An Ethnomethodological Approach to the Interpretation of Qualitative Data

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The message

- What do you get if you cross ethnomethodology with the mafia?
- People making you an offer that you cannot understand
No, really,…

• Have you ever heard of the Scottish mafia?
• What do you get when you cross a deconstructionist and a Mafioso?
• How do you know if you're being approached by the Quantum Mafia?
• “You cross a lawyer with the godfather, baby (Don Henley)”
• How do you know if a blonde works for the Mafia?

• Believe it or not, they'll make you an offer you can't understand.
What is the ”work” a joke can do?

• Makes us relax?
• Makes us, uhmmm, really awkward,…
• Membership categorization device
  – Well, only loosely,…
  – MCD are precise, linguistic (“hearable”) aspects of utterances,
    • A term coined by Sachs,…
    – which link together categories for “native speakers”
• Is joking a way of testing whether we belong to the same group, e.g., can expect from each to have a shared “native language?”
Is ‘belonging’ objective?

• Dominant sociology assumes that the social world is essentially orderly, that is that patterns of behavior and interaction in society are regular and systematic rather than haphazard and chaotic.
• Do you agree?
• Most theories assume that order is “achieved”, negotiated, interpreted along the lines of different layers of logic, etc. Even the s-word: Situated.
• That is completely besides the point!
What is besides the point?

• How other theories see work as “achieved”, negotiated, interpreted along the lines of different layers of logic, etc
• Even “situated”

• Inasmuch as all these “eds” are mechanisms that draw attention towards general aspects of action, overarching theoretical constructs and a “patterned” society, ontologically existing “without” the actors themselves
Functionalism

• Functionalists regard order as the outcome of value consensus in society, which ensures that behavior conforms to generally accepted norms

• Talcott Parsons:
  – Wanted to explain the connections between action, organizations, and the wider society
  – Human beings act positively to realize their goals, but they also need to achieve some social regulation of these actions in order to avoid chaos, “force or fraud”
  – A central value system is at the core of such regulation
  – Scientific rational action was some kind of norm

• Fully subjective action, which did not follow scientific rational procedures, could be discounted
Marxism, is it similar?

• Marxists see order as a result of the subordination of one class to another, it is precarious and prone to disruption by revolution, but nevertheless it exists
Interactionism

• No so macro-perspectives
• Order is created and recreated everyday in the multiplicity of interaction situations, rather than as part of the social “system”
• It is ‘negotiated order’ which results from the processes of definition, interpretation and negotiation which constitute social interaction.
• However as with Functionalism and Marxism, social order is presumed as an objective feature of social life.
• Order can vary, be reflexive, incomplete, etc, but there is sufficient intersubjective order
And according to ethno it is not?

- Ethnomethodologists start out with the assumption that social order is illusory.
- Social life merely appears to be orderly; in reality it is potentially chaotic.
- Social order is constructed in the minds of social actors as society confronts the individual as a series of sense impressions and experiences which she or he must somehow organize into a coherent pattern.
Parsons’ functionalism

• Resolves "the problem of order"
• The internalization of norms and complementary role expectations are shared in a value system that is also shared
• This institutionalized “super-ego” motivates actors to “willingly” and “rationally” accept the priority of collective over personal interest (which would lead to un-order)
But, is this “order” as seen by members of society?

- “For Kant, the moral order “within” as an awesome mystery; for sociologists the moral order “without” is a technical mystery“
- Parsons theories assigned residual status to the “seen-but-unnoticed” actions of ordinary people
- For people, the moral order is manifest as commonsense actions, “the way things are”, “what everybody knows”
- How could that be allowed to “slip” from our attention?
The problem of rationality

- Parsons assumes an external “state of affairs” that exist independently of human epistemological involvement
- Incompleteness of knowledge does not undermine its objectivity
- If observations are not consistent with what “can be achieved”, they are discounted by science as irrelevant
- But are people only “judgemental dopes” in a system in which errors may have been deeply institutionalized
  - And, then, who can “scientifically” study them for what they are?
The problem of intersubjectivity

- Knowledge of the objective world of facts, norms and values must be shared in order for actors to use it to coordinate behavior.

- Unsatisfactorily because he ends up with knowledge either being “scientific”, i.e. converging towards an objective image, or being “normal” and governed by ideals and norms which stipulate what counts as a “fact”
  - Institutionalism resolves the problem of solipsism
  - Communication and motivation is dealt with analogously, by Parsons

- But then, “normal” knowledge/language/moral which does not fit the institutional framework, which can be observed scientifically by professional sociologists, does not “count” as knowledge.
The problem of reflexivity

- The actors’ “theory of their own actions” are only brought to bear on its course, it is is rational from the perspective of the institutional framework.
- Actors will tend to lack insight into the normative underpinnings of their own actions.
- “Value standards are conditioned into the actor”
  - Which then becomes incapable of making moral choice.
- On the other hand, if they can,
  - Functionalism is crushed as a fortress against chaos, force and fraud, since people who can manipulate their conduct within a known normative framework, also can act opportunistically.
  - And, such orientation would in itself have to be part of the normative foundation for those actions, and in a positivistic fashion, and this breaks the “action frame of reference” upon which Parson’s theories were founded.
Order or chaos?

• Preoccupation with rational conduct had drawn attention away from “reasonable” courses of action in everyday life.
• The assumption of “scientifically available” objective knowledge had given rise to normative determinism, which Garfinkel rejected.
• Garfinkel rejected the notion that ordinary, mundane actions of ordinary people can be treated as irrelevant or epiphenomenological.
• Rather than reflexivity having to be overcome in order to avoid chaos, Garfinkel argued that it was essential to maintain social organization.
So, there is order, after all?

