
UNIT 7 ETHNOMETHODOLOGY*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- Everyday reality and people's account of it;
- Methods people employ to understand social world; and
- How people attribute meanings to regularities of social life.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will try to understand how society is studied through ethnomethodological approach. But first we will try to know what does ethnomethodology mean? What does it explain about how social life functions? Unless we grapple with these basic ideas of this approach, we would not be able to proceed with the discussion on this approach. Ethnomethodologists argue that nothing is sacred to be critiqued, and even the most basic concepts of classical sociology must be revisited. Ethnomethodology is not a theoretical rebuttal to classical sociological theory, rather it adopts the scientific vision to produce an account of how the objectivity of social facts are constructed through individuals as members of the society. Ethnomethodology, therefore, is an approach that takes seriously the implications of the routine observation of social activities.

As we know that the discipline of sociology is concerned with the study of social structures and processes. In classical understanding social structures are treated as 'objective', 'constraining', also known as 'social facts'. At the empirical level, sociology treats these structures as variables. Conventional approaches seek the relationships among these variables. Ethnomethodologists claim that the objective and constraining social structures of the world are constituted by "social structuring activities" (i.e. practices, methods, procedures). 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 as a study of the people's actions, practices and behaviours that form social structures. 'Ethnos' refers to members of social, cultural, ethnic groups, 'method' refers to the things people routinely do create or recreate regularities of

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order or practices and 'logy' means the logic of or study of these methods. Ethnomethodology means the study of members' methods for producing recognizable social orders. It starts from the fact that sociologists are, first and foremost, members of society like anyone else, equipped with the same kinds of social competencies that any member of society can be presumed to possess. Ethnomethodology turns its attention to such competencies, capabilities as topics of inquiry in their own case. Its focus is upon the methods by which members of society are able to observe and recognize what is happening around them, and thereby know what they should do to fit their actions together with the actions of others. Another way of putting this is to say that ethnomethodology concerns the 'possibility' of observation of orderly social practices. What does it mean to say ethnomethodologists are interested in the 'possibility' of observations? Broadly it means two things, first, is that how does an observer, be it a sociologist or layman, make sense of what they are seeing as this or that phenomenon. Second, how the observed phenomenon is produced or assembled in such a way that it is observable as the phenomenon actually is.

According to social scientists there are three distinctive characteristics of ethnomethodology: First, it aims to know how people construct meaning or "definitions of the situation," as a version of symbolic interaction. Second, because definitions of the situation emerge from how persons announce and impart sense-making perceptions and perspectives to one another, ethnomethodology is said to be individualistic. Third, ethnomethodology is understood to have emerged as a critique of traditional ways of doing sociology. Ethnomethodology's theoretical proposal is that there is a self-generating order in concrete activities, an order whose scientific appreciation depends upon neither prior description, nor empirical generalization, nor formal specification of variable elements and their analytic relations. From an ethnomethodological standpoint, ordinary experience is not necessarily chaotic, for the concrete activities of which it is composed are coeval with an intelligible organization that actors "already" provide and that is therefore available for scientific analysis. The central aspect of this organization are practical activities through which actors produce and recognize the circumstances in which they are embedded. The principle aim of ethnomethodology is to investigate the systematic and meaningful accomplishment of these concrete activities as actual behaviours. Sociologists can rigorously explicate that phenomenon as an accomplishment of actors' concerted work in making social facts observable and accountable to one another in their everyday lives. This is, in a nutshell, the heart of the ethnomethodological enterprise. If the substantive concern of ethnomethodology is the achieved intelligibility and organization of every day activities, it can be appreciated that social order does not come about because individual actors bring their own cognitive definitions of the situation into some kind of convergence or common agreement. The focus in ethnomethodology on what are called, interchangeably, 'procedures', 'methods', and 'practices' runs contrary to a cognitive-interpretive or subjective solution to the problem of order, wherein actors produce patterned courses of action because they share internalized frames of reference and value system that enable common definitions of situations. Moreover, these procedures do not represent the solitary resources that singular souls impose upon one another; they are systemic resources that members of society concertedly enact. Thus, ethnomethodology avoids inferences about how otherwise separated actors abstractly think and negotiate definitions for joint projects and instead investigates how members are from the outset embedded in contingently accomplished structures of social order.

Ethnomethodology emerged through an adoption of Alfred Schutz's and Aron Gurwitsch's reading of Husserl. Schutz and Gurwitsch spoke of the everyday world as constituted by mental acts of consciousness. Garfinkel transformed these phenomenologists' 'mental acts' into public interactional activities, and ethnomethodology was born. The given objective reality of social facts is treated instead as an ongoing accomplishment of concerted activities of everyday life. Social interactional activities constitute social facts; the facts do not exist independently of constituting practices.

