Group Discussions/Focus Groups

Group discussion is a means of collecting data in one go from several people (who usually share common experiences) and which concentrates on their shared meanings, whereas a focus group is a special type of group discussion with a narrowly focused topic discussed by group members of equal status who do not know one another.

Section Outline: *Tapping into collective opinions and feelings. Public meetings: who really participates? Smaller informal groups. Expressed and underlying attitudes. Group discussions are cheap, quick and non-individualist. Social dynamics in group discussions. Focus groups as a special case. Size and procedures for focus groups. Selection of participants. Arrangements for meeting. The roles of 'facilitator' and 'scribe'. Focus groups: cheap and dirty substitute for research.*

Our opinions, feelings and attitudes are formed through our contacts with others. Unlike research methods based on questionnaires or even less-structured interviews, group discussions attempt to reflect this by obtaining information from people in groups. These range from large public meetings, through small get-togethers of about eight to ten invited informants, to highly specialised focus groups. A focus group is a special kind of group discussion.

Researchers sometimes arrange public meetings to take soundings. This typically happens early in the research project, to explore possible lines of enquiry and to inform people about what is being planned. Those who work with or represent communities or organisations might be thought to have a good idea of what 'the community at large' may feel. This is not

necessarily the case. These people's views are likely to be influenced by their particular function in the community. Community representatives usually only meet a sub-section of the population. Local politicians tend to have knowledge only of constituents who consult them.

It is also impossible for everyone to have an equal share of speaking in a large meeting. The opinions most strongly expressed are those of community leaders, 'experts', and those who regularly attend meetings. This form of group discussion is a collective version of conducting individual interviews with **Key Informants**. It is useful in the early stages of a project, as a means of getting a feel of some of the issues and topics to explore. However, if used as a main method of investigation, the opinions of the vocally or politically dominant, rather than the whole range of views, will be over-represented.

A better use of group discussions is on a smaller scale, with groups consisting of the kinds of people with whom the participants normally mix. However, because the group has usually been specially created by the researcher, the participants are in an artificial situation. The researcher is therefore interested not only in the ideas, opinions, etc. as they are communicated in that specific and artificially created group, but also the *underlying* opinions, feelings, etc. that members already have, and which are expressed, amplified and possibly modified through the collective interaction in the group. The presence of other members may also suggest ways in which individuals adapt when faced with alternative views.

The value of group discussion as a method lies in its speed and cheapness. In the time that a couple of one-to-one interviews might take, it is possible to obtain responses from eight or ten people. Less detail or depth is achieved for each informant, but we also see how the individual's comments are received by other people. In this sense, it is a *social* rather than an *individualistic* research tool. Its sympathy for social settings of the informants has established it in **Feminist Research**. In a wider context, during the exploratory stage of a project, group discussion is an effective tool to test preliminary ideas and discover the expressed concerns of potential informants.

The success of this depends on how well group discussions are managed, and the data analysed. Discussion groups, like all new groups, have their own dynamic which depends on who is taking part. Initially, even with the researcher's guidance, there are few 'rules' governing participants' behaviour, and it takes a while before informants negotiate their own roles and contributions. As informants begin to co-operate with each other, a productive period follows in which many new topics will be raised. Gradually, a structure and consensus emerge, which constrain

themes for further discussion. Although the set-up of such groups is less formalised than in focus groups, the researcher's tasks are much the same.

Focus groups are a special type of group discussion, first used by Merton (Merton et al. 1956). The techniques for conducting them have since been developed by market research companies. They are now widely used in the public sector and by political parties as a method of assessing public opinion. *The media attention this has received has encouraged inexperienced researchers incorrectly to call any form of group discussion a focus group.* Focus groups are one, specific, more formal type of group discussion (see Krueger 1994; Krueger and King 1998; Morgan 1997, 1998; Morgan and Krueger 1997–8).

As implied by the name, focus groups *focus* on particular issues that are introduced in a predetermined order as carefully worded, open-ended questions or topics. These groups should normally consist of between six and ten people; more than 12 has been found to inhibit discussion. The group members are chosen because they have similar education, social status, occupation and income, etc. (Brannen and Nilsen 2002). How closely similar is a matter for judgement: does a discussion of disabilities require participants to be disabled, or to have the same disability (Edwards and Imrie 2003)? Participants should not know each other. Those invited to attend will cover various sections of the community. For example, a series of discussions could be held with particular interest groups – community leaders, teenagers, women, the elderly – as in the Glasgow study of the health needs of black and ethnic minority women (Avan 1995).

