

## The dialectic of ethnomethodology\*

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Ethnomethodology has come of age. Although it remains a somewhat rebellious offspring of the social sciences, some thirty years of research has endowed ethnomethodology with all the earmarks of a mature discipline of inquiry. Its lines of influence have expanded beyond the boundaries of sociology to inspire research and theorizing in social science disciplines ranging from anthropology and communication studies to cognitive science and linguistics. Moreover, patterns of inquiry *within* ethnomethodology show signs of substantial growth and development. There is, on the one hand, increasing diversification of ethnomethodological research. What was initially a fairly cohesive community of inquiry now encompasses a heterogeneous variety of research programs which may share certain basic analytic assumptions and sensibilities, but which remain distinct from one another. At the same time, practitioners have begun to step back from their empirical inquiries to reflect on the progress of the enterprise in which they are engaged. Thus, an increasing number of works seek to take stock of the cumulative accomplishments which ethnomethodology has bequeathed to the social sciences (e.g., Heritage 1984, 1987; Hilbert 1992; Maynard and Clayman 1991; Sharrock and Anderson 1986; Wilson and Zimmerman 1980).

*Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences* (1991), a recent collection of essays edited by Graham Button, is enmeshed with these intellectual developments. In one sense, this book is a new effort at stock-taking, for its primary objective is to review ethnomethodology's contribution to a range of foundational issues in the human sciences. However, it is stock-taking of a distinctive and unconventional sort, one that is deeply

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informed by a particular interpretation of what ethnomethodology is all about, and a particular albeit prominent line of inquiry that proceeds from that interpretation. In order to understand the type of review this book has to offer, it will be necessary to provide some background on the form of ethnomethodology from which it proceeds, and this will in turn require a more general discussion of some of the divergent lines of thinking that now comprise the ethnomethodological enterprise. I wish to emphasize that what follows is by no means a comprehensive review of ethnomethodology. My aim is to distinguish some divergent analytic tendencies within the writings of Harold Garfinkel, and to show how these have given rise to distinct lines of ethnomethodological research.<sup>1</sup>

### **Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, and the ethnomethodological dialectic**

There is a tension in Garfinkel's original studies, and throughout ethnomethodology, between two alternate analytic tendencies. This tension is in part what gives ethnomethodology its distinctive intellectual cast, and it is also partly responsible for the diversification of ethnomethodological research, the particular lines of which may be distinguished in terms of how they position themselves with respect to this tension. The tension is between what Heritage (1991) has called 'deconstructive' and 'constructive' analytic tendencies (cf. Wilson 1992).<sup>2</sup>

#### *The deconstructive dimension*

The deconstructive aspect of ethnomethodology derives from Garfinkel's systematic effort to investigate the foundational processes through which everyday social activities, circumstances, and structures are constituted and rendered intelligible. Such processes are overlooked within most extant social scientific research because, as a precondition for analyzing social phenomena, investigators ordinarily take for granted the fact that such phenomena are available for recognition, inspection, and analysis in the first place. Garfinkel, influenced by the phenomenological teachings of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, and Aaron Gurwitsch, proposed that the experiential reality of any social phenomenon rests upon certain pre-scientific or common-sense methods of reasoning. However, unlike his phenomenological predecessors, Garfinkel directed attention away from essentially mentalistic processes and toward forms of reasoning which are embodied in ordinary social activities and are thus publicly available.

In a sense, Garfinkel sought to 'deconstruct' orderly social phenomena to lay bare the constitutive methods of reasoning-in-action through which phenomena are produced, recognized, and rendered accountable by societal members (both laypersons and professional social scientists alike) in local environments of action.

