Introduction

We think a good way for careful readers to approach reports of sociological investigations is to treat them as narratives or stories about goings on in some segment of a social world. By this, we do *not* mean we think sociological reporting is full of falsehoods and inventions, though some may well contain not a few convenient fictions and rely a little too heavily on what might be called 'sociological urban myths'. Rather, it is that investigative reports have conventional narrative structures and generally deploy the same narrative components. The objective of the essays in this Part is to provide an extended introduction to and illustrations of a suggested heuristic, a guidance note, for understanding sociological reports as constructed narratives. The structure of the heuristic is derived from studies in the Philosophy of Science whilst its core principle is a cornerstone of Ethnomethodology's conception of the nature of sociological descriptions. The essay on the heuristic uses examples from formal mathematical analyses of the social. However, other essays in this Part broaden the scope to include more and different styles of sociological analysis.

In relation to all these illustrations, there are two things we need to state very clearly right at the start. Pointing to the formal and informal devices which sociological reasoning deploys does not mean we intend a sharply critical stance. Just a careful one. The heuristic proposes a re-presentation of the materials contained in a research report and a way of constructing their interrelationships. If the reader wishes to, it could also provide a basis for adopting a more quizzical attitude. Having grasped the contents of the report, the reader can move on to a conventional probing of the degree of adherence to the self-imposed disciplines of method consequent upon adopting the investigative strategy chosen by the researcher. Such a probing could be placed alongside an exploration of the implications of any variation in that adherence for the security and plausibility of the findings laid out. Alternatively, it could be used as an "aid to a sluggish imagination" (to quote Garfinkel) for a much less conventional endeavour; an ethnomethodological consideration of the report as the display of practical reasoning occasioned by the necessity to *manage* method when mounting an investigation. Where these two options differ is in their premises. For the first, choices over modes of implementation of an investigation,

whilst conventional within the discipline, are assumed to be open. The researcher chooses a method and follows its 'recipe' as a feely adopted solution to options such as selection of a system of data collection and with it, data analytic techniques and forms of analysis. The presumption here is that, in most cases, adherence to the rules of the method is sufficient to provide re-assurance about the plausibility of the case being made. For the second form of analysis, the proposition is that no abstract depiction of method suffices to remove all methodological decisions. It is the "how" of this decision making which is front and centre now, under a recognition the contingencies of any investigation mean the detailed application of any chosen method must be worked out "first time through" each time, every time. Such contingency managing decisions are the practical reasoning on which the recognisability of following the method rests. In this second option, an axiom is being explored, namely that there is gap in the texts which set out the method. Successfully utilising the method entails resolving the gap as part and parcel of applying the method here and now so that the plausibility of the findings can be sustained. Many studies in this Collection display elements of both these forms of analysis.

Although use of our heuristic might be complemented by an appraisal of the findings demonstrated and the claims made about them, appraisal is not its purpose. Nonetheless, a probative discipline (which is, we assume, what Sociology aims to be) should welcome such summaries. In our illustrations of the application of the heuristic, we focus on forms of mathematical sociology and suggest they rest heavily on a limited range of operations applied to $\mathbb{R}^N$, the real number system. This reliance has several consequences. Saying so is an observation not a disparaging comment. Neither, and this should be an obvious truism, is it a prediction of the inevitable failure of any mathematical structures or any formal methods, including formal languages, to be of value for sociological reasoning.

With regard to the ethnomethodological analysis of practical reasoning which might be prompted by the use of the heuristic, the hope is investigations might lead to greater clarity about relationship between Sociology's generally endorsed methodological and disciplinary objectives and the actual epistemic virtues it is oriented to in practice. We see provision of such clarity as a positive contribution to Sociology. Rather than promoting the annihilation of formal analysis (as is sometimes assumed must be Ethnomethodology's mission), analyses could well lead to the remediation of identified shortcomings. Since all enquiry is a human activity, we should expect any sociologising to display at least a few errors or maladroit moves. We should be careful here, though. Our approach cannot determine which modes of investigation are most suitable for which specific research topics and objectives nor how any identified shortcomings should be addressed.

It could not. Instead, somewhat akin to the way work by Michael Lynch and colleagues in the Sociology of Science prompted the philosophers James Bogen and James Woodward [Woodward and Bogen 1988] to rethink the fundamentals of the Philosophy of Science, the approach we recommend could encourage researchers to reflect on how data are transformed into phenomena. Most important of all, though, for us the approach is of interest in itself. But we hope others, such as those learning to be practitioners, might find it to be of some use as well.

Finally, as we emphasised in the Preface, we are very aware we provide a *reading* of the work of sociologising. Necessarily, it is just one among many possible descriptions. Given our commitment to the sense assembled character of any working sociology, it would be perverse of us to think otherwise.[1]

Bibliography

Hammersley, M. 2022. Is "Representation" a Folk Term? Some Thought on a Theme in Science Studies. Philosophy of the Social Sciences 52, 3, 132–149.

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[1] Our old friend Martyn Hammersley [2022] once chided us for professing this ecumenical sentiment and then immediately following it with a claim that what we did was a 'First Sociology'. Alas Martyn had not noticed what we were talking about was not the order of importance of the work undertaken but the logical ordering of the objects we took an interest in when viewed from the point of view of the sociality of the processes of reasoning we were examining. They come *before* the reasoning gets underway, and hence are *principia* rather than *theoria* introduced within that reasoning.