Two methods of selection for focus groups are normally used. Existing groups can be approached and discussions held with the members who agree to participate. Alternatively, random sampling followed by allocation to groups could be used, as in a study for Somerset Health Authority (Richardson and Bowie 1995). This helps to ensure that a wider range of opinion is represented rather than being dominated by 'professional volunteers'.

When organising focus groups, it is important to arrange a convenient time and a suitable location, accessible for all attendees. The venue should be comfortable, so that people will feel free to talk and share their experiences and opinions. People may have problems in attending meetings because of family or employment commitments. Transport and crèche facilities may even be provided, and it is usual to supply light refreshments. To encourage attendance, financial inducements or small gifts are sometimes given to those attending (the Somerset study paid each person £10).

The interviewer, often called the *facilitator*, needs different skills and techniques than in the one-to-one interview (**Interviewing**). He/she must be very well informed and prepared. An additional expert may also attend to provide specialist information. The methods of question construction and interviewer probing will be the same, but with the added problems of group control. The interviewer must ensure that only one person speaks at a time; that everyone is encouraged to speak in turn; and that no-one dominates. In this last case, the interviewer needs to be able to say 'shut up' without sounding threatening or inhibiting the others. Seating arrangements can be changed (perhaps after refreshments or a comfort break) to influence participation. The more reticent members should be re-seated opposite the facilitator so that eye contact can be used to encourage them to join in. In contrast, the vociferous should be moved to a position that makes it difficult for them to catch the facilitator's eye.

It is also common to use a second interviewer (or *scribe*) to operate the tape recorder and to act as note-taker. Usually name-badges or place-names are used to aid later transcription. Facilitators should not be members of the community or at least not identified with any particular faction, and not be known to members of the group.

As Grbich has shown, focus groups, like other discussion groups, are useful for finding out about underlying issues and opinions, provided they are properly conducted (1999: 108–15). Comments by members can trigger a whole range of views from others in the group. Because they give quick results, and are relatively cheap and easy to set up, discussion groups are widely used as an aid to policy planning and prioritising, and evaluation of programmes (**Community Profiles**). Without other inputs, however, focus groups are a 'cheap and dirty' substitute for real research. It is all too easy to be tempted into making wild and unjustified generalisations based on what, after all, are a few people talking about a handful of selected issues. The isolation of the leadership of 'New Labour' from the core membership of the British Labour Party during its first two terms of government is a stark reminder of the damage that can be done by an over-reliance on fashionable focus groups.

Key Words

consensus
facilitator
group dynamics
key informant
scribe

Links

Community Profiles
Feminist Research
Interviewing
Key Informants

REFERENCES

General

Grbich, C. (1999) *Qualitative Research in Health*. London: Sage.
Krueger, R. (1994) *Focus Groups: a Practical Guide for Applied Research*. (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Krueger, R. and King, J. (1998) *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups*. (Focus Group Kit, 5) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Merton, R., Fiske, M. and Kendall, P. (1956) *The Focused Interview*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
Morgan, D. (1997) *Focus Groups in Qualitative Research* (2nd edn) (*Qualitative Research Methods, Vol. 16*). London: Sage.
Morgan, D. (1998) *The Focus Group Guide Book*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Morgan, D. and Krueger, R. (1997–8) *The Focus Group Kit* (6 vols). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Examples

Avan, G. (1995) *Perceived Health Needs of Black and Ethnic Minority Women: An Exploratory Study*. Glasgow: Community Support Unit, Healthy Glasgow.
Brannen, J. and Nilsen, A. (2002) 'Young People's Time Perspectives: from Youth to Adulthood'. *Sociology*, 36 (3): 513–37.
Edwards, C. and Imrie, R. (2003) 'Disability and Bodies as Bearers of Value'. *Sociology*, 37 (2): 239–56.
Richardson, A. and Bowie, C. (1995) 'Public Opinion'. *Health Service Journal*, 11 (May): 25–6.

