

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

NO.10 - Ethnomethodology

INTRODUCTION

The term "ethnomethodology" was first coined by Harold Garfinkel in 1967 for the study of methods used by individuals to construct and give meaning to the social world. It is associated in sociology with the approach of phenomenology (eg: Edmund Husserl 1859-1938; Alfred Schutz 1899-1959 ¹).

The emphasis in phenomenology is upon the meanings of individual in the social world rather than to explain the social world itself as in many other sociological approaches. Individuals experience the world through their senses and classify these experiences into "phenomena" (common patterns or characteristics). Thus it is not about objective reality, but how the individual has "bracketed" reality (an "interpretive reality").

However, the process of classification is not completely individual, but is shared by members of society through language. Schutz called the classifications, "typifications" (varying from objects like "chairs" to concepts like "justice"). The typifications together produce the "common-sense knowledge" of the community or society.

Society functions on the basis of shared assumptions. For example, white Americans categorise four annual seasons, while the Abernake Native Americans (from north east USA) describe eighteen ².

The objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary, artful ways of that accomplishment being by members known, used and taken for granted is a fundamental phenomenon ³.

¹ Husserl, E (1931) Ideas, London: Allen & Unwin; Schutz, A (1962) Collected Papers (vol 1), Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff; Schutz, A (1932/1972) The Phenomenology of the Social World, London: Heinemann.

² O'Donnell p508.

³ Garfinkel, H (1967) Studies in Ethnomethodology, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall pII.

Shared knowledge gives the illusion of stability and order in society. Though common-sense knowledge changes with social interactions, and is unique to each individual.

We expect others to know what we are talking about, to see what we are seeing. But we also take it for granted that the ways we are involved in this common world are, at least in some respects, particular to us ⁴.

Ethnomethodology is interested in studying such knowledge. It is studying "how members of society go about the task of seeing, describing, and explaining order in the world in which they live" ⁵.

The aim is:

to analyse the methods, or procedures, that people use for conducting the different affairs that they accomplish in their daily lives. Ethnomethodology is the analysis of the ordinary methods that people use to realise their ordinary actions ⁶.

For ethnomethodologists, the researcher is using this process in the same way as an ordinary person in society. Thus, the job of the researcher is to understand and describe how individuals make sense of the world, not what causes social processes and behaviour. It is also certainly not about giving "definitive descriptions" of the social world.

A key idea within ethnomethodology is the "local production of social order". This is the idea that social life is the product of an individual's understanding of the situation, which can accept some features as "normal" (eg: roles). But, at the same time, interactions are ongoing and changeable. Social situations are both the product and the process of the actors involved. Individuals can both perceive the social situation as constraining them as well as being free to behave differently. It is not about right or wrong interpretations, but how individual perceive and construct the situation.

⁴ Cuff et al p169.

⁵ Zimmerman, D.H & Weider, D.L (1971) Ethnomethodology and the problem of order. In Douglas, J.D (ed) Understanding Everyday Life, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

⁶ Coulon, J (1995) Ethnomethodology (vol 36), London: Sage p1.

HAROLD GARFINKEL

Harold Garfinkel ⁷ noted the use of the "documentary method" in everyday life. The individual selects certain aspects of the situation, and defines them to give evidence of underlying patterns. Aspects of the situation or events are treated as "the document of" or "standing on behalf of" a "presupposed underlying pattern". Then particular instances of the underlying pattern are used to confirm that pattern. This method is classed as "reflexive":

Members of society constantly look at particular activities and situations in terms of patterns by referring to particular expressions of them in activities and situations ⁸.

Individuals are, thus, not only making sense of the social world, but constructing it at the same time.

Garfinkel used an example of an experiment with university students in the USA to show the "documentary method" at work. Students were invited to speak to a counsellor about their problems via an intercom. Unknown to the students, the answers of the counsellor were random responses of "yes" and "no" to questions from the students.

