

# Ethnomethodology

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Ethnomethodology is an area in sociology originating in the work of Harold Garfinkel. It represents an effort to study the methods in and through which members concertedly produce and assemble the features of everyday life in any actual, concrete, and not hypothetical or theoretically depicted setting. Ethnomethodology's proposal – one that is incommensurate with respect to other sociological theory (Garfinkel 1988) – 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. Moreover, raw experience – the booming buzz of William James – is anything but 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. Members of society achieve this intelligible organization through actual, coordinated, concerted, procedural behaviors or *methods* and *practices*.

Garfinkel was a student in Harvard's Department of Social Relations where he went to study with Talcott Parsons, although Garfinkel's developing concerns with the empirical detail of ordinary life and activity came to be at odds with Parsons's emphasis on conceptual formulation and theoretical generalization. While at Harvard, Garfinkel deepened his knowledge of phenomenology – an interest that had been sparked at the University of North Carolina where he had completed a master's degree – by meeting with Alfred Schutz and Aron Gurwitsch, who were both European "philosophers in exile" at the New School for Social Research. There is a strong influence of phenomenology on ethnomethodology, but Garfinkel deemphasized perceptual knowledge as a mental process or activity in favor of a concern with embodied activity and the practical production of social facts as that production resides in lived experience, whether that experience involves rhythmic clapping, responding to a "summoning" phone, traveling in a freeway traffic wave, standing in a service line, or any other ordinary matter.

After finishing his degree at Harvard and a short stint at Ohio State University, Garfinkel moved to Kansas where Harvard classmate Fred Strodtbeck invited him to help with a project on jury decision-making. While working on how jurors, in their deliberations, struggle with issues of evidence, demonstration, relevance, facts versus opinion, and other "methodological" matters, Garfinkel turned to the Yale cross-cultural area files and came upon terms such as ethnobotany, ethnophysiology, ethnophysics, and others. It was then he realized that *methodology* was something jurors were producing as a prominent and serious feature of their deliberations. Hence, Garfinkel coined "ethnomethodology" (see Garfinkel 1974) to refer to the study of how members of the jury engage in practices whereby they could decide indigenous problems of adequate accountability, description, and evidence in relation to the deliberative outcomes they produced.

In the fall of 1954 Garfinkel joined the faculty at UCLA. While there, he trained several generations of students and produced his most well-known work, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Garfinkel 1967). To obtain access to members' methods in a variety of settings, Garfinkel introduced his famous "breaching experiments," which reversed the usual sociological preoccupation with factors that contribute to social stability. Breaching involves asking what can be done to make for trouble in everyday events, and demonstrates that troublesome events are themselves revelatory of the ordinary practices whereby stability is achieved.

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A tic-tac-toe exercise, for example, involves the experimenter inviting a participant to play. After the participant starts the game by placing an “X” in a square formed by the tic-tac-toe matrix, the experimenter puts an “O” on a line of the game matrix rather than in a square. The trouble thereby created brings members’ methods to the fore as sources of order. These methods are manifest in the restorative or reparative efforts of participants. When a participant protests to the experimenter, “Is this a joke?” it shows that an ordinary game is to be engaged seriously and by respecting commonsense practices for placing Os and Xs. The practices of common sense are employed not by following rules of the game but by behaving in ways that are retrospectively consistent with those rules. In other words, behavior is to be accountable to rules and this means engaging in concrete and embodied practices that are orderly in their own right and are not explained or provided for in the rules that these practices make visible.

However, Garfinkel also went beyond experimental breaches to examine more naturally occurring disruptions to everyday life. In his influential *Studies* chapter on Agnes, a male-to-female transsexual, he set the agenda and tone for many subsequent investigations into the accomplishment of “gender.” Garfinkel’s extensive interviews and observations concerning Agnes provide access to something that is utterly routine in everyday life: the achievement of one’s visible and objective status as a man or woman, boy or girl. Because Agnes did not experience her gender visibility as routine or taken for granted, Garfinkel was able to document how members regularly employ tacit means for securing and guaranteeing the rights and obligations attendant upon being seen as a normal, natural, adult female. Agnes was a “practical methodologist” and artfully displayed what is required of anyone who claims to be a bona fide woman.