Analyzing such methods is intrinsically difficult because they are normally 'invisible' to actors in the course of their everyday affairs. Although common sense serves as an omnipresent resource for the management of social activity, it is not ordinarily an object of conscious reflection in its own right. Garfinkel overcame this obstacle by seeking out extraordinary situations in which the sense assembly process is highly exaggerated and hence conspicuous. The studies that pursue this objective are varied, complex, and resist easy summary, but one continuing methodological practice was to focus on circumstances where social actors confront anomalous events that are potentially incongruous with a pre-existing or default 'definition of the situation'. In many cases, these incongruities were engineered by Garfinkel and his associates in a series of informal 'breaching experiments'; one such experiment involved subjects in a game of tic-tac-toe with a confederate who violated its rules (Garfinkel 1963). In a related experiment, subjects were told to ask yes/no questions of a counselor but, unbeknownst to them, the 'answers' were given according to a random schedule (Garfinkel 1967: chapter 3). Elsewhere the focus shifted to incongruities that arise naturalistically rather than experimentally; an example is the case study of 'Agnes', a person whose masculine genitalia and biography were incongruous with her claim to being essentially female (Garfinkel 1967: chapter 5). Across these studies, incongruity and its management served to throw processes of sense-making into sharp relief.

The results revealed that, instead of becoming confused or bewildered, interactants pursued courses of action and reasoning that rendered the anomalous situation coherent and intelligible. This was accomplished by invoking various bits of common sense and contextual knowledge in an ad hoc manner, often in the form of natural language accounts, so as to either (1) 'normalize' the anomalous event by treating it as consistent with the prior definition of the situation, (2) 'demonize' the event by treating it as a motivated and morally suspect departure from normality, or (3) reconstitute the enviroing situation to make it congruent with what was ostensibly taking place. Taken together, these studies demonstrated forcefully that the experiential reality of any social phenomenon — whether the rules of tic-tac-toe, a course of counseling advice, or a person's sexual status — rests upon an unexplicated array of constitutive procedures.

It should be readily apparent from this brief description that Garfinkel's studies were directed toward an order of phenomena which is quite unlike that pursued in most social scientific research. Garfinkel was not attempting to render a positive characterization of social phenomena as the latter are usually conceived; he was not attempting to describe the rules of tic-tac-toe, the practices of counseling, or the correlates of sexual status. His analytic interest was squarely focused on the underlying methods through which such phenomena are locally produced and rendered intelligible; the constitutive *processes* of social life, rather than their accountable *products*, was the primary topic of investigation. It is in this sense that Garfinkel's studies can be characterized as embodying a deconstructive analytic dimension.

#### *The constructive dimension*

Even as Garfinkel sought to penetrate and decompose the familiar objects of everyday life, he established an entirely new domain of phenomena comprised of order-productive or constitutive methods. His studies were aimed at describing and analyzing these methods as they are put to use in various concrete social situations. As a consequence, the studies retain a 'constructive' dimension which may be discerned alongside the 'deconstructive' aspect outlined above — while the objects of everyday life were to be bracketed and decomposed, this was primarily a means of carving out a new domain of ethnomethodological phenomena for description and analysis.

Garfinkel was generally cautious about characterizing these phenomena in a formal or systematic fashion, but he did attempt to detail some of their basic properties. Perhaps the most elaborate analysis is contained in his discussion of 'the documentary method of interpretation' (Garfinkel 1967: chapter 3). The concept refers to the co-constitutive or 'reflexive' relationship between particular objects of perception and larger patterns or enviroing contexts. On the one hand, each perceptual particular is understood by reference to the context of which it forms a part. This context-dependency of meaning would be a trivial matter if contexts could be treated as independent entities which are given and stable. Each context could then serve as an Archimedian vantage point from which to disambiguate any perceptual particular. Contexts, however, are neither independent nor stable; they consist of component elements, each of which is dependent on other enviroing elements — including the perceptual particular with which we began — for its sense. Thus particulars and contexts, rather than being discrete entities, are mutually elaborative

or co-constitutive and hence stand in a 'reflexive' relation to one another. From this perspective, sense-making is a dynamic process in which particular objects of perception and enviroing contexts are ongoingly adjusted and reconciled with one another.

Similar ideas appear — with varying degrees of elaboration — in philosophical discussions of indexical and deictic expressions (e.g., Levinson 1983: chapter 2), phenomenological studies of the horizational properties of perception (e.g., Gurwitsch 1964), and psychological inquiries into gestalt phenomena (Kohler 1947) and conceptually based or 'theory-driven' cognitive processes (e.g., Bruner 1973). Garfinkel's contribution was to take these essentially mentalistic processes out of the individual psyche and examine them as they are embedded within mundane transactions between societal members. Hence, he documented how members rely on background knowledge of the circumstances to make sense of and respond to particular actions, utterances, and textual records. Correspondingly, he showed how members' grasp of the circumstances is contingent and revisable in light of developing courses of action and natural language accounts. The result is a novel view of how both 'big' and 'small' social phenomena are incrementally and collaboratively assembled in real time.

