
Tim May (2000) 'Reflexivity in Social Life and Sociological Practice: A Rejoinder to Roger Slack'

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◆ Reflexivity in Social Life and Sociological Practice: A Rejoinder to Roger Slack

- 1.1 Roger Slack (2000) is quite correct in identifying my debt to ethnomethodology. Indeed, I find many interpretations of the work of this tradition to be problematic and have committed these concerns to print (May 1996: chapter 4). Here, however, we reach an issue upon which deconstruction - a school of thought he clearly does not have much time for - may shed some light. The idea of a coherent ethnomethodological tradition that is implied within his critique can only be constituted by the exclusion of a negative; in this case 'mainstream sociology' and the clear blue water that apparently lies between it and the ethnomethodological 'other'.
- 1.2 Given that sociology is a pluralist discipline, I am not sure how this can be maintained. Part of the very formulation of endogenous and referential reflexivity is to recognise this as strength when faced with social problems and issues that sociology may usefully understand and explain. The intention is thus to be inclusive, not exclusive, in sociological practice. It seems to me that the dichotomous position which I am accused of perpetuating, is maintained and reinforced by the tone and logic of the response. This, in turn, necessitates the constitution of a homogenous referent that becomes the 'enemy' in order to sustain such a position - and I need a correspondence theory!
- 1.3 Without further specificity accusations of this type remain of the same status that 'positivist' has been routinely deployed in sociological discourse against any person who does not share the accuser's perspective. Few philosophers of science or social science now maintain this position in the sense that the language of observation and reality itself are held to be identical. As such, thinking on these matters has changed considerably in the last thirty years, but the response does not appear to be sensitive to these movements in social and philosophical thought and their consequences for social research. This is where a degree of reflexivity seems to be required and this was a topic in social science to which ethnomethodology made significant contributions. It is to these that I now turn.

◆ Ethnomethodology Examined

- 2.1 Ethnomethodology, or more accurately the type of practice that Roger Slack is seeking to defend under this broad heading, seeks to avoid a self-referential conclusion for reflexivity via the application of a methodological purity that is supposed to accurately represent the ongoing accomplishments of everyday life. Yet I am left wondering that if the idea is to faithfully represent everyday life, should not sociological practice be subject to change in order to remain sensitive to alterations in the concerns, hopes, wishes, aspirations and beliefs that people in their practical lives hold? Without the possibility for transformation at the level of social scientific practice the result is a methodology that legislates for how social life should be reflected. How might this situation arise within a tradition of social thought?
- 2.2 A perspective that forgets its history, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu (2000), is one that presupposes there is a point of view from which no view may be taken. It is that of the 'motionless spectator' who becomes installed in their position by theoretical and/or methodological fiat and avoids a questioning of presuppositions via the application of method. It then becomes possible to execute a double movement from reflexivity at the level of social scientific practice by allowing the method to speak in the name of what is assumed to be a presuppositionless form of social inquiry. Yet who, we may reasonably ask, decided upon this mode of discovery and why? Was it lay actors of whom, let us not forget, sociological practitioners are a part, who collaborated with Harold Garfinkel to critique his teacher Talcott Parsons? Of course not. This was an endogenous move within sociology that sought to avoid self-referential consequences. It did so by arguing that meticulous descriptions of ongoing accomplishments were both necessary and sufficient for the purpose of understanding the social structures of everyday activities.