However, afterwards the students felt that the counsellor's answers had made sense and were helpful. In other words, the students had imposed their order and sense on to a situation of no order or sense.

Garfinkel also talked about the concept of "indexicality". The sense of any event or activity is based upon a particular situation. In the experiment above, the sense of the counsellor's answers were indexed in the belief that the counsellor must know what they are talking about. The same answers would be viewed differently if given by a non-expert.

Garfinkel ⁹ is often remembered for his encouragement for the disruption of the social world. One way to study social processes is to challenge the everyday roles that are taken for granted. For example, a customer goes into a shop and says to the shopkeeper, "Can I help you?" Such

⁷ op cit Garfinkel (1967).

⁸ Haralambos & Holborn p900.

⁹ Garfinkel, H (1972) Studies in the routine grounds of everyday activities. In Sudnow, D (ed) Studies in Social Interaction, New York: Free Press.

disruption of social rules tends to produce a negative response.

Such behaviour that is "out of place" is challenging, and needs to be categorised, for example, as "odd" or "foreign".

As members, we find the social world to be orderly, not because we treat every occasion - or every person - as the same, but because we make sense of the particularities and contingencies of occasions as knowable and accountable ¹⁰.

EXAMPLES OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH

ATKINSON AND SUICIDE

J.Maxwell Atkinson ¹¹ studied how US coroners make sense of unnatural deaths to define them as suicide. Rather than there being "social facts" about death (ie: suicide or not), Atkinson was interested in how deaths become categorised as suicide.

Atkinson interviewed coroners, attended inquests, and observed coroner's officers at work as part of the research. He found that coroners had a common-sense theory of suicide, and deaths that fit this category are labelled as suicide. Relevant aspects of the decision process include:

- i) the presence of a suicide note;
- ii) certain types of death - eg: drowning, hanging, gassing, and drug overdoses, but not road deaths;
- iii) circumstances of the death - eg: a gas death was viewed as suicide if the windows and doors had been blocked in the place of death;
- iv) biography of deceased - eg: recent traumatic events, like divorce.

In other words, the coroners are comparing a particular case to a "typical suicide". Though the typical characteristics may be statistical common, the coroner is still making an interpretation of the event based on a set of common-sense assumptions.

In a number of cases of unnatural death, there is

¹⁰ Cuff et al p178.

¹¹ Atkinson, J.M (1978) Societal reaction to suicide. In Cohen (ed) Discovering Suicide, London: Macmillan.

ambiguity about the death, through a lack of suicide note, for example, and the decision of the coroner, in a position of power, defines the event for society. However, relatives or friends may contest the conclusion of the coroner.

ZIMMERMAN AND BUREAUCRACY

Don.H.Zimmerman ¹² studied how individuals made sense of their behaviour in the context of specific rules, and, in this case, the bureaucracy of the US Bureau of Public Assistance.

In particular, Zimmerman studied the receptionist whose job was to allocate clients to caseworkers following a clear set of rules. For example, clients were allocated in numerical order to each caseworker. But Zimmerman found that the receptionist would change the process to speed it up. The justification for the breaking of the rules was to make the process more efficient, but, in reality, it was about the appearance of order.

Zimmerman argued that if social settings appear as they should, in terms of making sense, this matters more than following the actual rules. As long as clients are seen by caseworkers, it does matter how the allocation process works. The receptionist themselves saw their behaviour of breaking the actual rule as evidence of supporting the rule (ie: the intent of the rule).

OTHER EXAMPLES OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH

1. Aaron.V.Cicourel ¹³ studied the treatment of delinquents in two Californian cities. Who is arrested and charged depends on whether the individual fits the category of "typical delinquent" by police, and the courts. It is a "process of negotiation" between all the participants.

2. Kessler and McKenna ¹⁴: gender attribution at birth, particularly in cases of genital ambiguity.

3. Michael Lynch ¹⁵: study of lab researchers collecting animal brain specimens, and how artefacts (mistakes) are defined.