The Hawthorne Effect

The Hawthorne Effect is the tendency, particularly in social experiments, for people to modify their behaviour because they know they are being studied, and so to distort (usually unwittingly) the research findings.

Section Outline: *How people respond to being studied. The original experiments at the Hawthorne plant. Responses to real and imagined changes in lighting. Manipulating working conditions. The move from psychology to ethnography. Unofficial worker practices. Being studied versus engagement with the researcher. Hawthorne as poor experimental design. Extraneous influences: the Depression.*

REFERENCES

General

Bourque, L. (2003) *How to Conduct Telephone Surveys* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Frey, J. (1989) *Survey Research by Telephone* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Frey, J. and Oishi, S. (1995) *How to Conduct Interviews by Phone and in Person*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lavrakas, P. (1986) *Telephone Survey Methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Schutt, R. (1999) *Investigating the Social World* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Examples

Bellview CATI (2003) www.bellviewcati.com

Kellner, P. (2003) 'For the Record'. *The Guardian*, 12 February: 19.

QPSMR CATI (2003) www.qpsmrcati.ltd/qpsmr_cati.htm

Sparrow, N. (2003) 'Why Internet Polls Have a Liberal Bias'. Letter to the Editor, *The Guardian*, 13 February: 23.

Surveycraft CATI (2003) www.infocorp.co.uk

The Guardian (2003) 'R4 to the fore – or is 2 still No 1?' 29 May: 21.

Unobtrusive Methods and Triangulation

Unobtrusive methods, which extract data from physical sources, or from groups and individuals without them being aware that data are being extracted or modifying their behaviour because they know they are being studied, are often used in multi-method triangulation as alternative data sources against which research findings on a particular topic can be cross-checked.

Section Outline: *'Non-reactive methods'. Addition to survey research, not replacement. Multi-method approaches. Triangulation and its forms. Methodological pluralism. 'Less reactive methods'. Physical records. Field notes, secondary analysis and psychological experiments not really unobtrusive. Examples of clever indirect methods. Participant observation. Issues of ethical practice. Reporting unobtrusiveness.*

Unobtrusive methods is the collective term for ways of gathering data without intruding into the lives of the people being studied. Their advantage is that they do not disturb the naturally occurring processes that are the subject of the research. In particular, because the informants are not aware of the research that is going on, their behaviour and self-descriptions are not modified by the researcher's presence or activities (Lee 2000). Other names for these techniques are 'non-reactive' or 'indirect' methods.

While advocates of unobtrusive approaches (e.g. Webb et al. 1966) were not opposed to survey research, they drew attention to its limitations as a means of tapping into the actual behaviour and belief systems of respondents. Rather than rejecting the survey, they proposed that data could also be gathered *by using additional techniques*, so that a better picture might be gained from several sources. Non-reactive measures would enable researchers to 'shore up reactive infirmities of the interview and questionnaire' (Webb et al. 1966: 174).

The purpose was to improve the way social science concepts were defined, represented empirically and so better understood. Concepts like racism, sexuality or even kinship, for example, might not be accessed fully by interview questions as the sole measure. Respondents are believed to be less reluctant to admit in public (i.e. to interviewers) that they take racist stances, have unconventional sexual preferences or do not visit their parents often.

The presence of an interviewer modifies their reported position, because they *react to being under scrutiny*. They might withhold socially unacceptable views; act the way they think researchers want to study; become self-conscious about audio-recorders; respond to questionnaires in a routine fashion (e.g. answering 'no' to all similar questions: **Questionnaires**); or just modify activities to accommodate the presence of a researcher in a confined space. Measuring anything inevitably changes it (**Hawthorne Effect**). What matters is what informants might otherwise actually do and believe, not how they act and what they say when they know they are being 'watched' (Speer

and Hutchby 2003). Invisible methods help to constrain this problem, and the results from them can be compared with those found by conventional survey techniques (**Social Surveys**).

Using several methods would offer complementary measures of concepts, and a comparison between them would yield both a more rounded and accurate set of measurements. The employment of several methods is called 'triangulation', a term borrowed from land surveying based on two points. Denzin (1970, 1978) advocates using different perspectives ('theoretical triangulation'); data-sets ('data triangulation'); research workers ('investigator triangulation'); studies ('in-method methodological triangulation'); and methods of data collection ('between-methods methodological triangulation'). Combinations of these types of triangulation are called 'multiple triangulation' (Denzin 1970: 472). The more extensive the triangulation, the more confident we can be about the findings (**Reliability**; **Validity**).

