

4 Representations without metaphysics

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we examined two examples of the kind of investigations which might result from Lindsey Prior's call for a repositioning of the document in sociological studies. Neither was motivated by Prior's recommendation, but both display the sort of concerns which are typically raised when documents and other 'representations' are examined by sociologists. A common theme in these analyses is the assumption that, no matter where they are found – in science, religion, art, literature, or ordinary life – when formalised propositions, myths or other narratives, pieces of conventional wisdom, or taken for granted understandings (as well as their homologues in images, diagrams, pictures, icons and the like) state how things are and what is and is not 'real', 'existent', 'factual' and so on, they serve the key social function of cultural reproduction and integration. This being Sociology, interpretations of the integrative function are myriad. As we saw, Louis Bucciarelli felt the reproduction of the 'engineering mentality' in Engineering texts and diagrams leads to the acceptance of an 'object world as defined by Engineering'. John Law found a *EuroBarometer* report to evidence the domination of a not unrelated 'one world' metaphysics which he associated with the 'scientism' of advanced Western societies.

In both cases, the main pre-occupation was in delineating what might be implied or tacit in the documents rather than what was actually visible or explicit. The documents were treated as expressions of an unarticulated subtext. In the phrase which Prior borrowed from Zimmerman and Pollner, the documents were resources, not the sustained topic of the accounts given. This outcome was precisely the reason we doubted the likelihood that the proposals Prior himself made for re-beginning the sociology of documents would lead to the kind of radical break with pre-existing work he was seeking. Without changing the grounds of the investigations (i.e. the assumptions and pre-suppositions which frame it), we cannot see how Prior's call can lead to anything other than the same form of analysis which has always been produced, one which involves the 'substitution' move. In this chapter, we suggest a way of changing those assumptions, one that is rooted in third person phenomenology. In the jargon much favoured among some ethnomethodologists, we want to *re-specify* the sociology of the documents

and similar artefacts in ways that are *indifferent* to sociology's concern with the metaphysics of representations. This chapter, then, is a bridge between our discussion of 'foundations' and the studies we present.

Re-positioning documents

Ethnography of documents

One of the studies Prior might have cited as an exemplar of the shift he had in mind is Richard Harper's (1998) investigation of the IMF. This is quite explicitly an 'ethnography of documents'. What Harper does very successfully is to use documents, and particularly a document type called a 'Mission Report', as a lens to focus and refract the organisation. The distinctive culture of the IMF and the meaning of the Mission Report are entwined and mutually explicative. These interrelationships provide the basis on which the 'moral career' of the Mission Report is made visible and hence investigable, while the trajectory of that career throws the reflexive character of the surrounding organisational culture into relief. The Report passes through a number of formal stages and, at each, its organisational character changes with consequent change in its authoritativeness, the definition of who can make what amendments, as well what the Report is used to do. As Harper suggests, the moral career of the Mission Report is a socially constructed trajectory of plausibility and definitiveness, its format being a consequence of the organisation's preference for standardised procedures for standard processes.

In positioning his analysis, Harper underscores insights he found in Dorothy Smith's even earlier discussions (see Smith 1990). Taking her inspiration from Garfinkel's (1967) classic studies, Smith stressed the 'cargo of background knowledge' (Harper's phrase) which users of any document have to bring to bear to understand what they are reading. With this background knowledge, they can see at a glance what the document is about. Seeing its character allows them to shape their response. In her classic essay, *K in Mentally Ill*, Smith (1978) *demonstrated how background knowledge is 'brought forth' by means of the recipient design of structures which facilitate a reading of a text as 'definitely saying this', 'providing an adequate description', 'making a reasonable case', 'stating a plausible proposal', 'drawing justified conclusions through sound logical inference' and the like.

Harper's study is, then, both a description of the functions and interpretive character of documents at the IMF and, following Smith's pointers, the beginnings of an account of the work of constructing their moral careers as the documents they so obviously are for those who work there. This second aspect is one element of the kernel of the re-specification we suggest. Asking what makes some document recognisably what it 'obviously' is means treating that document as an observable, a constructed object with a tactile, visual and other embodied materiality which acts as the occasion or site of the organisational work required to produce its meaningful character. On this view, the document as social object displays the work needed to find its meaning.

Documents as worksites

Focusing on documents as material objects rather than simply as organisationally constructed sources of information, points to the ways their physical properties facilitate their use as coordination devices. Interactional and organisational processes can be brought into conjunction by treating the document as a 'work site'. Borrowing the term 'affordance' (and very little else) from J.J. Gibson's (1979) ecological approach to perception, we once suggested documents and other objects could be analysed as displays of organisational knowledge (Anderson and Sharrock 1993). The marking up of invoices, for example, allows someone who knows their way around a company's 'document system' to ascertain at a glance the current state and progress of any particular item through the relevant invoice processing division of labour. What we were pointing to was the ways organisations make their systems and processes available to and hence analysable by members and sociologists alike.