This viewpoint, moreover, offers a fundamental challenge to conventional approaches to social action that conceive of action as rule-governed (Wilson 1971). The most relevant contrast is the work of Talcott Parsons (1937), who argued that internalized social norms determine actions under given circumstances and, in the aggregate, provide for the reproduction of larger institutional structures. Such theories presuppose that actions, situations, and the rules through which they are repetitively linked, are independent entities — only in a world of given rules associated with preconstituted circumstances can particular courses of action be regulated in a deterministic way. Garfinkel's investigations suggest a profoundly different view of the relationship between action and structure which has been elaborated by Heritage (1984: chapter 5; 1987: 240–248). In a world in which the documentary method is operative, each situation must be regarded as the emergent and flexible product of, rather than the container of, its constituent actions. Correspondingly, norms, conventions, and other rules of conduct are similarly flexible, with a sense and relevance that may evolve over the course of an encounter. This does not mean that norms are irrelevant to social organization, but their primary significance is constitutive rather than regulative. Instead of determining predefined courses of action under given circumstances, norms are referred to and invoked by societal members as a resource for recognizing discrete actions and the circumstances in which they are embedded.

In summary, both deconstructive and constructive dimensions coexist rather peacefully in Garfinkel's writings up to and including most of *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. The first dimension is 'phenomenological' in inspiration and impulse and is concerned, not with producing a descriptive representation of social life, but with explicating how any such representation is possible. The second is 'scientific' in impulse and is very much concerned with describing aspects of social organization. These dimensions are not necessarily contradictory, for each is brought to bear on a different order of phenomena: the accountable objects and features of everyday life are 'deconstructed' so as to uncover a substrate of incarnate reasoning practices, and these practices are in turn subjected to 'constructive' description and analysis. Moreover, in a variety of ways these two domains of phenomena are distinct from one another. The first domain is the subject matter of mainstream social science and reflects in part the ways that societal members understand and talk about their own affairs — such phenomena are objects of members' recognition and accounting, they are discursively justifiable and negotiable, and are culturally and historically situated. The second domain of tacitly relied-upon ethnomethodological phenomena is neither available in nor derived from members' explicit accounts — such phenomena are not subject to negotiation or discursive justification, and hence at least some are conceived as having trans-historical or 'context-free' properties (Sacks et al. 1974: 699–700; Wilson and Zimmerman 1980: 73–75; Wilson 1991: 26; Drew and Heritage 1992: 26–27).

### Subsequent ethnomethodological research

If ethnomethodology is conceived as a form of inquiry having both deconstructive and constructive aspects (with the latter directed toward the analysis of a distinctive organizational domain), then it may proceed in a manner not fundamentally different from other empirical/scientific disciplines which are predominantly descriptive in character. However, if ethnomethodology is understood as an *essentially* deconstructive enterprise, then a very different form of inquiry is presaged. Such inquiry would be based upon the recognition that any generalizing account of members' constitutive methods is necessarily partial and provisional, constructed by means of a range of ad hoc considerations and an ever-present 'et cetera' clause (Garfinkel 1967: 20–21), and hence subject to further decomposition implicating the investigator's own constructive analytic methods (Pollner 1991). The resulting form of inquiry, if carried

to its logical conclusion, would represent a radical departure from empirical science as the latter is conventionally understood.

These two directions (deconstructive/constructive versus essentially deconstructive) are pursued by, respectively, two of the more prominent contemporary forms of ethnomethodological research: (1) conversation analysis, and (2) the studies of work. In the discussion to follow I will characterize conversation analysis and the studies of work in ways that necessarily gloss over important distinctions between studies in each tradition.<sup>3</sup> Hence, this discussion is perhaps best understood as a characterization of what is prototypical within each research tradition.

### Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis is a naturalistic approach to the study of spoken interaction that was developed by Harvey Sacks in collaboration with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (Heritage 1984: chapter 8; Zimmerman 1988; Whalen 1992). Sacks was a student of Garfinkel and was strongly influenced by ethnomethodological ideas as well as other intellectual trends in the social sciences (Schegloff 1992). While conversation analysis retains an interest in common-sense methods of reasoning, these are examined as they are put to use within the specific domain of talk-in-interaction, resulting in a distinctive focus on topics of order that inhere in the structure of interaction itself: e.g. turn taking, activity sequencing, the relationship between vocal and nonvocal activities, and so on.

The deconstructive aspect of conversation analysis arises in the avoidance of abstract, formalistic, or ideal-typical characterizations of interactional procedure which are stipulated by the analyst. Instead, recurrent structures of talk are investigated for how they are oriented to and produced by the interactants themselves via practices which are sensitive to the particulars of the immediate interactional and situational circumstances. It is for this reason that research proceeds through the detailed examination of singular instances, collections of instances, and especially 'deviant' or atypical instances, where interactants' orientation to, and context-specific reproduction of, various orderly phenomena can be demonstrated. At the same time, conversation analysis has a strong constructive thrust, proliferating findings on the organization of turn taking, activity sequences, and nonvocal activities (e.g., Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Psathas 1990), and on how these phenomena are organized differently across casual, institutional, and cultural contexts (e.g., Boden and Zimmerman 1991; Drew and Heritage 1992).

*Ethnomethodological studies of work*

Since the middle 1970s Garfinkel has pursued, in collaboration with several students, a line of research known informally as 'the studies of work' (e.g., Garfinkel et al. 1981; Lynch et al. 1983; Livingston 1986; Lynch 1982, 1985, 1988). Unlike Garfinkel's initial ethnomethodological studies, which elucidated rather general constitutive processes (such as the documentary method of interpretation outlined above), this new body of work focuses on highly specialized and technical competences that underly work in various professional disciplines including, most prominently, the natural sciences and mathematics. This line of research has an antecedent in Husserl's later writings on the European sciences (Husserl 1970 [1954]; see also Gurwitsch 1966) in that the objective is to elucidate the unexplicated foundations of scientific knowledge. However, where Husserl's enterprise was essentially philosophical in character and retained a transcendental viewpoint, Garfinkel and his associates proceed empirically by examining publicly available details of 'shop work and shop talk' that form the tangible fabric of scientific practice (Lynch et al. 1983: 233).

The deconstructive emphasis arises most prominently in studies of scientific and mathematical discoveries. Mathematics no less than the physical sciences can be conceived as 'discovering sciences' whose practitioners seek to produce discoveries concerning the properties of physical and mathematical objects. Inevitably, such discoveries result from complex courses of practical reasoning and embodied activity which receive scant attention in scientific texts, but which are the primary focus of ethnomethodological studies of scientific work. Thus, Garfinkel et al. (1981), working from a tape recording of astronomers at work, examined the courses of inference and action through which a pulsar was discovered. The pulsar's availability to astronomical observation, and hence its reality as an independent celestial object, rests entirely upon a complex of recognizably competent situated practices. Lynch (1982, 1985, 1988) studied biologists working with and talking about various forms of biological and neurological data. The character of such data, as well as conclusions about their factuality or artifactuality, are shown to be contingent on situated forms of talk, action, and reasoning. Finally, Livingston (1986) examined the 'lived work' of proving Godel's theorem. Livingston demonstrates that mathematical proofs consist not only of schedules of equations and diagrams, but the *pairing* of such formulae with courses of reasoning and action which are essential to the proof's coherence, intelligibility, and technical adequacy. In each case the avail-

ability of discovered scientific objects is shown to rest upon a substrate of unanalyzed skills and practices.

*Points of difference*

To avoid overdrawing the contrast between conversation analysis and studies of work, it is important to remember that both examine the situated practices which underly the constitution of intelligible features of the social world. At the same time, both use language, transcripts, or other graphic techniques to represent these practices and advance arguments about their properties. Nevertheless, there are genuine differences with respect to the constructive/deconstructive dialectic, and these come into focus at the levels of substance, method, and analytic objective.

*Substantive focus: Generic versus situated practices.* Conversation analysts seek to specify recurrent practices of interaction which are used by diverse speakers and which figure in various social contexts. Sacks (1984: 26–27) used the metaphor of a conversational 'machinery' to characterize the generalizing focus of conversation analytic studies.

