Ethnomethodology: sociology and cuff et al. assignment

Sociology

Ethnomethodology: Harold Garfinkel Ethnomethodology is a term coined by Harold Garfinkel in the movement of sociology towards interpretivism. It took place in a marginal relationship to mainstream sociology and was condemned to relevance of approach as in social psychology, but its influence grew regarding questions of social order, as carried out by Garfinkel's once tutor, Talcott Parsons. It means that ordinary people carry out social actions according to their largely practical interpretations of meaning about who and what is around them.

This is known as reflexivity of accounts. The way the world is described is part of that world – the description is the reality (see Cuff, 1990, 185). An important concept is indexicality, from Charles Peirce and Y. Bar-Hillel, which means a token takes place in a meaningful context, and thus allows each person to place meaning according to context. Garfinkel uses indexicality and indexical expression to refer to the dependence on context of the meaning of an object, social practice and concept (Baert, 1998, 86), and this is similar to Goffman's situational propriety.

People are emotionally attached to interpretation. Whereas Parsons was a large scale theoretical system person Garfinkel focussed on the small scale and much on empirical study. Parsons' functionalism was not particularly interested in motivations as he was interested in society looking after itself through its agents. Garfinkel did emphasise tacit understanding and knowledge of their surroundings; however he and H. Sacks did not judge the validity of sense making (Baert, 1998, 85) – just that people did it and acted on it.

It is not a question fo right or wrong interpretations and choices (if choices there are) but just how (Cuff et al. , 1990, 185). Garfinkel was influenced by phenomenology from Edmund Husserl and after 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" (Cuff et al. , 1990, 173) and only their understandings matter (174). What is 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 (Baert, 1988, 84) is assumed by social actors. Schutz view 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 acomplished and that people were practical enquirers (from Garfinkel in Cuff, 1990, 174).

The practicality means people do not separate the action and the explanation: they are intertwined (176). Nor is there any covert motivation to be uncovered by sociologists, as the action is the meaning as involved (see 176). 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 (see Baert, 1998, 85).

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 (see Baert, 1998, 85). An important question here is that of freedom. If the world is received as it is, and reciprocity is involved, then meaning is constructed within quite tight boundaries.

So there is some constraint in social order. (Cuff et al. , 1990, 174). These meanings are not individualist at all, and indeed each person expects others to be members of the social order, and their non-adherence to shared meanings in action raises questions of their membership not a re-evaluation of meaning (see 177). Weider (1974) as an ethnomethodologist looked at how prisoners on parole in hostels acted practically on an unwritten social code in the institution, showing in action the facts derived from meaning. A social order is derived from the pattern gained from invoking the unofficial social code (Cuff et al. , 1990, 180).

Rules are realised across the membership through use. Garfinkel developed such a documentary method of interpretation, as by Karl Mannheim, similar to the hermeneutic circle. People use intepretive procedures to construct documentary evidences (Baert, 1998, 87). The particulars of any situation are given a definite sense of place through referring to a generality and context out of the particular (Cuff et al. , 1990, 178). A practical situation

helps. The suicide investigating coroner in analysing evidence will prioritise the most obvious and common by way of evidence over all the other possibilities presented by the evidence (Cuff et al. 1990, 179). Thus selection is taken to the common, objectifying elements. A number of experiments included showing that we try and make sense of even random situations. Giving a counsellor a personal problem and receiving random replies, students were sometimes frustrated with the inconsistency of replies received but still used interpretation to look for patterns, insight and new meanings and found the counsellor helpful thus producing documentary evidence (Baert, 1998, 87). We can say that this happens by performers at cold reading sessions.

Using pyschological, speaking and prompting skills, performers give the impression of delving into people's past lives. People interpret the appearance and make the appearance reality, producing a sort of documentary evidence. It is crucial to see that when an individual falls out of line the understanding is not questioned, or our sense of membership of the socal order, but their membership of the social order. Thus notions of deviancy arise. Thus this is an analysis of social order, and how meaning generates order (see Cuff et al. , 1990, 177). Thus is the social order objectified.

Those that fall outside the social order might be considered as strangers (compare with Georg Simmel), or outsiders or even distraught (see 177). A breaching experiment (see Baert, 1998, 86) had students act like lodgers in front of their parents. This annoyed the parents because the context of the

assumptions behind these reciprocal relationships had shifted. In doing this work, the ethnomethodologist treats the meanings people generate as descriptions of the social world (Cuff et al. , 1990, 185) (therefore, no grand theory and nothing imposed).

This si why empirical work is the core of this method. It is particular to a people and a place. Questions arise as to whether this ethnomethodology can replace the systematic functionalism of Talcott Parsons. Does the system have to impose by relationships and necessary roles a social order beyond people in small locations generating reciprocal meanings? Secondly Garfinkel's approach is conservative, because indexicality relies on already 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 (see Baert, 1998, 88).

Garfinkel the ethnomethodologist describes rather than systematically explains, because the action and meaning are intertwined with no further motivational explanation needed (see above), and cannot offer explanations

for disruption (as in the breach experiment) and why people attempt to restore social order. Parsons does explain, through functional relationships. Garfinkel does have explanation (e. g. interpretation precedes evidence) but he does not make it systematic and it lacks theory (see Baert, 1998, 88).

As well as it not being functionalist, of systematic consensus (even if it is consensual), it also lacks engagement with theories of conflict. Anomie is there is if science is imposed over common meanings, but it is again a lack of development of theory. In doing research, these questions of conflict, and power, and authority should be addressed, such as the counsellor in the documentary evidences experiment (see Baert, 1998, 89). http://www. change. freeuk. com/learning/socthink/garfinkel. html