sociology as a science (in the prevailing positivist terms) has been undercut.

A central element of Garfinkel's work was taken to provide the grounds for just this claim. He argued that the meaning of social actions is indexical, in other words context-dependent. By contrast, conventional social science assumes that questionnaire and interview responses, behaviour in experiments, or in the case of ethnography actions in natural settings, can be treated as having determinable meanings that will serve as fixed indicators of attitudes, perspectives, strategies, etc that govern behaviour in other contexts. In other

words, it effectively ignores the indexicality of meaning, neglecting the work that necessarily goes into constituting actions and situations as what they are on specific occasions. As a result, so the argument went, it cannot ever live up to its claims.

There was a further, even more important, sense in which ethnomethodology was radical. It was not simply an internal critique of positivist sociology but put forward its own rather different conception of rigorous inquiry, and of what the task of sociology should be.³ This is signalled in the title of Zimmerman and Pollner's article: 'The everyday world as a phenomenon' and the claim that Garfinkel's work had made this world available for study. The allusion to phenomenology here was of great importance since there is a strong analogy between the commitment of that form of philosophy to examining how phenomena appear as the things that they are in our experience and Garfinkel's concern with how social phenomena are constituted in and through social interaction. Zimmerman and Pollner (1970:94-5) note how ethnomethodology involves a suspension of the natural attitude, adopting a study policy according to which any social situation is viewed as an 'occasioned corpus of setting features'. And they add that: 'We underscore the occasioned character of the corpus in contrast to a corpus of member's knowledge, skill, and belief standing prior to and independent of any actual occasion in which such knowledge, skill, and belief is displayed or recognised' (p94). Reiterating the point later they write that: 'thus, for the purpose of analysis, a setting's features [...] are not independent of, and cannot be detached from, the situated work through and by which they are made notable and observable' (p96). What is involved here is, then, a radical indexicality.

Where Husserl sought to identify the *essences* that enabled the identification of phenomena as phenomena of particular types, Garfinkel was concerned with documenting the *methods* by which people both make sense of social phenomena as what they are and display their understandings and intentions through their actions, thereby generating orderly institutional patterns of behaviour. Husserl insisted that phenomenological philosophy employs a process of description that was very different from that of natural science but which was equally rigorous. In parallel, Garfinkel, Sacks, and others proposed

³ In fact, there were important parallels between positivism and phenomenology in the early twentieth century, brought to a sophisticated synthesis in the work of Felix Kaufmann (1944), a book to which Garfinkel makes frequent reference.

that the task of sociology, if it is to be a science, should be rigorous description of the phenomena of everyday life as constituted in and through social activity.

What this required was not only at odds with the predominant quantitative methods within sociology but even with the modes of investigation employed by Goffman and others also interested in investigating the world of everyday life. In much of Garfinkel's early work the strategy employed was to deploy conventional research methods, but to pay attention to the problems and anomalies involved in their use, not least in the assumptions they make about the people being studied. And this strategy was also used in ethnographic studies by some of his students, notably by Wieder (1974a and b) in 'Telling the Convict Code'.

Meanwhile, Sacks provided a parallel, equally radical, approach to the study of social phenomena, employing newly available portable audio-recording machines to record talk, both telephone conversations generated by calls to help lines and ordinary conversation. As part of this he put forward a challenging methodological proposal: that for analysis to be rigorous the data must be available to readers so that they can assess its validity for themselves. Indeed, he drew a parallel between this and replication in natural science. Here, again, the implications for conventional forms of sociology were clear: since they cannot meet this requirement, the methods they employ are not rigorous.

Zimmerman and Pollner emphasise that while any corpus of setting features is occasioned, in the sense of being unique to the occasion, the methods by which such corpuses are assembled are trans-contextual, with the task of ethnomethodology being to document these methods. They write that:

Accordingly, from the point of view of the analyst, the features of the setting as they are known and attended to by members are unique to the particular setting in which they are made observable. Any feature of a setting – its perceived regularity, purposiveness, typicality – is conceived as the accomplishment of the work done in and on the occasion of that feature's recognition. The practices through which a feature is displayed and detected, however, are assumed to display invariant properties across settings whose substantive features they make observable. It is to the discovery of these practices and their invariant properties that inquiry is to be addressed. (p95)

Later Garfinkel seems to have abandoned the notion of trans-contextual methods (see Wilson 2003), perhaps because these would necessarily take the form of rules that would themselves need to be applied in an *ad hoc* fashion, their meaning lying in their use rather than in any abstract formulation. But, aside from this, Zimmerman and Pollner emphasise that the situational features that are selected and brought together in a corpus must be treated as only existing in and through that process. They write that: ‘The features of that society, from this perspective, are to be found nowhere else, and in no other way, than in and upon those occasions of members’ work, lay and professional, through which those features are made available’ (p100). This carries a further radical implication: that the social world is continually being recreated on particular occasions. This is an occasionalism that is at least as radical as that of Malebranche or Berkeley, albeit of a very different character. In the late 1960s and early 70s, this too was sometimes seen as carrying radical *political* implications.⁴

In summary, then, what was radical about early ethnomethodology was that it put forward a new form of inquiry that challenged the prevailing ‘news values’ of sociology, questioned social scientists’ claims to superior knowledge, demonstrated that the dominant sociological approach at the time could not meet its own requirements, proposed a rival form of rigorous inquiry of a very different sort, and seemed to imply a radically occasionalist ontology. As I have hinted, it was also sometimes seen as politically radical, not just in epistemological and ontological terms.

Ethnomethodology’s claims to radicalism are, then, beyond question. Of course, whether these claims are justified is another matter.

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⁴ This ‘occasionalism’ is another point at which different interpretations within ethnomethodology can arise. Whereas Pollner’s later work came close to a version of constructionism, other ethnomethodologists have distanced themselves from this, see

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