Thus it is not any particular conversation, as an object, that we are primarily interested in. Our aim is to get into a position to transform, in an almost literal, physical sense, our view of 'what happened', from a matter of a particular interaction done by particular people, to a matter of interactions as products of a machinery. We are trying to find the machinery.

While this 'machinery' of practices is elucidated by, and should be answerable to, the examination of specific instances, and while it is recognized that any particular enactment will necessarily be context-sensitive, the overriding objective is to isolate aspects of interaction that transcend particular contexts (Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff 1987b).

Practitioners within the studies of work tradition, by contrast, tend to avoid generalizing accounts of work practices. Thus, not only are practices investigated within specific disciplinary boundaries such as mathematics and various natural sciences, but the focus is on particular concrete 'workbench' settings and the contingent courses of action that occur therein. As Lynch et al. (1983: 207) have observed:

Scientists have to come to terms with the singularity of their situations of inquiry, and in doing so they are thrown again and again into circumstances which require practices that are vaguely, if at all, specified in methodological guidelines and other formulations about how science is done *in general*.

Thus, investigators seek to explicate the singularity of specific work environments and courses of action, or what has been variously termed the 'quiddity' (Garfinkel et al. 1981), 'haecceity' (Garfinkel 1988) or 'just-thisness' of particular settings of technical practice.

*Method: Analytic induction versus demonstration.* Conversation analytic researchers typically work with collections of instances in which recurrent patterns of talk and exceptional or 'deviant' cases may be located and examined. By comprehensively analyzing these instances on a case-by-case basis, paying particular attention to those cases that differ from the general pattern, analysts are able to demonstrate the extent to which a given pattern is recognized and 'oriented-to' by the participants themselves. Moreover, this approach enables the investigator to specify the scope and organization of the regularity in question — that is, the range of circumstances across which the regularity is operative, and the diverse ways in which it is manifested. This approach has affinities with what has elsewhere been termed *analytic induction* in that deviant cases, rather than being ignored or explained away in an ad hoc manner, are aggressively sought out in an effort to produce analytic formulations that comprehensively capture (as nearly as possible) the complexities of a given empirical phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> Although conversation analysts also deal at length with single instances, this is typically done in the spirit of exploration as a preliminary to more extended analyses of collections (e.g., Whalen 1994), or as a way of testing the power of a previous collection-based analysis to illuminate a single instance (e.g., Schegloff 1987a; Whalen et al. 1988).

Garfinkel and his associates in the studies of work tradition proceed very differently, with what might be termed a methodology of *demonstration*. Practitioners often focus on a single perspicuous case or a small number of such cases selected (or designed) precisely because they make certain constitutive practices, which are ordinarily tacit, highly conspicuous and available for inspection. Thus no attempt is made to formally or comprehensively describe members' constitutive methods — that would be inappropriate for an essentially deconstructive enterprise whose focus is the singularity of particular settings and courses of action. Instead, specific practices and their order-productive implications are *exhibited* by working through singular cases. This approach can be traced to Garfinkel's original studies, and particularly the breaching experiments, which he initially characterized 'demonstrations' rather than experiments to highlight their informal, illustrative character (Garfinkel 1967: 38). Contemporary studies of work continue this tradition of

exemplification (Garfinkel et al. 1981; Lynch 1982; Bjelic and Lynch 1992).

Perhaps the 'purest' manifestation of this analytic stance is the Bjelic and Lynch (1992) paper on prismatic color. Rather than attempt to *describe* a workplace competence — in this case, skills and practices involved in a prismatic demonstration of color phenomena — and suffer the limitations endemic to all abstracted descriptions of situated action, Bjelic and Lynch provide only a minimal set of instructions and allow readers, armed with their own prisms, to work through the demonstration for themselves. Readers can thus acquire an unmediated, first-hand acquaintance with the practical skills involved in generating and reasoning about color phenomena. Moreover, by working through demonstrations of two competing theories of color (an incongruity reminiscent of Garfinkel's original studies), readers are able to grasp intimately the way in which phenomena consistent with alternate spectral realities may be produced through appropriate manual, visual, and textual procedures.

