

DE-SECTING ETHNOMETHODOLOGY*

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The American Sociologist 1976, Vol. 11, (February): 13-21

I am caught in the middle of trusted friends and critics. Aaron Cicourel, Carolyn Mullins, Nick Mullins, Margaret Riel, and Marshall Shumsky, among others, offered candid advice. Because I did not always accept their counsel, they are not responsible for my position. I want what seems impossible: room for each and all to practice their art without dogmatism. I recoil from positions that say: my way is the way; it is the only way it should be done. I am not sure there is a way; at least there is not one that has shown itself to me. In the meantime, or forever, I want this enterprise to be big enough for the various ways. But in doing so, I fear that I did not do it to the satisfaction of any.

Coser (1975) attacks ethnomethodology because it (1) is a sect (2) ignores the sociological tradition and (3) fails to enlighten its practitioners. I cannot reply to these criticisms on behalf of all ethnomethodologists; I represent but one minor faction of the sect. As I enjoy sharing the work with others, I am willing to respond to Coser by reference to readily available works in a public language without "esoteric ruminations."

1. Ethnomethodology the Sect

Coser characterizes ethnomethodology as a sect. He says ethnomethodology (a) has

* This paper emerges from an earlier collaboration which continues even though our practical circumstances diverge. The first person singular has been adopted to emphasize that we speak in unison.

charismatic leaders, (b) has an esoteric language which unites followers and excludes outsiders, (c) ignores the larger group of sociologists, and (d) is split with factions. Although Coser claims ethnomethodology eschews relations with sociology, he sees ethnomethodology as (e) a danger to sociology.

I am surprised that Coser is surprised that ethnomethodology is a sect. The history of Western intellectual thought is the history of the development, routinization, sometimes the assimilation, and sometimes the dissolution of the intellectual groups. Bacon, Einstein, Freud, Galton, Piaget are but some of the original thinkers who have gathered around them true believers who learned to speak in a new and obscure way and call their glossolalia "the new way."

(a) The august Comte, whom Coser invokes, set the precedent for the charismatic leaders in sociology that Coser deplors in ethnomethodology. Every original thinker in sociology since Comte has recapitulated this pattern. Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Mead, especially Parsons (Gouldner, 1970; Mullins, 1974) began by gathering followers. The group then had to create a public for their "esoterica." In the process, the esoteric became exoteric, the charisma routinized.

Ethnomethodology is such an intellec-

tual movement. It began in obscurity and is only now beginning to find a public. It is unfortunate that Coser lambasts ethnomethodology's sectarian qualities just as it is losing this private mien.

(b) Coser claims that outsiders cannot penetrate the esoteric literature of ethnomethodology. Yet in the course of his address, Coser belies this claim by exhibiting some knowledge of ethnomethodology's factions, findings, and disputes. In the past few years, several "readers" in ethnomethodology have appeared (Douglas, 1970; Sudnow, 1972; Turner, 1974; Avison and Wilson, 1974; Weingarten, *et al.*, 1975; Schenkein, *et al.*, forthcoming). Mehan and Wood (1975) have even attempted to survey all of the literature.

(c) Coser attacks ethnomethodology's private mien, but the routinization of charisma and institutionalization of ethnomethodology's ideas are now far advanced. The institutionalization of ethnomethodology into sociology is what Coser fears. Ironically, institutionalization is just what Garfinkel fears as well (see, for example, his remarks in Hill and Crittenden, 1968).

(d) Coser says that ethnomethodology's "splits and fissions" are a sign of its weakness. I, on the contrary, see the increasing diversity in ethnomethodology as one of its greatest strengths. The diversity arises in response to the ceaseless reflexivity of the social world. As more minds reflect on the problems that reflexivity poses, more programs and solutions appear. I invite you to peruse the disparate work of Blum and associates (Blum and McHugh, 1971; McHugh, *et al.*, 1974; Blum, 1975); Castaneda (1968, 1971, 1972); Cicourel, (1964, 1968, 1973, 1974, 1975); and Sacks and associates (Sacks, 1972a, 1972c, 1973; Sacks, *et al.*, 1974; Schegloff, 1968, 1972); to choose but four arbitrarily. Consider that such diversity grew from a single source, and that among ethnomethodologists it is agreed that the "real work" has yet to be found.

(e) But ethnomethodology is more than a sect within sociology; for Coser, it is

a danger to sociology. The president of the ASA would never waste his time attacking ethnomethodology if it were just a sect.

