WHAT IS....

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY?

Wes Sharrock
The name

- By analogy with anthropological specialisms – ethnoscience, ethnobotany

- All studies of forms of indigenous understanding

- Ethnomethodology – study of indigenous understanding of methods
What indigenous methods?

- Method in the sense of ‘methodic’
- Methodic ways of organising practical affairs
- Organising practical affairs so that they are ‘observable and reportable’
Origins

• Originated by Harold Garfinkel (1917 - ) and Harvey Sacks (1935 – 1975)
• Sourced in a phenomenological critique of mid-twentieth century theoretical and methodological options in US sociology
• Specifically, critique of (a) Talcott Parsons’ theories and (b) empiricist methodology
Foundational texts

• Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 1967

• Harvey Sacks, *Lectures in Conversation*, 1992 (lectures given 1965 – 75)
Respecification

- Ethnomethodology a dissident sociology
- Retains a connection to sociological themes but thinks of itself as:
- An alternate, asymmetrical and incommensurable sociology
This means??

• That one can ‘respecify’ any sociological topic for ethnomethodology (alternate)
• Can investigate that topic in ethnomethodology’s terms but *not* vice-versa (asymmetric)
• Results will not answer the original question (incommensurable)
How and Why?

• Sociology a natural language discipline, social life carried on through use of natural language

• This relationship not otherwise much explored

• Ethnomethodology’s project: to understand how social order is produced through ‘mastery of natural language’
Not....

• A matter of studying how people talk about the social affairs they carry out
• A study of how social affairs are carried out – made to happen – through participants talking to each other
• How do people identify and reproduce the order of everyday affairs?
How and why? 2

• ‘People’ subsumes ‘professional sociologists’.
• Sociology, ‘lay and professional’
• Participants are practical sociologists
• Finding social order in the midst of and through their everyday affairs
• How do they find and voice that order?
‘Respecify’ again

• Respecify *any* ‘professional’ sociological problem as a practical one
• Locate a social setting where members of the society have to manage that problem as a prominent feature of their practical life
For example...

- A key initial example was suicide
- Because of Durkheim’s classic treatment
- Respecification as an inquiry into how cases of suicidal death are recognised and confirmed so
- Studies of coroner’s investigations and suicide prevention centres
Incommensurable…

• *Not* an answer to the question: under what conditions do persons kill themselves?

• An investigation into the way in which official suicide statistics are generated instead

• Into the ‘indigenous’ understanding of what suicide is which is presupposed in but not analysed by or accessible to other sociologies
Observable and reportable

- Social activities organised so that others can recognise and report them
- This is a reflexive matter, the organisation for observation and report is *embedded within* the social settings that are being organised and reported
- E.g. corporate reports are produced by teams from the corporations own departments
Observable and reportable

• …is conceiving ‘representation’ as socially organised
• …is conceiving ‘socially organised’ as practically organised
• …which is a matter of how they write up, diagram, compute, audit, discuss etc. etc. the features of the social settings they occupy
Observable and reportable again

• But not a matter of studying how they produce ‘representations’ of social settings instead of studying the setting

• Equally a matter of studying how parties use representations in the organisation of the social setting e.g. how people understand and make use of plans
Methods?

• Well, there aren’t any, not any *ethnomethodologically* proprietary ones at least

• Indigenous methods define/constitute socially ordered conduct so can’t have independent ‘professional methods’ for capturing phenomena
Objective

• Is to recover the indigenous understandings that constitute ‘social facts’

• This requires learning those understandings from practitioners if....
Unique adequacy

• …one doesn’t already have them

• Requirement of ‘unique adequacy’: must possess competences that parties have and use to organise their affairs observably and reportably, which is easy....
‘common sense understandings’

• … when one is interested in ‘common sense’ understandings that ‘anyone’ is expected to possess as a basis for their acceptance as competent participants

• Canonical example: conversation analysis
Conversation analysis

• Aims to recover the indigenous ‘oriented to’ understandings with which…
• …ordinary conversations are produced and the participants’ utterances made mutually intelligible
• Unique adequacy easily satisfied since as members of society we all have sufficient linguistic and conversational competences
A different matter

• If we are studying mathematicians or lawyers
• Being able to say what they are doing in ways they would accept as adequately reporting ‘what is going on’ depends on technical competences
• For such cases, acquisition of relevant competences, in the ideal, requires professional training
An article of faith

• Expressed by Harvey Sacks: there is social order ‘at all points’ - analogy with linguist’s structural decomposition of units

• So it really doesn’t matter what kinds of materials you have: any materials whatever will serve to initiate determination of the organisational properties exhibited in them
Not a license for laxity, though

- The emphasis is not on *collection* of materials (recording a conversation typically takes an hour or two at most)
- Emphasis is on *stringent* analysis of the materials, whatever they are
- Conversation analysis aims as a thoroughly systematic account of all features of conversations in relation to the distribution of turns at talk
Any materials will do…

• But because of an interest in just how participants organise their observable and reportable doings as a real time matter…

• …audio and audiovisual records of social interactions are often preferred as ‘hard’ records of social activities
What results?

• Identification of practical ways of determining ‘matters of fact’ and, relatedly, ‘properties of social structures’ that belong to, and may be specific to, diverse social settings

• Analysis of the production of social order by the local cohort as a matter of the real time structure of social action
Big influences

• Emergence of Conversation Analysis as a specialist field which has been adopted in linguistics, anthropology and psychology

• Decisive influence on CSCW (Computer Supported Co-operative Work), a collaborative discipline of sociologists (often ethnomethodologists) and computer scientists
Studies of?

• How decisions are made e.g. by police on the street, in courtroom disposition of convictions, in small businesses, in combat aircraft etc
• How instructions are conveyed and followed in classrooms, giving directions on the street, consulting manuals of software, game rule books, and instructions for self-assembly furniture.
…more studies

- How organisational plans are implemented in shopfloor work (especially through introduction of computerised system (see literature of CSCW for multiple examples)
- How ordinary matters such as shopping, cooking, fixing the faucet are actually done
- How scientific investigations are done in laboratory settings
still more studies

- How people read administrative, mathematical and literary texts
- How professional/lay encounters are organised in medical and legal settings
- The forms that ‘logic’ and ‘rationality’ assume in other, unfamiliar cultural settings
- Etc. etc. etc
Sources for these studies

• Michael Lynch and Wes Sharrock eds., Harold Garfinkel, 4 vols, Sage, 2004
• Michael Lynch, Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action, CUP, 1997
• Eric Livingston, Ethnographies of Reason, Ashgate, 2008
• Emanuel Schegloff, Sequence Organisation in Interaction: a primer, CUP, 2006