¹² Zimmerman, D.H (1971) The practicalities of rule use. In Douglas, J.D (ed) Understanding Everyday Life, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

¹³ Cicourel, A.V (1976) The Social Organisation of Juvenile Justice, London: Heinemann.

¹⁴ Kessler, S.J & McKenna, W (1978) Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach, New York: Wiley.

¹⁵ Lynch, M (1985) Art and Artefact in Lab Science, London: Routledge.

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS (CA)

Ethnomethodology makes use of CA to study the detail of talk, and how individuals make sense of the world through conversation. Conversations are recorded and transcribed to show the detailed process of social interactions, and particularly that talk is specific to the occasion, co-participant, and topic of discussion.

Essentially, conversation analysis aims to show how meanings and representations in discourse are produced through the structures, procedures and practices of talk ¹⁶.

The achievement of CA is:

to demonstrate in detailed and elegant ways how conversational organisation involves powerful general structures which are highly "context sensitive"; in and through these structures conversationalists build conversations which are not, in themselves, general, but particular and specific to their local social circumstances ¹⁷.

Topics of interest in conversation include turn-taking ¹⁸, closing conversations, introducing topics, asking questions, and making requests.

EXAMPLE OF CA ¹⁹

1A: Are you coming tonight?
1B: Can I bring a guest?
2A: Sure
2B: I'll be there

This brief interaction shows how much information is transmitted in such a situation, both explicitly and implicitly. For example, 1A is both a factual question (explicit meaning) and an invitation (implicit meaning). 1B is a question which is a conditional response to 1A.

Technically, 1B and 2A are known as an "insertion sequence" ²⁰, which temporarily suspends the question of

¹⁶ Forrester p38.

¹⁷ Cuff et al p186.

¹⁸ Sack, H; Schegloff, E & Jefferson, G (1974) A simplest systematics for the organisation of turn-taking in conversation, *Language*, 50, 696-735.

¹⁹ Schegloff, E (1972) Notes on conversational practice: formulating place. In Sudnow, D (ed) *Studies in Social Interaction*, New York: Free Press

²⁰ Cuff et al.

1A. The whole interaction is both specific to what is said, but also general in terms of normal behaviour.

1B could also be seen as a way to deal with the ambiguity of 1A's meaning. 1A could be asking for a date. While 2A confirms the social acceptability of 1B, and removes any ambiguity.

SOURCES

Cuff, E.C; Sharrock, W.W & Francis, D.W (1990) Perspectives in Sociology (3rd ed), London: Routledge

Forrester, M (1999) Conversation analysis: a reflexive methodology for critical psychology, Annual Review of Critical Psychology, 1, 34-49

Haralambos, M & Holborn, M (1995) Sociology: Themes and Perspectives (4th ed), London: Collins

O'Donnell, M (1992) A New Introduction to Sociology (3rd ed), London: Thomas Nelson

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

NO.1 - EMILE DURKHEIM (1858-1917)	April 2003
NO.2 - BASIC GENETICS	May 2003
NO.3 - QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGNS	May 2003
NO.4 - CLINICAL TRIALS	May 2003
NO.5 - BASIC PHARMACOKINETICS	May 2003
NO.6 - POST-MODERNITY AND GLOBALISATION	May 2003
NO.7 - EPIDEMIOLOGY	July 2003
NO.8 - SOCIAL STRATIFICATION	November 2003
NO.9 - SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM	January 2004
NO.10 - ETHNOMETHODOLOGY	April 2004

AUTHOR: Kevin Brewer

ISSN No: 1740-4444

Orsett Psychological Services
PO Box 179
Grays
Essex
RM16 3EW
orsettpsychologicalservices@phoncoop.coop

Psychology is an ever-growing subject area, and it overlaps with many other subjects, like sociology, medicine, and biology. Orsett Briefing Papers for Psychologists offers short summaries of different topics in subjects outside psychology that can be useful to psychologists.