Coser senses what Gouldner (1970) and Mullins (1974), among others, have pointed to as a crisis in contemporary sociology. While "new causal theorists," structuralists, and ethnomethodologists, among others, are re-examining the roots of the sociological enterprise, Coser recoils from radical considerations. Instead, he sounds a retreat to the very "fatigued ideas" that are the cause of the crisis in the old order. Given our present practical circumstances, radical inquiry seems preferable to the theoretical uniformity that Coser proposes for sociology.

2. *Ethnomethodology and the Sociological Tradition*

Coser says that ethnomethodology is not sociology in that it (a) does not address traditional sociological phenomena, (b) is radically subjectivist, and (c) is psychologically reductionist.

(a) Social order and social organization have been enduring concerns of sociology since its inception. Ethnomethodology addresses these phenomena, but from a different perspective, which places ethnomethodology in a dialectical relation with sociology.

Sociology studies social structures. Social structures are treated as "objective and constraining social facts." At the empirical level, sociology treats these structures as variables. Conventional sociological studies seek the relationships among these variables.

Ethnomethodologists claim that the objective and constraining social structures of the world are constituted by "social structuring activities" (variously called "practices," "methods," "procedures," "reality work"). Ethnomethodology says that sociology ignores these structuring activities when they measure the degree of association among variables. One way of reading ethnomethodology is to see it countering this omission: ethnomethodologists study the social structuring activities that assemble social structures.

Early ethnomethodology arrived at this constitutive position through an adoption of Schutz's (1962, 1964, 1966) and Gurwitsch's reading of Husserl. Schutz (e.g., 1962:11) and Gurwitsch (e.g., 1966:xvi) spoke of the everyday world as constituted by "mental acts of consciousness." Garfinkel transformed these phenomenologists' mental acts into public, scenic, interactional activities, and ethnomethodology was born. The "objective reality of social facts" is treated as an "ongoing accomplishment of concerted activities of everyday life" (Garfinkel, 1967:xii). Social interactional activities constitute social facts; the facts do not exist independently of constituting practices.

I see a number of ethnomethodological studies examining the social accomplishment of social facts in institutional and everyday settings. I must emphasize that the coherence that I find in these studies may not be those authors' intent, but the pattern I find in the literature is a heuristic way to show the dialectic relationship that ethnomethodology has with sociology.

In each study, the ethnomethodologist locates and describes the structuring activities that assemble that particular scene's external and constraining social facts. For example, some of the objective social facts of the judicial system are the number of people detained as suspects, brought to trial, and convicted or retained. A series of studies (Sudnow, 1965; Bittner, 1967a, 1967b; Garfinkel, 1967:104-115; Cicourel, 1968; Emerson, 1969; Sacks, 1972b; Wieder, 1973; Pollner, 1974, 1975) describe the practices employed by police on the beat and judges and lawyers in the courtroom which produce these objective social facts.

The objective social facts of American education include career patterns and school performance. These facts are generally presented as arrays of statistics displaying the number of successful and unsuccessful students by age, ethnicity, SES, or other social variables. A series of studies of schools have used ideas from ethnomethodology to describe the practices that school officials and students employ to produce these reified phenom-

ena. These studies show that placement groups and counselors and students work together to produce outcomes like the number of students in college preparation, vocational or general education categories (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Leiter, 1974; Shumsky and Mehan, 1974; Erickson, 1975); the practices of testers and students assemble answers to each test question and also produce the total score which ordinarily is presumed to constitute a measure of academic achievement (Mehan, 1973; MacKay, 1973, 1974; Roth, 1974). The organization of the classroom and the teacher's view of students as good performers or "pariahs" is produced in concert by teachers and students (Mehan, 1974a, 1974b; MacDermott, 1974; Mehan, *et al.*, 1975).

Ethnomethodological studies in medical settings have examined health professionals, informal and formal categorization of patients (Garfinkel, 1967:186-207; Wood, 1968), decisions to treat patients in emergency rooms (Sudnow, 1969) and hospitals (Garfinkel, 1967:186-207; Cicourel, 1975). One example of this work (Cicourel, 1975) examines the practices which the doctor employs to diagnose the patient in a medical interview, transforms the data into brief summary statements on medical charts, employs the medical summaries to treat other cases, and collapses the data into aggregate statistics which correlate diseases and causes of death with social structural variables. Other studies of social structuring practices within institutional settings can be found in Zimmerman (1969, 1970a, 1970b) and Molotch and Lester (1974).