7.2 WHAT IS ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

Ethnomethodology is considered to be a study of common and everyday methods, of practical action and practical reasoning. It was founded by Harold Garfinkel, a student of American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, in the 1950s and 1960s. It became popular with Garfinkel's text, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* published in 1967. The key assumption of this text was that the production of observable social routine practices involves the local or situated use of member's methods for doing such activities. With respect to these methods, the mastery of natural language is paramount. Thus, ethnomethodology conceives of language and social interaction as part of the process of social facts formation. Garfinkel's approach draws inspiration primarily from Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. The origins of this approach lie in Garfinkel's engagement with the thought of Talcott Parsons related to social action. This engagement led Garfinkel to turn to the writings of Alfred Schutz (for example, Schutz, 1962) and seek to apply the lessons of Schutz's phenomenological studies to the problem of social order as discussed in the work of Parsons. Schutz had emphasized the need for sociological analysis to attend to and be grounded in the ways in which persons, as members of society, experience social life. Garfinkel took this experiential focus and refined it to pose the question of how members of society produce 'from within' the observable features of social life.

Ethnomethodology is a synthesis of logico-empiricism and hermeneutic dialectic tradition, two traditions that are commonly considered to be mutually exclusive. From the first it borrow the notion of routine based rational actions. Ethnomethodology derives from the second 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. The first issue Garfinkel deals with defines the area of interest of ethnomethodology. It is the study of methods by which members (socially functioning human beings) make sense out of their world (Garfinkel, 1967). Hence it works with a view of social action where the emphasis is on the organization of perception which results in action becoming meaningful. Their study is directed to know how members' actual, ordinary activities consist of methods to make practical actions, practical circumstances, common sense knowledge of social structures, and practical sociological reasoning analysable' (Garfinkel, 1967:9 - 10). The second issue to which Garfinkel attends concerns meaning and language. For Garfinkel, making sense out of a situation, and giving ordinary language accounts of that sense, are inextricably connected. At one level this means the following: a large part of members' abilities to make sense out of a situation is predicated upon their abilities to announce to themselves and to others what meaning they are getting out of the situation. In addition to this, a large part of ethnomethodology becomes the study

of how members build accounts of social action, while doing that action. Garfinkel, in his distinctive style, describes the focus of ethnomethodology as follows:

For ethnomethodology the objective reality of social facts, in that, and just how, it is every society's locally, endogenously produced, naturally organized, reflexively accountable, ongoing, practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely, members' work, with no time out, and with no possibility of evasion, hiding out, passing, postponement, or buy-outs, is thereby sociology's fundamental phenomenon (Garfinkel 1967:11).

However, Garfinkel does not simply talk only about image of members making sense out of continuing situations and independently telling that sense. He sets up an important equivalence between the making sense of situations and the telling of that sense. His concern is to document and analyse "the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings 'accountable'". When I speak of accountable my interests are directed to such matters as the following: observable-and-reportable, i.e. available to members as situated practices of looking-and-telling" (Garfinkel, 1967:1). The above statement clears Garfinkel's equivalence, that to 'do' interaction is to 'tell' interaction. This correspondence is expressed in terms of "procedures" the primal unit of ethnomethodological terminology. The procedures by which we "produce" interaction are identical to the procedures by which we "describe" that interaction.

Ethnomethodology transcends the micro-macro debate by transcending its terms. That is, ethnomethodologists have repeatedly announced their suspension of belief in social structural phenomena per se as objects of theoretical inquiry. The purpose of this methodological stance, referred to sometimes as "ethnomethodological indifference" is not to legitimize one level of structure at the expense of others, but rather to examine social practices where by social order is made to happen, made to appear and accomplished by members of society. To illustrate, Garfinkel identifies ethnomethods of producing survey research as including those same methods that "the lay person" engages in when deciding what an acquaintance means by an utterance, for instance, 'that looks like child'.

Ethnomethodology thus represents a very simple idea. If one assumes, as Garfinkel does, that the *meaningful, patterned, and orderly character of everyday life* is something that people must work constantly to achieve, then one must also assume that they have some methods for doing so. If everyday life exhibits a patterned orderliness, a *recognizable coherence*, as Garfinkel believes it does, then it is not enough to say that individuals randomly pursuing shared goals, then they will do similar things enough of the time to manifest trends, or patterns, of orderliness in society, an approach characteristic of Parsonian sociology. Garfinkel argues that members of society must have some shared methods for achieving social order that they use to mutually construct the meaningful orderliness of social situations. One way of understanding this is by analogy with the idea that in order to make sense by speaking in a language we have to speak the same language, using the same meanings for words and the same grammatical forms. Another analogy is with the idea that in order to play a game we have to play by the rules recognized by other parties to the game as the rules of that game. It is, for instance, not possible to play cricket by running downfield with a football. The essential rules of cricket are in important respects constitutive of the game

of cricket. Constitutive means that the rules define the recognizable pattern of the social order/order of the game.