*Analytic objective: Cumulative findings versus respecification.* Conversation analysis has, as its primary objective, the accumulation of knowledge concerning the organization of interaction. Consistent with its predominantly data-driven and analytically inductive methodology, conversation analysis is devoted to explicating a progressively expanding array of interactional practices. Moreover, results in this area have been strongly cumulative in the sense that established findings have served as a foundation for subsequent investigations. For example, the analysis of turn taking has been deeply informed by studies of sequence organization and vice versa (Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Similarly, findings regarding the organization of talk in ordinary conversation have served as an analytic 'baseline' for the investigation of institutional talk, so that diverse forms of talk in various bureaucratic and occupational domains are each specified in relation to a common analytic reference point (Boden and Zimmerman 1991; Drew and Heritage 1992). As a result, findings interlock and build upon one another in a manner that is cumulative in the strong sense.

The studies of work have a very different analytic objective. The deconstructive impetus, with its situational focus and methodology of demonstration, precludes the systematic accumulation of knowledge regarding the organization of work practices. Instead, the primary aim is to *respecify* discovered physical and mathematical objects (and other technical work products) as local achievements. This pursuit of respecification renders the studies of work an empirically-based form of critique whose intellectual content runs contrary to established philosophical

accounts of the sciences. Thus, notwithstanding continuing claims to have disavowed an ironic or remedial stance in favor of adopting a policy of 'ethnomethodological indifference' (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970: 345-346; Garfinkel and Wieder 1992: 186), the studies of mathematical and scientific work have a profoundly demystifying and iconoclastic thrust.

These differences in substance, method, and analytic objective do not exhaust the ways in which conversation analysis and the studies of work may be distinguished. Nevertheless, these issues do seem to represent prominent points of contrast, and they are plainly intertwined with the divergent conceptions of ethnomethodology outlined previously. Inductive inquiry aimed at accumulating general findings is appropriate for a partially constructive analytic enterprise conceived as the systematic empirical study of interactional practices. By contrast, demonstrative inquiry aimed at respecifying the achievements of science and other forms of technical work is fitted to an essentially deconstructive enterprise that departs more radically from the idiom of science as the latter is usually understood.

#### **Taking stock: *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences***

We are now in a position to appreciate the type of review offered by Button and his contributors (1991). There are different ways that one could, in principle, take stock of ethnomethodology's contribution to the sciences of social life. In a predominantly constructive mode, one may review and synthesize accumulated findings regarding the constitutive processes of social life (e.g., Heritage 1984, 1987). In a predominantly deconstructive mode, one may endeavor to show how ethnomethodological studies have demonstrably respecified familiar aspects of social life and social inquiry as members' concerted achievements. *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences* adopts this latter approach.

The book focuses on a range of themes that have a foundational status vis à vis the human sciences. Matters such as the nature of logic, epistemology, measurement, evidence, the social actor, cognition, language, and morality constitute 'the foundations upon which the human sciences are built' (p. 4). The book proceeds from the observation that much philosophical and social scientific inquiry springs from 'a common epistemological and methodological womb' (p. 4) comprised of assumptions about these various matters, most importantly their availability for professional academic theorizing. These matters are then taken up, successively, in the ensuing chapters, where each is respecified as a phenomenon

to be investigated 'in-and-as-of-the-workings-of-ordinary-society' by reference to the details of locally produced and naturally accountable social action. The objective is to show how the ethnomethodological perspective, and various studies carried out under its auspices, provide for a new way of thinking about and investigating these classic themes.

This agenda is clearly spelled out in the introductory chapters by Graham Button and Harold Garfinkel. It is elaborated by the remaining contributors, some of whom deal primarily with issues of social science *methodology* (e.g., Wes Sharrock and Bob Anderson on epistemology, Mike Lynch on measurement, and Douglas Benson and John Hughes on evidence and inference), while others focus on more traditional substantive *topics* of inquiry (e.g., Jeff Coulter on logic, Wes Sharrock and Graham Button on the social actor, Coulter on cognition, John Lee on language and culture, and Lena Jayyusi on values and moral judgement). These chapters indicate the extent to which philosophical and social scientific discussions of such themes may be led astray when they are approached exogenously, in abstraction from the primordial contexts of everyday life in which they are encountered by ordinary members of society. Attempts to conceptualize, define, or theorize such matters in essentialist terms fail to capture the plethora of meanings and uses with which they may be associated in concrete circumstances. Correspondingly, attempts to regiment such matters in accordance with abstract rules or a priori standards inevitably run up against the omnipresent and unregimentable foundation of common sense reasoning necessary for the implementation of any rule or standard. Taken together, the papers consistently point in the direction of an alternate form of inquiry which takes as its subject matter the unexamined practices through which logic, measurement, language, and related matters are oriented to and accomplished in diverse contexts of everyday life.