Triangulation is a special case of 'methodological pluralism', a perspective that argues for an end to disputes about 'the best method' and the use of the 'most suitable methods' for the tasks in hand (**Methods and Methodologies**). Webb's between-methods triangulation emphasises adding new insights that non-reactive methods bring to survey research. However, it applies more generally: 'Every data-gathering class – interviews, questionnaires, observation, performance records, physical evidence – is potentially biased' (Webb 1970: 450). Unobtrusive methods do not prioritise qualitative research over quantitative research: rather they add *less reactive* measures to *more reactive* ones.

We can distinguish between 'indirect methods' involving no face-to-face encounters, and 'less reactive methods' which, while involving contacts, minimise the unintended effects of the researcher's presence. The most important of the standard methods in this respect is documentary analysis (**Documentary Methods**). Documents produced *before* the research cannot have been influenced by the research itself (although diaries and 'personal' papers are often produced with an eye to posterity and public reputation: **Auto/biography and Life Histories**). To varying degrees, documents are unrepresentative, incomplete, inaccessible and unreliable: each method has its own limitations.

The other major indirect method is **Content Analysis**. This has most of the same strengths and weaknesses of documentary analysis, with the added benefit that it is cheap, most frequently applied to published sources, and its source materials are easy to check. However, content analysis of field notes – the most common method of 'coding' – is a *direct* method because the data have previously been collected by researchers

in face-to-face research settings. Similarly, social psychology experiments in which subjects are not told *in advance* what the experiment is testing, because this would bias the outcome, are only partially less obtrusive.

A parallel caveat applies to **Secondary Analysis**, where data collected for one purpose is later re-analysed for another. Clearly, secondary analysis of previous research studies could not count as less reactive, even though the reactivity would have been in the primary research. Indeed, most primary sources like official statistics involve face-to-face data collection, as do most 'social indicators' (**Indicators and Operationalisations**).

Examples of direct and most ingenious methods include Mosteller's examination of wear and tear on library reference books to see which sections were most used and so intellectually important (quoted in Webb 1970). Journalists and market researchers sort through household garbage to investigate consumption patterns. In both cases, it was physical objects that were studied, not people. Using such physical traces is a well-established tradition in archaeology for information about lifestyles, religious practices and social hierarchies). Campbell et al. (1966) monitored lecture theatre seating patterns to infer inter-racial attitudes among student groups. This did involve **Observation** of people, but without social interaction.

The availability of pre-existing objects, and the researcher's lack of control over them is a limitation. An alternative less reactive method is 'contrived observation,' where the researcher introduces a stimulus without the research being obvious. Bryman (2001: 165–6) gives the example of leaving a ladder against a wall and observing how many people walk under it, as a measurement of superstitions. More common is **Participant Observation,** where the researcher attempts to blend in so that respondents will get used to the researcher's presence.

As in these last two methods, unobtrusive research raises ethical problems because respondents have not given their informed consent (**Ethical Practice**). Denzin (1970: 447) casually dismisses this, saying that the researcher knows best if subjects 'would be harmed or discredited . . . I place the ethical matter in the observer's hands'. In other words, Denzin advocates a stance that many scholars would find *unethical*, but transfers to the individual researcher, as the sole judge, the full responsibility for the potentially unethical practice. However, simply improving the quality of research is a poor basis for unethical procedures.

Employing several measures, some of which are less intrusive, should not be confused with a simplistic commitment to studying what occurs 'naturally'. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue that both qualitative and quantitative traditions seek to learn about the way the world would operate regardless of whether it is being studied. Both, in their own ways,

build on situations where the research process has little, and known, impact, and where variations in procedures and researchers are minimised. But this does *not* mean that naturally occurring events can only be studied in ways that do not disrupt them (despite many qualitative writers prioritising this), or that they have to be studied in a covert way. The purpose of multi-method approaches is to understand *how* the data collection changes things, or in other words to handle the inevitable processes of reactivity. By systematically exercising **Reflexivity**, researchers scrutinise

> why they did what they did and its consequences, both methodological and ethical . . . they make explicit for their readers how their research was done, and their own role in producing the findings (Hammersley 2003: 344–5).