7.3 INDEXICALITY

We now move to the concept of *Indexicality* in ethnomethodological research. *Indexicality* is a concept which describes a property of language and ordinary talk. It refers to the fact that a word may have a meaning which holds true for all situations in which the word is used (e.g., its dictionary meaning), but a word also has meaning which relates to the particular situation in which it is being used. Indexicality, then, means that there is a particular code, grammar or vocabulary used among people in a given region. For example, “she was there” has different meanings for both “she” and “there” depending upon the particular occasion or situation in which the sentence was said. More generally, any sentence is understood in terms not only of the literal meaning of its words, but in terms of the surrounding conversation and knowledge of the people talking. According to Garfinkel, a piece of talk does not just describe an interaction, but also stands for ‘indexes’ (hence indexical) some meaningful feature of that particular situation. Any piece of talk stands for or indexes more than it actually says. For example “where is your son”, “he is at home” indexes a whole range of things which are available to speakers. Extrapolating from purely linguistic materials, Indexicality, then, refers to the fact that accounts and meanings in any situation are dependent upon the nature of the situation. So, for example, the meanings which two people have in an interaction are uniquely linked to the location and time of the interaction, the persons present, the purpose or intention of the actors, their knowledge of each other’s intentions, and so on. The indexical concept is a major focus of Garfinkel’s work. For social interaction is seen as inextricably linked to context (situate), and explainable only in context. The identification of indexicality as an irreducible and inescapable feature of everyday life thus focuses attention on the embeddedness of language in use in which it is created and used.

7.4 ACCOUNTS

The aspect of action which is of interest to Garfinkel’s ‘accounts’ of the situations by people. The image is a dynamic one. However: the accounts are developed within and as part of the social situation which they describe, a situation which itself is constantly changing. One of Garfinkel’s key points about people’s routine methods is that they are “reflexively accountable.” Accounts are the ways in which actors explain (describe, criticize, and idealize) specific situations. Accounting is the process by which people offer accounts in order to make sense of the world. The word ‘account’ carries this equivalence; to account for something is both to make understandable and to express that understanding. The idea of reflexive accounts of human practices, makes it possible for ethnomethodologists to document the ways in which this order was perceived by actors during their actions. It implies that social interaction among actors is seen as routinized and central to make sense of everyday life. The key to accounting process is on people’s process of making sense of talk in conversation with others

Ethnomethodologists devote a lot of attention to analyze people’s accounts, as well as to the ways in which accounts are offered, accepted and rejected by others. This is one of the reasons that ethnomethodologists are preoccupied with

analyzing conversations. To take an example, when a student explains to his professor why he failed to take an examination, he is offering an account. The student is trying to make sense out of an event for his professor. Ethnomethodologists are interested in the nature of that account but more generally in the manner in which the student offers the account and the professor accepts or rejects it. In analyzing accounts, ethnomethodologists adopt a stance of “ethnomethodological indifference.” That is, they do not judge the nature of the accounts but rather analyze them in terms of how they are used in practical action. They are concerned with the accounts as well as the methods needed by both speaker and listener to explain, understand, and accept or reject accounts.

7.5 DOCUMENTARY METHOD

The most explicit similarities between phenomenological view and ethnomethodological approach is Garfinkel’s (1967) discussion of ‘the documentary method of interpretation’. By way of the documentary method, practitioner attempts to find a pattern in the response of the subjects and through the pattern tries to find an underlying pattern of the larger situation. Garfinkel draws on the writing of Karl Manheim to develop this method in ethnomethodological approach. Through the analysis of the actions, responses, behaviours, researcher aims to develop this ‘underlying pattern’ among all these actions. According Garfinkel, a documentary method:

“consists of treating an actual appearance “as the document of”, as “pointing to”, as “standing on behalf of” of a presupposed underlying pattern” (*Garfinkel, 1967: 78*).

Garfinkel emphasized perceptual knowledge of subjects as a mental process or activity, because of an emerging concern for “embodied” activity and the practical production of social facts that emerges in the very details of talk and action as endlessly contingent manifestations of real-worldly conduct. To demonstrate the strength of this method, Garfinkel asked students in psychiatry department to participate in a psychotherapy session with ten students. Students were supposed to discuss their problems with people who acted as experts/counsellors during the session. These experts gave responses only in ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and students accordingly gave their responses seeing these ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as ‘advices’ by the counsellors. He was of the view that researchers could find some pattern in the students’ responses.

Garfinkel has referred to the local as the proper domain for ethnomethodology, limiting scientists’ observations to what can actually be seen or otherwise empirically witnessed. This does not imply that ethnomethodology is anti-theoretical or that it approaches human behaviour from the point of view of pristine, crude, or behaviourist empiricism. Ethnomethodological empiricism does not remove the analyst as an interpreter of data, nor do ethnomethodologists claim privileged exemption from the social practices they investigate. Instead this approach exemplifies the empirical thrust of scholarship to observe meaningful, regular and orderly nature of routine practices. The documentary method of the ethnomethodological program seeks to provide a detailed, naturalistic account of competent practice within specific domains of socially organized action.