- Garfinkel suggests that the way individuals bring order to, or make sense of their social world is through a psychological process, which he calls "the documentary method".
- Selecting certain facts from a social situation, which seem to conform to a pattern and then making sense of these facts in terms of the pattern.
- Once the pattern has been established, it is used as a framework for interpreting new facts, which arise within the situation.
The phenomenological input
That was too easy,…

• But the point is,
  – We can “see” two different things
  – Certainly the picture does not change!
  – So something else changes

• Husserl was concerned with figuring out exactly how cognitive mechanisms (because that’s what is has to be, right) ”works”
Modern variant,..
But, we can still "do an ethnography", right?

• By which I mean we’re able to switch viewpoints at will, interpret and re-interpret what we see, explain it and explicate it from a "superior" position of either (Gertz):
  – Positivist "sense false" of objectivity
  – Interpretational participant observation

• But can we?
Phenomenologically, speaking,..., no

• How does one (re)cognize a face?
  – For a face, as it were?

• And what is the difference between the “moden” one and these classics of the face?
Enough phenomenology,…

• How does this extend generally to interpretation in sensemaking
• “The documentary method” is at the core of ethnomethodology
The documentary method

• “The method consists of treating an actual appearance as ‘the document of,’ as ‘pointing to,’ as ‘standing on behalf of’ a presupposed underlying pattern. The method is recognizable for the everyday necessities of recognizing what a person is ‘talking about’ given that he does not say exactly what he means, or in recognizing such common occurrences and objects as mailmen, friendly gestures, and promises (Garfinkel 1962).”
What is ethnomethodology then!?!?!?

• Ethnomethodology is
  – The study of the method(s) which people use in their common-sense, mundane, ‘everyday’ practical work as ‘lay-sociologists’, in order to make sense and create a sense of order which makes further action possible
    • Ethno = people
    • Methodology = The stable set of practices, procedures, and rules used by members of a setting, to ‘make them members’ of that setting
Has ethnomethodology anything to do with ethnography

- Ethnomethodology presents compelling evidence that (almost) blind people can do an ethnography,…
- On the others hand; ethnomethodologically-informed ethnographies is an established term
- On the one hand: Ethnomethodology clearly thrives on “naturally occurring data”
- On the other hand: In order to observe *and* understand we have to apply the very methods of which member use themselves, as “seen-but-unnoticed”, so how can they be “seen for another first time?”
The knowledge interest

- Ought not to be what to study what people do (and certainly not what they ‘think’ or ‘feel’), because:

- “[…]‘our notion of what could conceivably happen’ is likely to be drawn from our unexamined members’ knowledge. Instead we need to proceed more cautiously by examining the methods members use to produce activities as observable and reportable (Sachs).”
Now we’re getting somewhere: ethno concerns,..

- The unsatisfied programmatic distinction between (and substitutability) of objective for indexical expressions
- The “uninteresting” reflexivity of accounts
- That by his accounting practices the member makes familiar commonplace activities of everyday life recognizable as familiar commonplace activities
Indexicality:

• The unsatisfied programmatic distinction between (and substitutability) of objective for indexical expressions
Reflexivity:

- The “uninteresting” reflexivity of accounts
Accountability

• The analyzability of actions-in-context as a practical accomplishment is unproblematically achieved by members doing an ongoing ethnography of themselves, making common activities recognized as “another first time
A few more bits and pieces of ‘ethno’-speak

• Sacks: People should not be seen as “coming to terms with” some phenomenon, but instead actively constituting it.

• Sachs: Categorization problems cannot be solved simply by taking the best notes you can and deciding afterwards. Instead our aim should be to try to understand when and how members make descriptions (categorizations).

• Sachs: The ability to read other people’s minds is not a psychological delusion, but a condition for social order. But what do they do when they do it?
So what ‘is’ *our* method then,…

- Famous experiments
- Detailed attention
- Bracketing
- Seeing something “for another first time”
- But basically
  - Ethnomethodology is not a method
Not a method, but,…

• One can learn a lot about the ethno-methodologies of people in various settings by studying *methodologically* those settings,…, which means that our method start with an analytical platform

• What about those experiments,….
Breaching the routine

• “Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble … to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion … anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation … to produce disorganized interaction should tell us something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained.”
Classical examples

• Volunteer to pay more for an item in the grocery shop that what is posted
• Take groceries from another customers carts
• Play tic-tac-toe with an eraser
• Act as a stranger in your own home, give tips to friends and family
• Ask for the substitution of objective for indexical expressions in ordinary talk
A couple of “jokes” examples

• “Vitsemannen”
• “Sketchemannen”
  – From “Tre brødre som ikke er brødre”

• What would happen if I went on to talk about it at length without explaining?
• What exactly makes them funny, anyway?
  – “innocent” breaching, not deeply internalized situation
Another (similar) example

• A **troll** is a person who posts inflammatory messages on the internet to disrupt the discussion or to upset its participants.

• Is trolling a “breaching experiment”

• Is forum/Usenet-behavior governed by norms or do they seem to be responding less crassly to “breaches” because behavior is not “bone deep” among members?
But is it useful?

• Ethnomethodology needs to be carefully integrated in the project organization
• Research
• Software requirements

• Certainly no mapping from ethnomethodology to design, but sometimes introducing new IT is a wonderful breaching experiment
Summing up:

• Ethnomethodology is concerned with what most other angles explicitly seek to exclude
  – Deal with ANT, cog. sci, participatory design perspectives (critical resource)

• Is ethno “value-less”
  – No, but it draws a clear border around what we can study and what we cannot
    • (ethnomethodologically speaking)
It is possible,…

• That you haven't heard about the Unitarians who come to your door and make you an offer you can't understand

• But if you're rude to them they'll come back and burn a question mark on your lawn,…