Key Words

contrived observation
field notes
naturally occurring
physical traces
reactivity
reflexivity

Links

Auto/biography and Life Histories
Content Analysis
Documentary Methods
Ethical Practice
Hawthorne Effect
Indicators and Operationalisations
Methods and Methodologies
Observation
Participant Observation
Questionnaires
Reflexivity
Reliability
Secondary Analysis
Social Surveys
Validity

REFERENCES

General

Denzin, N. (ed.) (1970) *Sociological Methods.* Chicago: Aldine.
Denzin, N. (1978) *The Research Act.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Hammersley, M. (2003) '"Analytics" are No Substitute for Methodology'. *Sociology*, 37 (2): 339–51.
Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice.* London: Routledge.
Lee, R. (2000) *Unobtrusive Methods in Social Research.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Examples

American Sociological Association (ASA) (1997) *Code of Ethics.* www.asanet.org/members/ecointro.html

British Psychological Society (BPS) (2000) *Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles, and Guidelines.* www.bps.org.uk

British Sociological Association (2002) *Statement of Ethical Practice.* www.britsoc.co.uk?index.php?link_id=14&area=item1

Collins, H. (1984) 'Researching Spoonbending'. In Bell, C. and Roberts, H. (eds), *Social Researching.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Festinger, L., Rieken, H. and Schachter, S. (1956) *When Prophecy Fails.* New York: Harper.

Finch, J. (1984) '"It's Great to Have Someone to Talk to": the Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women'. In Bell, C. and Roberts, H. (eds) *Social Researching.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Guardian (2003) 'Research News', *Guardian Education,* 18 Feb. 2003: 11. www.educationguardian.co.uk/higher/research

Shipman, M. (1997) *The Limitations of Social Research.* Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.

Social Research Association (SRA) (2002) *Ethical Guidelines.* www.the-srs.org/Ethicals.html

Spallone, P., Wilkes, T., Ettorre, E., Haimes, C., Shakespeare, T. and Stacy, M. (2000) 'Putting Sociology on the Bioethics Map'. In Eldridge, J., MacInnes, J., Scott, S., Warhurst, C. and Witz, A. (eds) *For Sociology: Legacies and Practices.* Durham: sociologypress.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the production of highly detailed accounts of how people in a social setting lead their lives, based on systematic and long-term observation of, and conversations with, informants.

Section Outline: *Anthropological origins of ethnography. The Chicago School: direct experience versus book learning. British documentaries. From description to interpretation. Detailed accounts of prolonged, systematic, first-hand encounters. Reflexivity. Natural occurrences, seen in context. Learning participant observation. Gaining access to different groups.*

Ethnography began in the early twentieth century when social anthropology first directly studied societies other than their own. Given the dominance of evolutionary thinking in that period, tribal societies were seen as surviving examples of how humans had lived before advanced technology. Anthropologists documented already disappearing lifestyles, as systems of cultural beliefs, detailed daily practices and artefacts. Every aspect of the lives of peoples living in small-scale, agricultural, largely non-literate, 'simple' societies were fascinating in their own right. However, research could not rely on 'travellers' tales', which treated 'primitive' peoples like exotic plants or animal. It entailed *living among*, and *directly observing over a period of time*, the people in question.

Anthropology was an alternative to archaeology and history, and infinitely better than speculative armchair theorising. Simple societies' small size made them easier to study than vast nations: they could be studied as a whole by one person. They were treated as miniature versions of societies through which debates about basic sociological processes – for example, how is social order maintained – could be investigated. Additionally, these societies presented difficulties for colonial rule because they operated by principles alien to their conquerors. Even racist colonial administrators, and land speculators who despised 'the natives', initially tolerated the anthropologists as possible sources of assistance. Later, anthropologists who 'crossed the colour bar' were less welcome, but this did not subsequently endear them to emerging post-colonial regimes, who saw them as spies.

