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# Ethnomethodology: Some Suggestions For Sociology of Education

We have taken it as the main purpose of this paper to give our views on the strengths of the various approaches to the sociological study of education roughly falling within the general label: ethnomethodology.

This label is open to different interpretations, and to use it as though it represented one distinct body of research and theory is to give to it a meaning which in practice it does not have. Although there are similarities, the work of Garfinkle, Keddie, Young Cicourel, Sacks, Douglas, Mehan, etc. exhibits as it must do, some variation in interests and methodology that is appropriate to the researcher and topic of study.

Yet we do percieve one fundamental concern in the work of all those who work within the ethnomethodological approach to the sociological study of education. This concern is an epistemological one. It asks the questions: What is the nature of that which we are being asked to accept as knowledge about education? and: What is the nature of that which we are asking others to accept as knowledge about education? It is this concern which is at the root of the relatively recent questioning of sociological practice known as the sociology of sociology. In other words, the ethnomethodological approach to studying education begins by making the nature of sociological knowledge problematic.

In a recent article, Hugh Mehan points out that most sociological studies of education have treated social structures as social facts, without any rigorous attempt to see how these social facts are produced (Mehan 1978: 32). Yet it seems likely that it is the structuring activities of people in inter-action situations that produce such social facts.

Mehan gives the name "constitutive ethnography" to the work of interpreting the interactional work which generates recurrent patterns of behavior in school contexts. It is through such interactional work that the social facts of school life such as I.Q., achievement, school career patterns and classroom behavior patterns are accomplished (Mehan 1978: 35-36). And it is through the interpretation of such work that sociologists should be able to construct, in an inductive sense, those structures which sociologists of education have called social facts.

However, it seems to us, that structures are better understood as structuring activities rather than as fixed social structures. The relationship between structure and activity must be reflexive: structuring is made possible because of the idea of structure as a resource, and structure is available as a resource because of the structuring work that people do thereby creating structures.

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This position raises, or some might say, begs the question: Do such things as social facts, structures or variables have any existence outside of people's minds, in the same way that human cells are born, grow and die independent of human cognition? Without giving a definitive answer to this question, we suggest that even if there are such archetypal social facts floating around in Plato's realm of ideals along with love, the good, chairness, etc., it is our job as sociologists to make them visible, to find them embodied in something we can observe. As we have said in an earlier paper: "It is through intellectually devised tests of the seeming correspondence between symbolic representations of reality and reality itself that we assess the validity of the symbols, and the methods by which they were formulated" (Heyman 1976: 147).

We can say very little about "reality" directly. We know that mystics have been telling us for thousands of years about their own immediate experiences of a reality, in necessarily indirect ways, mainly through poetic language: symbol, metaphor, myth and parable. They have recognized that, in a sense, we live in two worlds: the one is the world of phenomena, the world of forms, the world of words; the other is the world of the absolute, the world of oneness, the world of no form, the world of silence. Interestingly enough, this idea is beautifully expressed both in the Old and New Testaments: in Genesis, chapter one, in which God creates the world by speaking: e.g. "And God *said,* Let there be light: and there was light (Genesis 1: 3) and in St. John, chapter one: "In the beginning was the *Word,* and the *Word* was with God and the *Word* was God" (St. John 1: 1).

The similarity between religious thought and ethnomethodology in this respect is quite striking. Both say in somewhat different words that the world as we know it is created through speech. It is through language that both God and man differentiate the world from an indiscriminate mass and give it form and substance, at least insofar as it can be lived in and communicated to others. This suggests to us that in order to study the knowable social world we should study, at the very least, the means by which it was and is created through the study of naturally occuring interaction, especially talk.

Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey, in the introduction to their new book *(Power and Ideology in Education)* have provided us with a review of the state of the art of sociology of education. What strikes us most about work in our field as they described it was the emphasis on solving social problems rather than sociological problems. Whether one looks at those various studies grouped under functionalism, empiricism, conflict theory, or theories of human capital formation, sociology of education has seen its task as coming to grips with problems in education as defined by non-sociologists. In so doing they have taken for granted and used as the framework for their research that "which everyone knows about education." They have taken for granted that which Garfinkle calls "The socially standardized and standardizing, 'seen but unnoticed,' expected, background features of everyday scenes," (Garfinkle, 1964 as reprinted in Sudnow, 1972, p. 2). Clearly, the problem with having taken such things for granted is that researchers have for the most part ignored the fundamental datum of education: The day-to-day interaction in schools and classrooms of teachers and pupils, in favor of more elaborate problems of apparently greater social significance.

We have no quarrel with attempts at improving society. But it is still the case that in order to improve society through educational reform we must first know what it is we are reforming. And we have yet to be convinced that sociologists know what schooling is all about.

In our view the strength and importance of the ethnomethodological approach to the study of schooling is its interest in understanding and describing what goes on in schools at the level of social interaction, by means of the analysis of this interaction as recorded on audio and video tape. How can we know about education, how can we talk about education, how can we reform education in any rational way until we are first able to provide a reasonable picture of the essential processes of education as they occur in the day-to-day interaction in the school? We might argue that theories in sociology of education have, until recently, concentrated on explaining *why* things happen as they do in education without first providing adequate descriptions of precisely *what* is happening.

We are convinced that the most heuristic approach to studying education is through the description and interpretation of naturally occuring interaction. Such a view asumes that the best way to understand the concept of structure as it applies specifically to education is to understand it as structuring i.e. as a process which can be studied in interaction as people draw upon background knowledge through explicit reference, or inference. Structure becomes real as it is used in competent members' talk as resource. Social categories exist in their use as revealed through interactional analysis. It is the job of the sociologist of education to show through interactional analysis what features are mainly trans-situational background features and what features are mainly contextual i.e. best understood as arising out of or created by the interactional process (Douglas 1973: 41).

To return to Karabel and Halsey (1977), they seem to us to misunderstand the significance of some recent work by Cicourel and his students presented in the book *Language Use and School Performance* (1974), and by extension, most of the other work using this approach. In this book Cicourel and his colleagues concern themselves with the ways in which standardized measures of aptitude and ability, such as intelligence tests, are administered and used for evaluation and decision making in schools. Of this work Karabel and Halsey (1977): 55) write:

> Yet despite the relative novelty of the ethnomethodological approach and the freshness of its insights, the most striking thing about the study led by Cicourel is its frequent banality. Roth (1974), for example, demonstrated in considerable detail that the cognitive operations leading to an answer marked as incorrect are often more complex than those which result in an acceptable response. Cicourel (1974: 331) finds it necessary to reiterate the study's finding that bilingual children have particularly acute problems in understanding test instructions. In article after article, the authors advance the well-worn idea that social settings in which a test takes place influences student performance. When one campares the self-consciously innovative work presented in *Language Use and School Performance* with the research of such representatives of the "traditional" sociology of education as Strodtbeck (1961) or Kahl (1961), it is hard to see how the interpretative approach has advanced understanding of a problem for which it seemed eminently apt - that of educability.

We would agree that this kind of work might *seem* banal to the superficial reader. But it is anything but banal; it is a sociology of the commonplace. As such it probes deeply into the commonplace activities in schools that most sociologists take for granted as being objective facts of school life, but of which we can say: the activities are often quite different than the normal accounting of them.

The papers in Cicourel's book present evidence of the complexity of school activities and of the work being done to accomplish the social interaction and cohesion without which schools could not function. These papers illustrate an often ignored feature of talk: that it serves to maintain or accomplish social interaction as much or more than it serves to transfer information of the kind that schools are supposed to transfer. They illustrate the extent to which it is impossible to understand educational activities simply by being told about them. What teachers,

administrators and children say they do and what they do do are not necessarily the same. The practical circumstances of everyday life must play an influential part. That is precisely why, in order to find better interpretations of what goes on in education researchers have to look long and hard at these practical circumstances as they are embodied in interaction.

