

THE FORUM

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Ethnomethodology and Education: Possibilities

Ethnomethodology has always presented something of a conundrum to social scientists. Since the early sixties the work of Harold Garfinkel, Aaron Cicourel and other ethnomethodologists has been read as offering a thoroughgoing critique of the possibility of meeting the canons and objectives of logical positivist science. When empiricists have reacted at all positively, they have demanded of ethnomethodology to show how positivist studies could be improved. And ethnomethodologists, generally, have answered either "you can't get there from here," or "there is not a place you should want to go."

The truth of the matter is that ethnomethodology seeks a level of analysis, and is concerned with orders of phenomena, which are fundamentally different, for the most part, from those which animate positivist and interpretivist social sciences. Yet in the study of these orders of phenomena, call them practical reasoning and activity organization, ethnomethodologists have come to see limits to any inquiry which presupposes knowledge of these phenomena, but does not study them. And, of course, most social science depends on some knowledge of how we reason and organize activities. This is strikingly true for those social sciences which take education as a topic.

Yes, but what is ethnomethodology?

There has been a small controversy amongst those who teach ethnomethodology, as to how Garfinkel's seminal work, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, ought to be read. One group believes firmly that the first chapter, "What is Ethnomethodology?" could not be understood by anyone who had not first read the studies which comprise the book. The other group argues that people want to hear what ethnomethodology is, before they tackle the studies, so they should attempt the first chapter. Of course, the latter group is right; but so is the former.

The editor is right, as well, that a short, cogent account of ethnomethodology would prove helpful to the readers of *The Journal of Educational Thought*. And I believe I am right, as well, in doubting that anyone currently unfamiliar with ethnomethodology could find it intelligible from a brief overview. All that is possible is to offer some suggestive advertisements, which might capture the reader's attention, however briefly. The hope, of course, is that attention might thereby be directed to more extended treatments of the subject. As well, the desire exists that the reader accept the notion that something slightly different is afoot, and thus that ethnomethodology should not be judged by the familiar criteria of logical positivism.

Yes, but what is ethnomethodology, what is it after, what kind of science is it? Well, the answer is simple, though what it means is not. Before propounding the simple answer, let me get my caveats wet. What follows is not an account which I expect every ethnomethodologist to stand by.

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There should be some murmurs of approval in Southern California, Calgary, Toronto, Boston, Manchester, Oxford and elsewhere, but the dissent may register rather higher on any seismic scale. In fact, ethnomethodology is no one thing (was that a tremor of approval?). And, of course, what ethnomethodology is, is defined by the practice of it, and not by our wordy meditations.

Ethnomethodology is the study of how reasoning and activities are organizable, within the limits and resources of a culture, as rational, identifiable events and occurrences.

While other social sciences necessarily take an interest in human events, they do not take an interest in how these are mundanely organized at the micro level. Ethnomethodology asks how events are organized such that they appear to participants and observers as typical, uniform, repetitive phenomena, having these features of typicality, uniformity and repetitiveness independent of who in the culture predicates, recognizes or produces them.

Further, the interest of most social sciences is in human events as empirical phenomena. By this we mean that the interest is in some particular event, or in all events of some class, and is focussed on what happened, or what will happen and why it occurs. What happens is something regarded as contingent: it need not occur, and its occurrence can be judged and known only through the avenues of sense experience. The essential interest of social sciences, especially those contributing to the study of education, is expressed in contingent, *a posteriori* judgments. This interest is empirical, in Kant's sense of knowledge of the world gained from sense experience alone.

It is a contentious issue, but we regard the essential aim of ethnomethodology to be the generation of knowledge about how human events possibly can be organized, culturally. Our animating interest is in recovering the culturally possible ways in which events can "happen," i.e., how they can be organized by members of a culture, such that they can be recognized, and taken for granted, by members of that culture.

Ethnomethodology is not concerned, ultimately, with actual contingent events knowable only through sense experience. Ethnomethodology is concerned with the necessary, possible ways such events can be organized. These ways can be known only from within a culture, by being, or becoming a member. The ultimate aim of ethnomethodology is to generate *a priori* judgments about event organizations, judgments which are necessarily true in the worlds where these events can occur. *A priori* is used here simply to denote the fact that the structures of reasoning or activity organization studied, are "prior" structures. They are already forged in the culture as standard, but modifiable ways of acting, of doing things. These ways stand as resources within the culture.

Readers having any familiarity with studies in ethnomethodology may regard our claims so far as ironic. No one seems more fixated on recovering the exact details of interactional events than an ethnomethodologist. Think of Garfinkel's penetrating study of the use of the documentary method of interpretation, or the more recent study of the optical discovery of a pulsar by him and his students. Consider virtually any work in the conversation analytic branch of ethnomethodology. All seem bent on providing an account of exactly what happened in some setting, what was said, how it was said, how it was done. And all (now) require that the events be recoverable in some way, for further, deeper study and criticism. This means that ethnomethodological claims are, and should be, based on materials, ones which are audio-visually available. Hence there has come to be a strong preference among ethnomethodologists for audiotapes, and especially videotapes of the activities studied. (This requirement, by the way, has led to a decrease in studies of practical reasoning as an order of phenomena, precisely because reasoning leaves no direct, representative traces, no materials which others can study.)