Jeff Coulter provides an exemplary illustration of these points, and the general style of analysis employed throughout the book, in his discussion of 'Logic: Ethnomethodology and the logic of language'. He cogently reviews the history of logic with special attention to its growth as an academic discipline divorced from a concern with ordinary practices of discourse and argumentation. Prior to Aristotle, interest in the analysis and dissection of courses of argumentation arose in several quarters of Greek society, prompted in part by the use of rhetorical techniques in public debating contests and courts of law. The development of logical formalization began with the first attempts to codify rules of valid inference, such as Aristotle's specification of the syllogism. Through the Middle Ages, logicians devoted increasing attention to the singular *proposition* and its components as objects of analysis. Following contributions

by Leibniz and Boole, and later Frege, Russell, Whitehead, and others in the Vienna Circle, this movement culminated in the rise of propositional and predicate calculi, and set-theoretic and componential schemes for representing word meanings — all of this directed toward the overarching goal of constructing a logically ideal language against which all other forms of reasoning might be assessed.

Against this philosophical backdrop, Coulter counterposes more recent efforts to critique logical formalization and reassert an interest in ordinary communicative praxis. In this vein he touches on Wittgenstein's later writings on language games and family resemblances, Austin on speech acts, Ryle on the analytic priority of informal over formal logic, and most importantly ethnomethodology. Of primary significance is Garfinkel's central insight that the irremediably context-dependent or 'indexical' properties of commonplace utterances, which logicians regard as problematic flaws, are not at all problematic for interactants themselves, who somehow manage to make sufficient sense for interaction to proceed. This observation directed attention away from language as an abstract system and toward language use in real-life circumstances, and to the situated practices for 'doing' and 'recognizing' concrete utterances and the activities they accomplish. Harvey Sacks further developed this line of investigation in his studies of conversation, examining 'membership categorization devices' as they figure in the production and recognition of references to persons, and more generally the sequential properties of interaction which are implicated in the production and recognition of discrete social actions. Coulter concludes that conversation analytic studies constitute a thoroughgoing replacement of the older *exogenous* 'Logic of language' with a fundamentally *endogenous* 'Logic for linguistic conduct'. The remaining papers pursue this motif of respecification across a range of other social science topics and issues.

The primary contribution of the volume is that it clearly establishes the relevance and significance of ethnomethodology for a wide range of recurrent themes within the social sciences. This has not always been apparent in particular ethnomethodological studies, which are often focused on minutiae of talk, embodied action, and textual practices. Perhaps because of this rigorously empirical focus, ethnomethodology has often been compartmentalized as a form of 'micro-sociology' without relevance to inquiry into structural, institutional, or comparative-historical matters. This book demonstrates that, far from being extraneous to such matters, ethnomethodology touches on a wide range of social science topics and methodological issues. It does so not primarily by offering a view of such matters which is designed to compete with existing social science theories, but by suggesting a new way of investigating them.

However, in charting this new line of inquiry, ethnomethodology has implications which tend to be 'unsettling' of previous approaches — while such approaches seek to pin down the essential properties and determinants of logic, method, social action, and the like, ethnomethodological studies demonstrate that such matters, and social scientific accounts of them, are rooted in an open-ended matrix of situated practices that obstinately resist formalization. In this respect, the book is singularly provocative, and this is achieved in part by focusing away from the empirical content of ethnomethodological studies and toward their respecifying implications.

