

Ethnomethodology as an unusual methods of studying society

The scientific field of ethnomethodology is broad scope, unusual and interesting sphere. To begin with we should evaluate the main term. Ethnomethodology is a fairly recent sociological perspective, founded by the American sociologist Harold Garfinkel in 1954. The main ideas behind it are set out in his book "Studies in Ethnomethodology" (1967). Ethnomethodology simply means the study of the ways in which people make sense of their social world, display this understanding to others, and produce the mutually shared social order in which they live. Ethnomethodology is a descriptive discipline and does not engage in the explanation or evaluation of the particular social order undertaken as a topic of study. In this way it differs from other sociological perspectives.

Garfinkel was influenced by phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz who used it in interpretive sociology. Garfinkel's particular aim was to show that social order was locally produced - "just this way by just these participants" and only their understandings matter. Common sense is biographical - in seeing the social world as stable as experience of it has developed over time from the individual's point of view. A reciprocity of perspectives and suspension of doubt is assumed by social actors.

The view of Schutz was that whereas scientists know so much of the world is not as it commonly appears, ordinary people assume that things are as they appear and that others as well as themselves will behave accordingly according to a stock of knowledge already laid down. For Garfinkel too there were two recommendations that the social settings were already practically accomplished and that people were practical enquirers. The practicality means people do not separate the action and the explanation: they are intertwined. Nor is there any covert motivation to be uncovered by sociologists, as the action is the meaning as involved. Schutz saw that there are different rationalities, and in this he follows Weber. Not unlike Weber, scientific rationality leads to anomie, here because it undermines the given stock of knowledge and assumptions of reciprocity between people. Certainly sociologists should not try to impose a science of sociology on to the world, though this is because it misses meanings and because meanings and the social world as well as derived actions are intricately connected: the social world produces meanings and is created by these meanings. Margaret Mead spoke of a world taken for granted, and that people assume realities until something comes along to question them.

Garfinkel's approach is conservative, because indexicality relies on established guiding interpretations at an almost unconscious level: so how do these change? Garfinkel forces new experiences into old interpretations, whereas even ordinary people can weigh up and reinterpret new experiences. Perhaps people knowingly assess their documentary evidences either to maintain or change their interpretive experiences, rather than trying to adapt everything into preforms of practically understood almost unconsciously accepted everyday interpretations. Culture does change, for example, so shifts are made. This is not unlike Kuhn's paradigm shift that scientists in the pursuit of falsification can undergo as new evidence calls for new interpretation.

Garfinkel's development of phenomenological tradition is widely misunderstood. In contrast to the social constructionist version of phenomenological sociology, he emphasises a focus on radical phenomena, rather than on the various ways they are interpreted. His recommendation that sociologists suspend their assumption of social order is often wrongly taken to mean that he believes social life to be chaotic, or that members of society are free agents. However, this suspension (bracketing in the phenomenological jargon) is merely an analytic move designed to bring the existing social order more clearly into focus. He emphasises the indexicality of language and the difficulties this creates for the production of objective accounts of social phenomena. This means that such accounts are reflexive to the settings in which they are produced (they depend upon that setting for their meaning).

Ethnomethodology looks at how individuals communicate while interacting. One of its key points is that ethnomethods are reflexive accounts. These accounts are the ways in which actors do such things as describe, criticize, and idealize specific situations to make sense of their social world. Reality is not stable. Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists did not subscribe to Parsons' theory that the social world is reified. Ethnomethodology treats social facts as the result of the individual situation created by a specific situation involving interpersonal communication. That is why many ethnomethodologists were concerned with the analysis of conversation.

Garfinkel believed experiences provided the meaning of language and facilitated communication. He did not believe language held a shared, consistent meaning for everyone. Garfinkel contended that the words of language are not the basis of communication. Previous and present interactions are at the heart of communicating.

According to Garfinkel, communication is made possible by a communal agreement or the appearance of consensus of the spoken word. Previously agreed upon events, within conversation, can set patterns of understanding. These patterns of previous communication are brought to encounters by each participant and can only be understood if each person met with the same results during previous dialogues with others. Communication produces experiences that are recalled in future communication. The more experience one has through conversing the greater understanding in communicating can be achieved. Understandings are developed through the interaction of communicating. The words of a language do not hold any inherent, common meaning. Conversations can be very vague. Social interaction provides the understanding.

In terms of the question of ethnomethodological methods, it is the position of Anne Rawls, speaking for Garfinkel, that ethnomethodology is itself not a method. That is, it does not have a set of formal research methods or procedures. Instead, the position taken is that ethnomethodologists have conducted their studies in a variety of ways, and that the point of these investigations is, «to discover the things that persons in particular situations do, the methods they use, to create the patterned orderliness of social life».

Working out the totals it is necessary to stress, Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists see language as a tool that is used to interpret and clarify social interactions. The interaction is doing the communicating and language the clarifying. Progressive realization through communication, past and present, further facilitates the understanding of language and its use. Communication is possible through social interaction and the development of the consensus of an assumed shared meaning based on experience.