WHAT IS....

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY?

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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 methdology

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 do 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 organistion 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

- Paul Ten Have, Bibliography of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, updated April 2010, http://www.paultenhave.nl/EMCABIB.pdf

- 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