7.6 BREACH EXPERIMENTS: CASE OF AGNES

By taking the case of breach experiments, ethnomethodologists have examined the relevance of this approach to social science discussions on gender, education, organizational forms and so on. Let's discuss Harold Garfinkel's (1967) interesting demonstration of the ethnomethodological analysis in the case of 'doing gender'. He shows how society confers certain social and sexual status on every individual. In cases of some irregularities in these ways, some persons manages to achieve desired sexual status, Garfinkel calls this process as 'passing'. In the 1950s Garfinkel met a person named Agnes, who seemed unquestionably a woman. Not only did she have the convincingly figure of a woman, but it was virtually a perfect figure with an ideal set of measurements to be a woman. She had both physical and behavioural features of a women. For instance, she had a pretty face, her voice tone, attires, large breasts, a good complexion, no facial hair, and plucked eyebrows, had used lipstick (Garfinkel, 1967: 137 - 140). Garfinkel discovered that Agnes had not always appeared to be a woman. In fact, at the time he met her, Agnes was trying, eventually successfully, to convince physicians that she needed an operation to remove her male genitalia and create a vagina.

Agnes was born as a male at birth with normal male genitals. In fact, she was by all accounts a boy until she was 16 years of age. At that age, sensing something was awry, Agnes ran away from home and started to act like a girl. She soon discovered that dressing like a woman was not enough; she had to learn to act like (to "pass" as) a woman if she was to be accepted as one. She did learn the accepted practices and as a result came to be defined, and to define herself, as a woman. Garfinkel was interested in the 'passing devices' used by Agnes to achieve the desired female sex status in the society (*ibid*, 167 - 172). He highlights the point that people as members of society and certain category learn and routinely use the routine practices that allow them to pass successfully as men or women. It is only in learning these practices that we come to be, in a sociological sense, concept of gender status. Thus, this approach explains that even a category like gender, which is thought to be an ascribed status, can be understood as an accomplishment of a set of situated practices.

7.7 LET US SUM UP

The influence of ethnomethodology has been felt widely in social sciences and beyond. In addition to studies of naturally occurring ordinary practices, ethnomethodologists have increasingly explored new areas of research in institutional settings: legal processes; academic pedagogic milieus; medical field; scientific institutions; political structures. The considerable influence of ethnomethodology has been established beyond its own discipline. The methodologies and findings of ethnomethodology have contributed directly to our broader understanding of organizations, diagnoses and assessments, the social production of 'thing-like-facts' and the construction of texts and oral accounts.

After this brief discussion of the ethnomethodological approach we can say that it is a thoroughly empirical way of understanding the nature of social order and intelligibility as witnessable achievements. Garfinkel's key aim was to transcend this micro-macro binary which has created more confusions then clarity in sociological theory. His emphasis in developing this approach was to argue that

local orders exist and these orders can be observed in the scenes within which they are produced and their possibility for intelligibility depends on their detail enactment. It is perceived that these orders are actual and they can be observed and simultaneously they are collective. Therefore the focus on individual subjectivity would obscure our understanding of these orders. This approach involves a focus upon ordinary social life and how it is done by people. It involves the observation of social activities 'as they happen' broadly in two senses: first, as they happen in the real world, not in some theoretically constructed version of the social world; second, it is meant that these activities are observable at first hand, not just by expert sociologists but by anyone. Social life is made up of many different activities and these are available to be recognized and understood for what they are by ordinary members of society.

In the backdrop of this discussion one can argue that ethnomethodology's lasting achievement has been to place the investigation of ordinary, practical action at the centre of sociological studies and reveal, through those studies, the myriad empirical forms that such action takes. Said this, one can also assert that ethnomethodology is not a homogeneous research field and should be viewed as a subset of qualitative inquiry. Its examination of ordinary action stands in contrast to the prevailing conception in the social sciences. Ethnomethodology, in contrast, has uniquely sought to reground ordinary action as a topic of inquiry in its own right. Its ordinarieness lies in its mundane availability for the members of society. In other words, according to this view, the members of society 'know what they are doing' and it is taken seriously in ethnomethodology. This commitment frequently has been misunderstood. It does not mean that ethnomethodology advocates an individualist and subjectivist theory of action. Rather, it implies that the intelligibility of the myriad actions comprising social life is an accomplishment of those engaged in them. Social 'order', meaning the recognizable, intelligible, accountable features of such actions: the features that make them 'ordinary' to those engaged in them is reconceived as endogenously produced. It is part and parcel of the ways that the members of society realize.

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