Although ethnography's 'anthropological heritage' is conventionally traced to Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Boas, there were other sources of inspiration (Payne et al. 1981: 87–115). In America, the world's first Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago was founded in 1892 by Albion Small. His influence created the 'Chicago School', dedicated to the principle that 'the first thing that students of sociology should learn is to observe and record their own observations' (Park and Burgess 1921: v), and which produced ground-breaking studies of slum life: immigrants, gangs, opium-addicts and hoboes. In Britain, early social reformers like Beatrice Webb called for 'deliberate and sustained personal observation' of social institutions (quoted in Payne et al. 1981: 87). The national network of volunteer observers, Mass-Observation, was founded in 1937 by two social scientists, Madge and Harrisson (and the film-maker, Jennings). In the post-war period, the ethnographic tradition was taken up by researchers of local communities (**Community Studies**), factories, and later, deviancy and the position of women (**Feminist Research**). Today, in its various guises within qualitative research, it is

strongly represented in the social sciences and is even possibly the dominant method in British sociology.

With such a history, it is not surprising that different traditions have emerged within ethnography. Both the methods of the simpler, highly *descriptive* approach of the early anthropologists, and the name for an account produced by these methods, are referred to as 'ethnography': the scientific study of peoples (i.e. their culture and behaviour). Later work has placed more emphasis on *interpretations* of such descriptive accounts, which is sometimes called *ethnology*. 'Critical ethnology' addresses the unmasking of power structures, seeking to empower and emancipate. Whereas traditionally ethnography recorded life in great detail as a **Case Study** in its own right, contemporary researchers use ethnographic data as evidence in developing theoretical ideas (e.g. Punch 2003).

Despite these orientations, there are strong common threads to ethnographic practice. Unlike the brief encounters of social surveys, it involves a *prolonged, systematic, first hand* and *direct encounter* with the people concerned, as they act out their lives in a range of interactional contexts (**Qualitative Methods**; **Quantitative Methods**). Because this involves close personal contact and intense experiences, ethnographers must take account of their own reactions, which become part of the research itself. A premium is placed on the researcher's **Reflexivity**. Understanding what is happening across the range of contexts means seeing each specific element of social action as part of a greater unity: i.e. taking a *holistic view*.

The ethnographer accepts the legitimacy of what is encountered, and tries first to understand it on its own terms. This means looking at what happens as it *naturally occurs* in its own setting, and trying to see it through the eyes of the participants. The ethnographer is therefore a learner among the more knowledgeable, and should tackle the research project with the humility appropriate to being in an inferior position to those being researched. The researcher must also convey that new learning in their accounts (Hammersley 1998).

The method of choice for ethnography is **Participant Observation**. Entry into, and involvement in, the chosen social setting is eased by the researcher adopting a role that is naturally part of that setting, facilitating observation. (How open researchers are about their real intentions is an ethical issue; **Ethical Practice**). Ethnographical 'observation' and 'participation' are normally used alongside other methods: asking questions, long interviews and background documentary methods (**Documentary Methods**).

Ethnography's emphasis on taking part, and taking it as it comes,

makes it sound fairly easy. It was conventional in the 1980s to claim that ethnography could not be taught: expertise could only be acquired by *doing* it. Certainly many untrained postgraduates had to learn the hard way, a tradition that may be attributed to social anthropology. Evans-Pritchard, recalling the time before he was a leading anthropologist, when the discipline was very male-oriented, reported how he tried 'to get a few tips from experienced fieldworkers':

> I first sought advice from Westermarck. All I got from him was 'don't converse with an informant for more than twenty minutes because if you aren't bored by that time he will be' . . . [Haddon] told me that it was all quite simple: one should always behave like a gentleman. Also very good advice. My teacher Seligman told me to take ten grains of quinine every night and to keep off the women. The famous Egyptologist, Sir Flinders Petrie, just told me not to bother about drinking dirty water as one soon became immune to it. Finally I asked Malinowski and was told not to be a bloody fool (Evans-Pritchard 1973: 1).

However straightforward ethnography may sound, it does present several problems. Gaining initial access is rarely easy (**Fieldwork**; **Key Informants**), while recording what takes place is a constant problem (**Observation**; **Participant Observation**; **Coding Qualitative Data**). It also entails, as we have seen, committing at least implicitly to a fairly sophisticated theoretical orientation about what should be studied, and how (e.g. **Grounded Theory**). Earlier contributors have sometimes played this down: Howard Becker, when asked about theoretical frameworks, replied 'What do you want to worry about that for – You just go out there and do it'. (Payne et al. 1981: 114).