- 2.3** Bourdieu suggests that within academia a principle applies such that certain works may be absolutized by dehistoricizing them. This, in turn, provides for their apparent ability to solve problems that are not sensitive to historical changes, nor the conditions under and through which they were first produced (Bourdieu 2000). I am suggesting here that a process of forgetting is apparent in Roger Slack's response. At one level, this allows a practice that remains indifferent to the original reasons and conditions of its possibility and how these relate to contemporary issues. This, however, can lead to indifference and ultimately an arrogance that may serve to produce insularity sustained by those who will not challenge what is apparently beyond question. All disciplines and all members of those disciplines are susceptible to such a process and it is against that which practitioners must guard themselves.
- 2.4** With the overall purpose of sharpening insights into social life in mind, this form of reflexivity takes as its target the "oxymoron of *epistemic doxa*" (Bourdieu 1998: 129. Original Emphasis). Pierre Bourdieu employs this term to capture the continual need for practitioners to question the presuppositions that they leave unthought in their practices in order to improve scientific practice. Therefore, in the process of what was undoubtedly a radical and innovative move by Harold Garfinkel, a number of consequences for the study of social life followed. Here are what I take to be the core of those presuppositions. First, all that was accountable by lay actors became rational. Second, indifference in the process of studying formal structures was maintained by abstaining from all judgements of their "adequacy, value, importance, necessity, practicality, success, or consequentiality" (Garfinkel and Sacks 1986: 166). Third, the hermeneutic implications of a meeting between the language games of ethnomethodologists and lay actors were sidelined in favour of meticulous description in the manner suggested above. Fourth, the issue between language as a medium for the expression of interests and motives by people differentially positioned within discourses and language as a topic for uncovering the methods through which ordered activity is generated, was found in favour of the latter and finally, but by no means exhaustively, the idea of knowing and being in the social world was reduced to a study of language use.
- 2.5** The sheer weight of carrying these presuppositions over time would appear to call for some reflexive questioning. Quite simply, perhaps the burden of all of these is just too great to carry? It is not surprising, therefore, that cracks appeared in the unfolding of ethnomethodology. Thus, those who were reluctant to resort to studies of the sequencing of conversations as inspired by Harvey Sacks' conversation-analytic turn in ethnomethodology, become an ethnomethodological out-group. Once regarded as worthy of representing the tradition in various readers, these authors subsequently became the subjects of critique. Here we can include Dorothy Smith, Aron Cicourel, Jack Douglas, Mary Rogers, Alan Blum and Peter McHugh.
- 2.6** Take the case of Mary Rogers (1983). She wanted to recapture some phenomenological roots from those such as Jeff Coulter (1979) who argued for the expunging of the phenomenological residua in social thought. Noting certain trends within the tradition, commentators observed that ethnomethodology was increasingly sharing its critique of phenomenology with structuralism (Lemert 1979; Rogers 1984). More recently there are also those, such as Alec McHoul (1994) and Gale Miller (1997), who have argued for a dialogue between ethnomethodology and the works of Derrida and Foucault. The consequences of a failure to consider these possibilities for studying social life through a resort to an ever-narrower form of social inquiry were noted by Paul Atkinson in his review of ethnomethodological writings: "The radical stress on observable details risks becoming an unprincipled, descriptive recapitulation devoid of significance...minute descriptive detail is assembled in a hyper-realist profusion, until the reader loses any sense of meaning" (Atkinson, 1988: 446).
- 2.7** No one, as far as I am aware (reflexivity is also about limitations), has been more acute in recognising the loss of Garfinkel's original insights in this turn inwards than Melvin Pollner. In his article 'Left of Ethnomethodology: The Rise and Decline of Radical Reflexivity' he refers to endogenous and radical or referential reflexivity (albeit in different ways from which I have employed these terms. See May 1998a; 1998b; 1999; 2000; forthcoming). He refers to endogenous reflexivity as constituting social reality in terms of: "how what members do in, to, and about social reality" (Pollner, 1991: 372). Radical reflexivity, on the other hand, refers to how social reality, in general, is constituted. The object of its practices thus includes the presuppositions that are employed by social inquirers in their construction of social reality.
- 2.8** For Pollner, the central legacy of ethnomethodology was a concern with radical reflexivity. It is also one that has been lost in the unfolding of its history. Above all, it is about 'unsettling' and not a celebration of meticulous descriptions via unchanging methodological prescriptions. After all, it generates: "an insecurity regarding basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality". He continues: "Because it is the antithesis of 'settling down' it is not surprising that radical reflexivity is abandoned as ethnomethodology moves through the reconstructed walls of sociology" (1991: 370). This is also the

consequence, he suggests, of the blurring of the boundaries between conversation analysis (CA) and ethnomethodology with its “increasingly detailed explication of endogenous processes” (1991: 373). To this extent there appear to be differences between Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks on the topic of reflexivity itself. For some, it seems, such questions along with the forgetting of the history of a tradition, are not matters for contemporary practice. It is, therefore, impoverished as a result.

Summary

- 3.1 Histories of traditions may be written from a point of view that gloss over the differences in its unfolding. However, if the claim is to accurately represent social life by employing a methodology that is insensitive to these differences as well as potential changes in social life itself, then who exactly is legislating for the true way in which social relations *ought* to be studied? Originally, ethnomethodology attempted to overcome the complacency of the scholastic point of view in the study of social life. If this is forgotten and replaced by an increasing purity via methodological prescriptions, that re-invents that point of view whilst seeking to masquerade as something else. By forgetting the legacy of radical reflexivity that consequence seems inevitable and places beyond question that which is apparently sacred and so beyond question. Reflexivity is a risky business and the stakes are perhaps too high for some practitioners.



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