The concern for *how* practitioners assemble facts in institutional settings is recapitulated in the ethnomethodological investigation of social science research. Ethnomethodologists have studied the processes by which researchers gather materials from everyday life or official records, transform these materials into data by employing certain coding practices, and manipulate the objectified data abstracted from everyday life into correlational matrices (Cicourel, 1964; Kitsuse

and Cicourel, 1963; Garfinkel, 1967:20-24, 262-83; Cicourel, 1974; Douglas, 1967).

These ethnomethodological investigations illustrate the social construction of social research. Researchers decide truth through discussions, arguments, and other practical human activities. An organized consensus decides what is and what is not warranted as knowledge in accordance with procedural rules. The truths of social science are argued, not revealed.

Ethnomethodological studies of the social structuring activities that assemble objective social facts have been conducted outside of institutional settings as well. Garfinkel (1967:116-185) described the passing and management practices of an intersexed person. Sacks and his colleagues (Sacks, 1972a, 1972c, 1973, 1974, 1975; Shegloff, 1968, 1972; Sacks, *et al.*, 1974; Schenkein, 1972; Turner, 1970, 1972) are examining the conversational practices that assemble the organized character of conversational openings, closings, turn taking, topic selection. The practices which organize and maintain the coherence or oracles (Pollner, 1975); sorcery (Castaneda, 1968, 1971, 1972); astrology (Wedow, 1975); religious rituals (Jules-Rosette, 1975); secret societies (Bellman, 1975); as well as social science (TenHouten and Kaplan, 1973); have been described.

(b) Coser is correct when he says that ethnomethodology has tended to ignore the "real world" in its investigations. In its attempt to counter much of standard sociology's exclusive concern for macro-social structures, early ethnomethodology developed an exclusive concern for social structuring. Pollner (1970), Schwartz (1971), Bauman (1973), Bittner (1973), Goldthorpe (1973), Shumsky and Mehan (1974), and Cicourel (1975) have previously criticized ethnomethodology on similar grounds.

A major concern in my ethnomethodology at this moment is to construct a theory that accounts for both the structures and the structurings of everyday life. The structuring activities described by ethnomethodologists "exist in empir-

ical multitude" (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970:343). The practices are scene-specific; different scenes are assembled by different practices. For example, the organization of pairs of utterances in a conversation, the organization of judges' or teachers' decision making, and the organization of social science researchers' assembly of tables of statistics, and the rest, appear to be at different levels of abstractness. Because scenes are continually being created, the enterprise of assembling scenic practices seems endless. Besides, a compilation of an exhaustive list of practices would not provide us with a general theory of social order and social ordering.

The recent work of Garfinkel and Sacks (1970), Shumsky and Mehan (1974), Sacks *et al.* (1974), Cicourel (1975), and Mehan and Wood (1975) can be read as attempts to resolve this difficulty. For example, Mehan and Wood's (1975:179-191) solution to this problem is to seek the properties that all the structuring practices have in common. The properties of the practices would be reflexive, and invariant across the occasioned, context bound practices that constitute the various social facts. The discovery of some invariant properties of practices would constitute the beginning of a general theory of social ordering that addresses both structures and structuring activities.

It should be understood, however, that such an improved ethnomethodology will still differ fundamentally from Coser's sociology. He thinks of the "real world" as a hypothetical realm of "socioeconomic groups," "sociopolitical mechanisms," "functions and dysfunctions," "manifest and latent," independent of the quotidian actions of concrete persons. Ethnomethodologists maintain that these concepts and theoretical notions do capture a version of social life; but much is left out by that equation. Ethnomethodology seeks to make these notions more meaningful by seeing how concepts like "political power" and "institutional factors" exert their "behavior-altering force" in everyday social nexuses. (For an explicit ethnomethodological treatment of the

problem of power in everyday life, see Pollner, 1975 and Filmer *et al.*, 1975.)

(c) Coser accuses ethnomethodology of psychological reductionism, but the notion of constitutive practice does not reduce the problem of social order to psychology. The structurings are not psychological variables. As Garfinkel (1963:190) has said:

. . . there is no reason to look under the skull since there is nothing of interest to be found there but the brains. The 'skin' of the person will be left intact. Instead questions will be confined to the operations that can be performed upon events that are 'scenic' to the person.

Ethnomethodologists study *social* phenomena, those that are available in embodied, sensuous, human activity, in talk, and in actions. Though we may disagree on other matters, that principle binds ethnomethodologists.