Despite Becker's disparagement, 'doing it' is not that easy. Because the enterprise rides on the quality of interaction between researcher and informants, the personality and social skills of the ethnographer are at a premium. Not all sociologists are naturally suited to this method, although one seldom finds sociologists who seriously ask themselves about their own suitability. Even conversational facility, let alone expertise in slang phraseology, dialect or the local language, are rarely discussed in research reports.

There is also often an over-confidence about the extent to which the researcher has actually been accepted, gained entry to social groups, and understood their cultural meanings (**Community Studies**). The single-handed researcher cannot cover all relevant physical settings at once, at all hours of the day and night. Even if this were possible, some sub-settings will remain closed. Young males are unwelcome among mothers and toddlers (**Feminist Research**); women are 'bad luck on boats'; whites

Ethnomethodology and Conversational Analysis

Ethnomethodology and conversational analysis are schools of sociology which focus on the mechanisms by which people use commonsense knowledge in structuring their day-to-day encounters to construct shared meanings and social order from their conversations and interactions.

Section Outline: *Ethnomethodology and ethnography. Interaction: what we bring to it and how we make sense of the world. Origins of ethnomethodology in Husserl and Schutz's phenomenology and collective typifications. Garfinkel: commonsense and making sense of experiences. Reflexivity. Breaching experiments. Conversational analysis. Rigorous analysis of natural talk. Ethnomethodological ethnography: Cicourel. Examples: train drivers; text of talking about ill health.*

We have included ethnomethodology as a key concept, although it is not a research method in itself. However, it is an important sub-field of sociology, with a research style that students sometimes find difficult to distinguish from other qualitative approaches, notably ethnography (**Ethnography**). Despite these genuinely confusing similarities, ethnomethodology does have some of its own particular methods. It also illustrates how social research techniques depend upon theoretical approaches: i.e. how *methods* sit within a framework of *methodology*. What ethnomethodologists study, and how they study it, is integral to their philosophical view of the social world (see Heritage 1984).

The first step in understanding ethnomethodology is recognising that sociologists choose to study different parts of human existence. Some are interested in big public issues like war, class or poverty, which seem to exist outside of individual control. Other sociologists are concerned with such issues only as they impinge on the person through individual

experience and sense of identity (e.g. ethnicity, sexuality, disability). Others focus on how people are able to act socially on a day-to-day basis: i.e. on the details of the social interactions through which we communicate with each other. This group includes the ethnomethodologists. Sadly, there is little positive communication between these orientations.

Ethnomethodology and 'conversational analysis' argue that we do not live in a fixed social world which determines exactly how we behave. Rather, each brings a personal set of previous social experiences and cultural knowledge to their interactions with others. Interactions are processes of exploration and negotiation, through which people actively (but often unconsciously) make sense of their experiences. This does not imply that there is absolutely no social order, but rather that individuals deploy their 'personal baggage' of skills to cope with the processes of exploration and understanding without which social life would be impossible. These processes fascinate ethnomethodologists, drawing them towards particular types of social research appropriate to the topics they wish to investigate.

The origin of this view lies in Husserl's philosophical writing. He argued that rather than directly connecting with the world, the human mind first processes the raw data collected by our physical senses, and then builds an interpretation of this information, using prior knowledge (see also **Positivism and Realism**). Without this interpretation process based on concepts about what things are, we cannot comprehend the world. For instance, if you had never encountered a car, how would you know its function? But if you were familiar with horse and carts, it might help: in the early day, cars were called 'horseless carriages'.

Schutz adapted this 'phenomenological' school for sociology, stressing that interpretations are not unique to each person, but dependent on shared, collective categories (called 'typifications'). Different groups do not share exactly the same sets of 'commonsense knowledge'. However, people can only communicate by starting from the assumption that they do share meanings, and then negotiating at least a semblance of agreed mutual comprehension.

