ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

VOLUME I

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VOLUME I

Edited by

Michael Lynch and Wes Sharrock

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ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

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Editors' Introduction:
Methods in Ethnomethodology

Michael Lynch and Wes Sharrock

ollowing the publication of Harold Garfinkel's (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, ethnomethodology became an established, if controversial, subfield of sociology, and it continues to provide a distinctive approach to studies of social phenomena. Together with conversation analysis – a research programme that investigates the constitutive organisation of social interaction through the analysis of turns at talk – ethnomethodology has also made inroads into anthropology, sociolinguistics, management studies and science and technology studies, among other fields. It has become a fixture in studies of human-computer interaction (HCI), and is central to the novel research area of computer supported cooperative work (CSCW). This four-volume set of articles provides a sample of ethnomethodological writings addressing methodological issues. It includes both programmatic arguments and empirical studies that exemplify ethnomethodological and conversation analytic approaches in different subject areas. Before discussing the selections and giving our rationales for including them in these volumes, we first need to clarify ethnomethodology's distinctive treatment of methodology and specific methodological topics.

Methodology as Topic and Resource

As usually understood in the social sciences, methodology includes basic philosophical questions on the very possibility of a social science, as well as more specific procedures (methods or techniques) for gathering and analysing data. Between these two extremes are questions about scale (macro/micro) of investigation, qualitative versus quantitative approaches and value-free versus value-committed approaches. In sociology and other fields, long-standing divisions on these questions remain in place, and researchers are more or less free to pursue contrasting, and even incompatible, methodological objectives. The chosen methods – survey analysis, experimentation, ethnography, archival research – tend to be congruent with basic methodological orientations, though it is also common to recommend eclecticism of approach and mixture of methods.

Treated superficially, such as in general theoretical overviews and textbook treatments, ethnomethodology can be located on a map of social science

methodologies. In terms of familiar methodological categories, it is qualitative, interpretative, micro (even 'molecular'), ethnographic and observational. Again, using conventional categories, ethnomethodology tends to be seated on the 'value free' side of the aisle (with 'value committed' or 'advocacy' approaches on the other), and yet it is sometimes placed on the radical wing of the various 'constructivist' social science programmes opposed to scientific realism or objectivism. If one looks a bit more deeply into the matter, it should become clear that leading ethnomethodologists rest uneasily with the categorical distinction between micro and macro levels of scale (Schegloff, 1987), and they reject the Cartesianism implied by methodological divisions between 'interpretative' and 'objective' approaches (Garfinkel, 2002). This unease has less to do with an aversion to conceptual dichotomies than with the vision of ethnomethodology's point and prospects.

Garfinkel's and other ethnomethodologists' deep and abiding interest in Continental philosophy long preceded the embrace of that philosophy by so-called 'postmodernists' in the social sciences and humanities, but one does not often find ethnomethodologists railing against Western (Anglophone) philosophy, with its rigid dichotomies and alleged epistemic-political hegemony, or celebrating a proliferation of 'ontologies' and 'knowledges' liberated from the severe gaze of positivist philosophy. Many ethnomethodologists speak about 'real worldly' matters; they speak of 'data', and they attempt to be rigorous and empirical (if not empiricist) in the way they present and analyse their materials, to the point that sociologists interested in 'big' questions often respond with a 'So what?' when presented with ethnomethodology's research findings. Ethnomethodologists are far from alone among academics in resisting compartmentalisation, but for reasons we shall elaborate, they present an interesting and often unanticipated challenge to entrenched positions in the endless debates between proponents of 'scientific' versus hermeneutic social science.

We hope that this introduction and the selection of articles that follows not only will acquaint readers with ethnomethodology's methodological orientation – or, rather, the various orientations associated with it – but also will make clear why many ethnomethodologists are dissatisfied with conventional methodological categories and lines of debate. Perhaps the most confusing aspect of ethnomethodology's orientation to methodology is also its most fundamental: *methodology* (or, rather, an open-ended array of methodologies) makes up the empirical subject matter of the field. At the same time, the sizeable research literature in the field of ethnomethodology exhibits some common practices and orientations that are appropriately considered under the rubric of research methodology.

Ethnomethodology's treatment of methodology as a topic of study, though meant to register the witnessable fact that everyday practices are methodically conducted, is intertwined with its use of methodological resources, so