Others such as Hartsfield et al. (2011) and Rooksby (2011) have picked up this idea and described the detailed ways in which patient records and other types of information summaries are used both to create shared resources for determining the current position regarding a patient or an investigation, as well as for carrying out whatever tasks are in hand. The layout and formatting of a form provides mechanisms for it to act as a nexus of communication, thereby allowing the conjunction of organisationally and temporally separated activities and processes. As with Harper, the emphasis is on interactional and organisational practices as evidenced in and through documents-in-use.

Documents as displays of professional practice

Ball's study (2011) of annual company accounts takes a slightly different line. Here the concern is the use of a type of document to display professional competence through the visual production of authoritative descriptions of a company's financial position. Ball draws out how features such as formatted structures of numbers, sequentially positioned logos, and the interdigitating of numbers, text and images all allow the professionally competent reader to determine both what financial state is being claimed for the company and the degree of trust to be placed in that claim. From the visual arrangement of the Annual Report, the veridical financial *gestalt* of the company can be constructed.

Re-specifying documents

The observability of lebenswelt pairs

In his analysis, what Ball is after is the relationship between the composition of the Annual Report and the understanding or interpretation of the accounts contained in the schedules. How do competent readers arrive at their own accounting of the company from the account in the Annual Report? In clarifying what he means

by this relationship, Ball makes reference to Garfinkel's somewhat inscrutable notion of the '*lebenswelt pair*'.¹ To see what Garfinkel means by this, go back to Bucciarelli and the engineering drawings. Bucciarelli focuses on what was not being learned through the use of the drawings, namely that Engineering is a social activity. What he did not draw attention to was what *was* being learned through the continued and repeated use of textbook drawings, blueprints, mock-ups, models and all the other representations engineering students encounter. As they learn to engineer, engineering students are learning how to read, analyse, interrogate and use these things (and, of course, lots of other skills as well). Once they are experienced engineers, these skills become part of the 'cargo of background knowledge' Harper refers to. The same holds for accountants. In reading a company's Annual Report, experienced accountants draw on a similar cargo. Because it is taken for granted, this commonly known background knowledge is in the background. It is not explained, itemised, called out, or referred to in the drawings or the accounts themselves. It is unarticulated and, for those using the document, largely unarticulatable. Moreover, many drawings and accounts contain no commentary on how they are to be read and used. ~~Not only does the substitution effect lead to~~ Sociology's enthusiasm for spelling out the tacit focusing on sociological obsessions rather than the concerns of the document's users themselves, ~~but~~ also a disregarding of whether those who use those documents need to spell out the unsaid (as we showed with the *EuroBarometer*, the tacit doesn't necessarily need to be explicit to be understood). However, this tacit knowledge is vital to the proficient, normal, routine, ordinary use of these artefacts and so the sociological challenge is to make it visible and hence available for analysis.

Working with a number of students, Garfinkel encountered the same question in the context of scientific practice. How could the bench skills of biologists, the proving skills of mathematicians, the data analytic skills of astrophysicists be made visible and available? The solution adopted was to apply the same logic as was applied in the 'breaching experiments'. Using the praxeological rule, the postulates of conceptual play and intersubjectively achieved recipient design, the written-up and publicly available formal account of the experiments, proofs and discoveries were rendered as instructions for doing the experiment, doing the proving, or finding the discovery. This rendering takes the form of interrogating the formal account as if one is using it to learn to do the science. In one example, Garfinkel and his students tried to undertake Galileo's famous inclined plane experiment using only the original written account. In going back and forth between the set-up and the account, seeing what had to be done to and with the set-up (what he calls 'the shop floor work') to reproduce Galileo's experiment successfully and thereby learning how to read the account to see what must have been done to make it work in the way Galileo says it worked, eventually Garfinkel and his students managed *somehow* to close the praxeological gap between the formal experimental account and the doing of the experiment. That pair – the account and the lived-work of performing the action the account is an account of – is a *lebenswelt pair*. In closing the gap, they made the lived-work of doing the inclined plane experiment visible, observable and analysable. What they made

analysable, of course, was what every competent seventeenth-century (and most twenty-first-century) experimental physicists knew Galileo must have done to get the results he did.