Karabel and Halsey apparently misinterpret the essential argument of the articles, although how this is possible is beyond us. Cicourel *et al.* do not use a reified sense of setting and performance to suggest that social settings influence student performance, as is done in traditional sociological functional analysis. Instead they analyze the interaction that takes place between teachers, testers, pupils, and researchers which both draws upon and creates the sense of setting and performance. Among other things in so doing they show that in the very limited studies they have done, conclusions on ability and educability of children cannot be based on the results of certain standardized tests because (1) they are not standardized and (2) they do not allow us to recover the child's knowledge or ability from the test score. The method of analysis goes far beyond the work of Strodtbeck and Kahl (see below). It depends on transcripts of tape recordings of "naturally occurring interaction" which the researcher analyzes as to meaning in his capacity as a native English speaker and hearer. The tapes are records, as complete as we can have at this time, of what has taken place during the teaching of a lesson, the administration of a test or experiment, or the elicitation of children's reasons for answering test questions as they have done. The ethonomethodologist is not using these tapes as indicators for the "real thing." When we analyze these tapes we are analyzing social interaction as it is lived.

Even the very interesting work cited, that of Strodtbeck (1961) and Kahl (1961) reprinted in the Halsey, Floud and Anderson book *Education, Economy and Society* (1961), looks at social settings at second hand. In other words, *naturally* occuring interaction of the boys, and their families, or the boys in a school environment is not made problematic at all by Kahl, and only as a supplement to the interview and questionnaire by Strodtbeck. Both studies attempt to explain their subjects' behavior in terms of external variables, such as Jewish and Italian cultural values in Strodtbeck's study, (very much in the manner of Weber's work on the relationship of ways of thought and the distribution of power in society) and I.Q., family status and desire, in Kahl's study.

The social settings are used as a resource, not as a topic for study insofar as these settings are not analyzed as they naturally occur. Claims as to their influence on behavior are thus reduced to common sense inference based, not on observed interaction, but on indicators gathered by questionnaire and interview.

The difference between this research and that of Cicourel and his research group seems to me to be of the utmost importance. As Cicourel (1974: 2-3) says in his introduction:

> . . .I want to stress that many of the issues we examine are not new, but our approach is different in that we locate school problems and the education of teachers within a context that addresses basic questions and issues in everyday school life. We seek to learn about the child's experiences and his conceptions of a lived-in world through his oral and non-oral expression.

In Cicourel's research that which is to count as knowledge about education is based on observation and analysis of taped social interaction. For us this is a logical approach to the study of education: what could be more logical than trying to make sense of education by showing what constitutes aspects of schooling as they are, in a sense, created through teacher and pupil action and interaction in their

natural setting? Once this problem has been satisfactorily solved, we can then turn to the question of how to account for these differences as part of a larger theoretical statement concerning causes of variation in performance.

As in traditional sociology of education, the structure and meaning of social interaction is the main analytical interest in this approach to research. But the search for the principles of structure and meaning focusses upon the living, social world of the school. As Mehan has said: ". . . in contrast to correlational studies, which seek relationships among social structures treated as variables, and participant-observation studies, which look for systematic patterns of routine social behaviors, constitutive studies attempt to describe the interactional work that essembles systematic patterns and social structures" (Mehan 1978: 38).

In our opinion future research in the sociology of education must give considerably more attention than it has to describing and analyzing the normal everyday interaction that goes on in schools. It is through such work that we should be able to give more useful accounts of what education is in its sociological aspects. It is through such work that we should be able to give more useful accounts of such "social facts" as intelligence, achievement, streaming, teaching, classroom organization, etc., because these facts will now exist for sociologists as part of the process in which they have been created.

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*Notes*

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