Garfinkel notes that he initially attempted to use a game metaphor in order to comprehend the various occasions in which Agnes had to “pass” or come across as the normal female person. But he realized that Agnes’s passing eluded attempts to reduce it to playing a game by the rules. There are, he argued, various “structural incongruities” between playing a game and sexual passing. Unlike a game, to pass as a member of a particular gender has no “time outs,” no exits from the work of passing, and only limited capacity for planning one’s strategies for passing because of the ubiquity of unanticipated happenings. Agnes could not be a strategic actor in the way that sociologist Erving Goffman portrays the matter, because she could never know in advance exactly what would be required of her for displaying herself as the natural female in any given interaction. She was learning what it took to be a woman even as she acted as if she were non-problematically a woman in the first place.

In 1959, while on sabbatical from UCLA, Garfinkel met Harvey Sacks, who was pursuing his law degree at Yale but would eventually move to the department of sociology at Berkeley for graduate work. Sacks remained in touch with Garfinkel, who brought him to Los Angeles in 1963. Sacks’s lectures and thinking formed the beginning of what would become the field of conversation analysis. Mutual influences between Garfinkel and Sacks are of considerable interest. Their collaborative endeavors are partially embodied in a joint publication, “On Formal Structures of Practical Actions” (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970), where they argue that sociological reasoning has often aimed to distinguish between “indexical” expressions, whose sense derives from their relation to aspects of the immediate context in which they are used, and objective expressions, whose sense is purportedly context free. Garfinkel and Sacks argue that the quest for objective expressions is endless, because such expressions always depend upon an orderliness that necessarily ties them to the situation of their use. Accordingly, Garfinkel and Sacks recommend a policy of “ethnomethodological indifference,” whereby investigators abstain from judging the status of objective expressions in terms of their adequacy, value, or consequentiality. Instead, the orderliness of any and all human expressions – the practical means by which those expressions attain their sense – is to be brought under study. The orderliness that Sacks and collaborators in conversation analysis began to pursue was the sequential organization of everyday talk and interaction, although there is also a stream of conversation analytic work on “membership categories” as devices that are deployed for purposes of making interactional sense.

Meanwhile, Garfinkel's own interests developed in the direction of scientific and work practice, and his contributions have been taken up in sociological studies of technology and science. In the 1980s, Garfinkel and his students turned to the examination of technical competencies in mathematics and the natural sciences, including astronomy (Garfinkel et al. 1981) and other domains. These studies probe the details of "shop work and shop talk" that form the tangible fabric of scientific practice. There is always "something more" to methodological practice than can be provided in highly detailed instructions, formalized guidelines, or accounts of inquiry. The "something more" includes routine practices at the workbench in laboratories and other settings of work. Indeed, lately Garfinkel (2002) has become preoccupied with what he calls the "shop floor problem," having to do with how generic descriptions of work settings, which attempt to specify the constituents of practice within those settings, confront "details in structures" or coherences in embodied practices that cannot be anticipated by, and utterly defy, the generic descriptions.

In his recent book, Garfinkel (2002) makes more explicit the central claim of ethnomethodology – namely, that it is in the business of working out Durkheim's aphorism, "the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental phenomenon." Rather than claiming that order can only be revealed by aggregating across large sets of data and replacing the concrete, observable detail of "immortal ordinary society" with concepts, ethnomethodology claims that there is a plenitude of order that is lost to the formal analytic theorizing as it exists in the field of sociology and elsewhere in the human sciences. Indeed, ethnomethodology "respecifies" Durkheim's aphorism in a way that formal analytic techniques do not and in fact cannot. Garfinkel is careful here to emphasize that ethnomethodology is not proposing itself as an alternative to formal analysis as if it were possible to escape from the search for objective expressions by engaging in a more interpretive endeavor. Rather, ethnomethodology proposes *alternates* that are not only coeval but also autochthonous, i.e., grounded practices that spring up and exist alongside formal analytic inquiries. The ethnomethodological alternate is, however, asymmetrical to formal analytic theorizing, meaning that ethnomethodology – but not formal analysis – makes it possible to investigate how members of any grouping achieve, as practical, concerted behaviors, the sense of formal truth and objectivity as this sense is necessarily embedded in their everyday casual and work lives.

SEE ALSO: Conversation Analysis; Information Technology; Language; Phenomenology; Schutz, Alfred; Science and Culture; Social Psychology; Theory

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