There is irony here, but not where it appears. Ethnomethodologists pay close attention to the details of activity organization not to establish exactly what happened, but to make a case for how such activities can be organized. And to do so, they have to make sure that the structures of activity organization which they formulate are actually displayed in, and as, the events studied. The irony is not that I claim ethnomethodology is interested in culturally possible, apriori structures, yet the literature shows an abiding interest in aposteriori, actual events. No, the irony is that to establish the cogency of claims about culturally possible structures, we must use (records of) actual events.

The demand that ethnomethodological inquiry use audio-visually available materials, like tapes, transcripts, pictures and other documents, is mnemonic, constraining, rhetorical and judgmental. It is mnemonic in the sense that such materials are used as perspicuous reminders to analysts about matters already familiar, but not obvious to them. Ethnomethodology is done from within culture. The matters judged about are already known to some extent, though only pre-reflectively, by members of the culture. Indeed, ethnomethodology defines members as ones who have mastered a culture's ways of acting. Members have cultural know-how. Ethnomethodology uses empirical events as aids in recollecting the knowledge needed to locate and comprehend activity structures.

Materials are used as constraints on inquiry in the sense that claims about cultural possibilities are not allowed to be promulgated at the analyst's whim. To recollect how activities can be organized we require artifacts of their occurrence, to offer resistance to the claim that such and such structure is possible. Which brings us to the rhetorical use of materials. Materials referenced and presented in ethnomethodological articles and essays are used to persuade the reader that the claimed structure is indeed a possible one, within our culture. And such materials can then be used by others to judge the adequacy of those claims.

Of course, ethnomethodology is not the only form of inquiry which uses materials. All social sciences would like to. Where ethnomethodology differs (further) is in the theoretical framework it welds, and the methodological perspective which results. The framework is a fusion of phenomenology and analytic philosophy. From phenomenology comes a theory of consciousness as a relation between the object-as-known, and the acts through which the object is known. Methodologically, this part of the frame leads to a situated perspective: activity organization is viewed from the perspective of its unfolding, its accomplishment in real time, *in situ*.

From analytic philosophy comes the notion that language provides both resources and limits for what can be said about events, from within a culture. Methodologically, this part of the frame leads to the requirement that activity organization be formulated from the perspective of what members could understand, could recognize and identify the activity to be. In all of this, remember that the ethnomethodologist is also a member of the culture he or she studies. It is by being a member, by sharing the know-how for reproducing activity organization, that the ethnomethodologist can be an analyst. But being a member alone is not enough: the ethnomethodologist must use that membership as a resource for explicating how activities can be produced, how reasoning can be organized.

Other than assuming it would be a real education to figure out all the enigmas expressed in this essay, the reader may well wonder what value ethnomethodology can have for education. This depends on what is of interest about the structures of activity organization recovered by ethnomethodology. To appreciate applied ethnomethodology, one must comprehend and appreciate its model of the social world as it encompasses the topics and phenomena of education.

Courting seismic disapproval, I will say that the model is one of a world where the things to be gained, the judgments to be made, the curricula to be organized, are all oriented to what cannot be seen directly by those who provide and study education.

In our culture, learning itself is not visible: we have only manifestations, displays of learning. This is a world where the private and personal can be expressed and displayed publicly, but where the public is not the private. In such a world public activity organization can be studied and appreciated as setting limits on what we as educators can claim to know about student skills and knowledge. And, on the other side of the coin, such public activity organization can be studied and appreciated for how it makes feasible and successful that which we cannot see: learning.

The study of limits to certainty in judgments has been undertaken by ethnomethodologists looking at standardized tests and assessment activities. The study of resources for education has examined the unnoticed pedagogical functions of lesson discourse structures. The point in all these studies, and hence their value, is what we regard as the point and value of ethnomethodology. Through ethnomethodology we can come to recollect and comprehend events in the world, "facts", as artful accomplishments for which parties to the setting bear some responsibility.

We believe the ethnomethodological perspective recasts in a new light what are taken as "facts" in debates in education over testing, basic skills, mastery learning, teacher accountability and even the uses of microtechnology in the classroom. This light cannot be shown, though, through a simple advertisement. While we cannot expect that the reader will have glimpsed the light, much less seen it, we do hope that the reader has been enlightened.

The King is Naked

I met someone the other day
who had it made in ibid-land,
spot that most would sell their souls
to have and hold. Not her.
She turned her back on tenure's rights
for views that others feared to hear,
views not far removed from mine
with one important difference.
She took them from the closet.

Now free-lance scholar-writer-teacher,
free to search and do those things
that by conviction count for her.
The cost's been high in coin,
but settled peace in being free
that most work hard to find.
Chained to rules no longer questioned,
discovering in the end the price
is far beyond the pallid gifts attained.

Odd how one who has her act together
stirs up dormancies inside.
May the kings of ibid-land wake up
Make room for her from time to time
to show us for the clones we are.
Let her loose, the curve be damned,
to bring perspectives of a different kind
as rich as those within the hive.
She's got what students want and need:
air and light and willow bending
from outside.

W.E. Goding

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