Coser's equation of ethnomethodology with a version of phenomenological reductionism implies that ethnomethodology uses that single research technique. While some ethnomethodologists have explored the use of the reduction (Wieder, 1973), others have also employed virtually every other research method and are pioneering the use of still other techniques. Some ethnomethodologists have employed laboratory experiments (Zimmerman and Wilson, 1973; Crowle, 1971; Jennings and Jennings, 1974); traditional field ethnographies (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Cicourel, 1968; Castaneda, 1968, 1971, 1972; Emerson, 1969; Bittner, 1967a, 1967b; Handel, 1972; Jules-Rosette, 1975; Ramos, 1973; Wieder, 1973; Zimmerman, 1969, 1970a, 1970b); and (even!) surveys (Cicourel, 1974). Others have been exploring the use of film and videotape as a research tool (Mehan, 1973; Cicourel, *et al.*, 1974; Shumsky and Mehan, 1974; Mehan, *et al.*, 1975; Bellman and Jules-Rosette, forthcoming).

Though ethnomethodology is neither confined nor defined by a single method, its investigations are rigorous. Audio-visual techniques are often used as data gathering devices. Hard data, often in the form of film, videotape, audiotape, and

transcripts derived from these sources, are used to display findings. Intensive analysis of the complete course of interaction across social situations is made. Transcripts are often provided along with the analysis of the materials. The videotape and transcripts provide the grounds of interpretation as researchers move up the ladder of abstraction from raw materials to coded data to summarized findings. This practice enables others to follow the logic of analysis and allows the possibility of alternative interpretations to be made on the same materials.

3. *Ethnomethodology and Enlightenment*

Coser claims that while ". . . our discipline will be judged . . . on the basis of the substantive enlightenment which it is able to supply about the social structures in which we are enmeshed . . ." ethnomethodology does not supply "substantive enlightenment." I believe it is standard sociology that fails to enlighten. Much of standard sociology is too often divorced from the lived social realities of the everyday lives it seeks to enlighten.

Some of us in the academy, and more outside it, have turned to ethnomethodology because it, and not Coser's sociology, enlightens us "about the social structures in which we are enmeshed." Ethnomethodology reveals the practices that structure everyday life, including oppression, dogmatism, absolutism. Knowing how these social structures operate in everyday life enables people to change them.

Different generations of social scientists must create their own styles of sociology to find the enlightenment Coser rightly demands. The sociology Coser represents is of a different era than that of today. It began with the belief that the methods of natural science are the best way to acquire knowledge and to improve society.

Standard sociology arose in an age when technology was man's best friend and when positivism's atom was the basic stuff of the universe. Today that basic stuff is swarming. Contemporary physicists claim that the universe is made of quarks (Glashow, 1975) that have

"charm," and "flavor," and which exist only when the physicist magically summons them, while our old friend and pet, technology, bites our hand charmlessly.

I believe that sociology must be reinvented to resonate with the new image of rigorous inquiry that has emerged from the philosophers of the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition (Radnitsky, 1973)—philosophers like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and the later Wittgenstein. Feyerabend (in Radnitsky, 1973:417) summarizes this view as the belief that:

... science is only one of the many monsters which has been created by man, and I am not at all sure that it is the best. There may be better ways of finding the 'truth.' And there may be better ways of being a man than trying to find the truth.

Ethnomethodology is a synthesis of logico-empiricism and hermeneutic dialecticalism, two traditions that are commonly considered to be mutually exclusive. It has borrowed its methodology from logico-empiricism and its theory from hermeneutic-dialecticalism. As a result, both traditions find ethnomethodology anathema.

Ethnomethodology derives from the hermeneutic-dialectic tradition a commitment to study concrete scenes rigorously, with the recognition that the researcher is a reflexive participant and not mere observer of those scenes. But my ethnomethodology is not like critical Marxist theory, merely a theoretical rebuttal of science; I adopt the vision of science to transcend that vision. Just as ethnomethodology recoils from the logico-empiricist commitment that science is the superior way of knowing, it reacts against the hermeneutic-dialectic belief that dialectic theory alone is sufficient. Both these positions are not reflexive enough for me; every mode of inquiry is supported by secondary elaborations of their commitments.

Those who are satisfied with sociology would do well to listen to Coser and ignore ethnomethodology. But those who think that sociology can achieve something greater than it has so far

accomplished should look beyond my "promiscuous discussions of theory" (cf. Garfinkel, 1967:vii) with Coser and go to the work of ethnomethodologists themselves. My ethnomethodology is not primarily a reading, writing, and talking discipline; it can be best understood by being done.

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Received 10/14/75

Accepted 10/29/75