During the 1960s and 1970s, this developed into 'ethnomethodology'. Garfinkel (1967) portrays individuals (or 'members') as being themselves social researchers, using their own naturally occurring commonsense knowledge to make sense of a chaotic world. In a similar way, academic social researchers apply more technical and specialist methods of investigation. Hence 'ethnomethodology': from 'ethno' suggesting something pertaining to people (the same root as 'ethnic'), and 'methodology', meaning the process members use in making sense. Ethnomethodology is the *study* of these folk methods, rather than a

method per se. Members isolate patterns, try to explain social life through them, and the more this succeeds, the more this reinforces their belief in the validity of those patterns. Garfinkel gives a special meaning to the term 'reflexivity' to describe this.

There are several consequences for ethnomethodological research. Best known are Garfinkel's 'breaching experiments', in which he asked his students to act in unconventional ways in conventional situations. If someone wished them to 'Have a nice day', they queried in what ways 'nice', and was that for 24 hours, or just in daylight? They acted as lodgers in their parental homes. The frustration and quick anger this caused demonstrated the importance of commonsense meanings. A general, if dangerous, implication of this for social researchers is that we can clarify what is 'normal' behaviour by experimentally flouting what we suspect is a convention. Note that 'breaching' involves role-playing and no informed consent by the 'victims' (**Ethical Practice**).

Ethnomethodology focuses on the intricate detail of social life and communication. Sacks promoted one branch of ethnomethodology, 'conversational analysis' (indeed, some sociologists would argue that 'CA' is more important than ethnomethodology: e.g. Seale (1999: 150–3). Here, a small number of texts of naturally occurring talk were transcribed from audio-recordings (and more recently video-recordings) and then analysed in very great detail. The search was for patterns contained in talk, treated as organised sequentially, and in specific situations (e.g. a phone call offering an invitation). The social situation, often limited to the immediately preceding sequence of talk, is very important as it contributes to the particular meanings at work. Although the conversations were 'natural', their treatment was rigorous, technical and capable of replication (**Reliability**; **Validity**). Figure 4 is an example of the coding conventions used, adapted from Silverman (1997: 118).

Influenced by Cicourel (1968) and Winch (1958) a second, less specialised branch achieved a larger following. Drawing on ethnography (**Ethnography**), there is less emphasis on detailed analysis of talk, and more on what is observed and the social context of small-scale interactions. However, commitment is maintained to the view that social order is not pre-ordained. Equally, 'natural' behaviour is treated as patterned, consisting of attempts to make sense and build shared meanings that underpin the social world – meanings which cannot casually be attributed by social researchers. Particularly in more recent 'applied' studies of organisations and professions, it is genuinely difficult to differentiate between ethnomethodology and ethnography.

A good example is a study of drivers on the London Underground:

> Whilst primarily ethnographic, the paper draws on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis and their analytic concern with the occasioned production of normal scenes and appearances, and the methods in and through which such activities are accomplished and rendered intelligible (cf. Garfinkel 1967; Sachs 1972, 1992). In the case in hand, we are particularly interested in the ways in which drivers make sense of the conduct of colleagues and passengers . . . Whilst such assessment and discriminations are thoroughly embedded in the activities in which drivers engaged, or which they will have to undertake, they do provide the sociologist with interesting insights into [the drivers'] practical commonsense and organisational reasoning (Heath et al. 1999: 558–9).

This clearly goes beyond the narrower remit of conversational analysis, but how far cases like this represent a significantly different social research method from ethnography is a moot point.

```
1  H:  And we were wondering if there's anything we can do to
2      help
3  S:  [Well 'at's
4  H:  [I mean          can we do any shopping for her or something
5      like that:t?
6  (0.7)
7  S:  Well that's most ki:nd Heatherton .hhh At the moment
8  no:. because we've still got two bo:ys at home
```

Selected transcription codings

Italics	shows emphasis in the speaker's s talk (sometimes underlining used)
[	left square bracket marks overlapping speaking
:	in a word, the word part before the colon was prolonged
(0.7)	a silence in tenths of a second. 0.7 means seven-tenths of a second
.hhh	in-breath, the more hh the longer (note dot before the hhh)
hhh	out-breath (no dot before the hhh)
.	dot signifies a very small pause of not more than one tenth of a second

Figure 4 *An example of coding conventions in CA. H talks with S, whose wife has a slipped disc*

Key Words

breaching experiments
coding
conversational analysis
phenomenology
reflexivity
typification

Links

Ethical Practice
Ethnography
Positivism and Realism
Reliability
Validity