This focus is not without drawbacks, however. Firstly, it allows the agenda of traditional social science to set the terms under which ethnomethodology's cumulative accomplishments are assessed. By focusing exclusively on established themes and issues typically regarded as 'significant' within the social sciences, the book overlooks much of the substance of ethnomethodological studies, many of which are addressed to comparatively mundane topics of order. This emphasis can certainly be justified in the interest of exhibiting the relevance of ethnomethodology to the social sciences at large, but it comes at the expense of attention to ethnomethodology's own agenda and accomplishments. Moreover, it could have the unintended consequence of fostering the impression that ethnomethodology is essentially about, or should properly be concerned with, these longstanding and 'important' topics. That would be unfortunate, for it runs contrary to the original spirit of Garfinkel's (1967) research and Sacks's (1984, 1992) studies of conversation, which are predicated on the insight that social organization is an omnipresent feature of everyday life, and can be found in the detailed practices through which each and every concrete action is produced, recognized, and dealt with. Accordingly, inquiry into social organization need not be confined to topics which have been licensed by established social scientific disciplines and subdisciplinary specializations. Readers of the book may need to be reminded of this fact.

Moreover, given the emphasis on respecification rather than empirical elaboration, the book resembles a sustained and at times contentious programmatic statement more than it does an effort at stock-taking. Each chapter is cast off against existing philosophical accounts and social scientific theories which are reviewed in considerable detail, and the thrust of each chapter is to demonstrate that such accounts and theories are inadequate or untenable. At the same time, the empirical research agenda that ethnomethodology embodies is programmatically characterized but not elaborated. Although each chapter alludes to the existence of an unexamined domain of constitutive practices, and provides intriguing



and provocative examples of research on that domain, the domain itself is never explored systematically by reference to the accumulated wisdom of ethnomethodological studies. As a result, the empirical payoff of an ethnomethodological approach may not be evident to those who are not already familiar with the field.

What the book does achieve is no small feat. It demonstrates that ethnomethodology offers a novel angle from which to approach virtually any theoretical, methodological, or substantive topic, and can thereby contribute to a thoroughgoing revitalization of inquiry in the human sciences. However, if the ultimate goal of the book is to secure for ethnomethodology 'a lasting impact on the human sciences', as Graham Button puts it in his preface (p. xii), realizing this goal may require more than a promissory note — no matter how cogently argued — asserting ethnomethodology's programmatic relevance. It may also require convincing evidence that the note can indeed be cashed in for the hard currency of tangible knowledge concerning the inner workings of social life. Accordingly, the book may ultimately be less successful at influencing social science than might have been the case if the substantive findings of ethnomethodology had also been systematically reviewed and synthesized — that is, if the authors had chosen to take stock of ethnomethodology's contribution in a more conventional, 'constructive analytic' mode.

### Concluding remarks

What is distinctive about ethnomethodology is that it embodies divergent and in some respects competing analytic tendencies.<sup>5</sup> Research in this area is most illuminating when both dimensions are seriously entertained in the course of investigation. The deconstructive impetus in ethnomethodology proceeds from the recognition that something is missing when academic analyses of the social world take the mundane intelligibility and intersubjectivity of that world for granted. Such research tends to overlook what is arguably the most fundamental level of social organization: namely, the common sense practices which underly the conduct of *both* social life *and* social inquiry, and which provide for the maintenance of a shared social world. To recognize and acknowledge this fact is not, however, an end in itself; it is a means to an end. Its primary rationale is that it encourages investigators to notice things that they otherwise might not have noticed, to describe things that are so commonplace and familiar that they do not seem to require description, and thus to begin the task of analyzing that which is usually submerged within the ordinary 'givens' of everyday life.

### Notes

1. I am grateful to John Heritage, Doug Maynard, and Andy Roth for providing comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. My use of the term 'deconstructive' should not be equated with the tradition of literary criticism and social analysis founded by Derrida. As will become apparent in the ensuing discussion, the present usage is rooted in the distinctively ethnomethodological reinterpretation and use of themes derived from phenomenology.
3. For instance, several recent papers have begun to combine modes of analysis derived from both research traditions (e.g., Goodwin 1994; Maynard and Manzo 1993; Whalen 1994).
4. Despite these similarities, there are significant differences between analytic induction (see Katz 1983) and conversation analysis. Analytic induction, as it was originally conceived, is a method of formulating causal laws. By contrast, conversation analysis is oriented toward a different order of phenomena: the reasoning practices that guide, and are available within, interactional conduct. On the distinction between conversation analytic sequences and causal laws, see Heritage (1984: 245–253).
5. For a more general discussion of the range of divergent lines of thinking and research within ethnomethodology, see Maynard and Clayman (1991).

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