Perhaps the most well-known example of the analysis of a lebenswelt pair is Eric Livingston's description of the work of proving Gödel's Theorem (Livingston 1986). As with the Galileo case, Livingston distinguishes between the activity of proving the theorem which Gödel and any subsequent professional mathematician has to accomplish and the 'proof account' of the proving set out in the published text. To accomplish the proving, the mathematician has to perform the proof. But performing the proof entails far, far more than is encapsulated in the proof account. To complete the proof, a whole body of taken-for-granted mathematical knowledge and skills is required allowing the prover 'to see' how each step naturally and necessarily follows from the last and what is needed to allow the projected sequence of steps to go on. Working through the published proof *for the first time* is the work of using the proof account as instruction for performing the proof and so achieving the followability of the text. With novel proofs on the frontiers of mathematics, such working-through-for-the-first-time may be challenging even for highly accomplished mathematicians.

The application of the concept of the lebenswelt pair offers a cogent demonstration of the distinctiveness of the ethnomethodological gaze, compared to the 'constructive' accounts given by conventional Sociology. The relationship embodied in the concept captures the essence of what Lynch and others describe in their investigations (Lynch 1988, 1993; Garfinkel et al. 1981). Whilst the study of the sciences provided the attention-grabbing demonstration of the phenomenon of lebenswelt pairs, they are not exclusive to science. Others, such as Stacey Burns (2001), George Psathas (1989) and Garfinkel himself, have demonstrated that legal cases, occasioned maps and flat-pack instructions could all be subjected to the same mode of analysis. More recently, Livingston (2008) has undertaken studies of such humdrum activities as origami, checkers and jigsaw puzzles.

'Lebenswelt pair' is one of an array of "strange phrases" (a term Mike Lynch (in press) finds particularly apposite) used to mark the distinctive approach which ethnomethodology takes to phenomena made familiar by more conventional Sociology. In conventional sociological accounts, they are denoted by contrast pairs like product and process, reconstructed logic and logic-in-use, formal and tacit knowledge, know-how and know-what, cultural knowledge and cultural practices and so on. Each in its own way sidles up to the 'praxeological gap' between the formal, general purpose, abstract depiction of some activity and the engaged, *in situ*, working through and working out of the *doing* of that action. 'Lebenswelt pair' encapsulates the achieved unification of depiction and action, the finding of how to do the action in the depiction. Ethnomethodology's approach is to construe the gap as filled with the plena of the lived-work, the occasioned experience of the moment-by-moment, observable/reportable, step-by-step, quotidian performance of the action.

Garfinkel's strategy of discombobulation was designed to force ethnomethodological studies into a different mould from those of more conventional

'constructivist' social science. They are not just another theoretical reinterpretation of Sociology's standard formulations nor are they just another investigative technique to be used as part of the multi-method armoury used in empirical investigations. The strange phrases point to the extent to which Ethnomethodology seeks a complete methodological re-specification of Sociology's foundations and hence of its topics.

However, the term 'lebenswelt pair' itself has been felt to have an unfortunate degree of inscrutability. The familiarity of the phenomenon was lost in the unfamiliarity of the term, so much so that it was hard to see just what Garfinkel was actually claiming about the gap and its locally produced resolution. This was made all the more difficult because the leading examples were mathematical theorem proving and scientific discovery. For most readers, the lived-work of proving Gödel's theorem (or even any of Euclid's theorems) or of discovering the optical pulsar or reading micro-biological slides is beyond their reach. The technical specifics of the work are unremittingly arcane, and so while they could understand the claims being made (the gap and its evident traversal), making the traversal themselves was well-nigh impossible.² Most sociologists are not professional mathematicians, astronomers and biologists. On the other hand, the lived-work being pointed to was no news to mathematicians and scientists in exactly the same way that the lived-work of tying one's shoes or riding a bike is no news at all to the child that learns how to do them. Since they know what to do, they can see how the depiction relates to the performance of the activity though, of course, articulating what that means in ways that make it sociologically analysable may be a challenge.

What do managers know about documents?

In our studies, we use the notion of lebenswelt pairs to render the use of ordinary, routine management objects as a topic for analysis. As we mentioned just now, Eric Livingston and others have already begun to extend the range of the term's application. In our analyses of spreadsheets, plans, organisation charts, sensitivity analyses and computational models, we extricate and explicate the socially organised practices by which the gap between the documentary action and its summary formal depiction is traversed, as these objects are competently, standardly, *effortlessly* used. We realise practical management is almost as unfamiliar to many sociologists as practical mathematics, practical astronomy and practical law-practice. This means some level of ancillary detail will be necessary to make the lived-work visible. This detail is not essential to the analysis but is, we think, *advisable* lest it tend to inscrutability in its own right. The formal analysis does not depend on the background detail, but the communication of that analysis well might. Naturally, readers being the motley they are, not everyone will need the same level of ground clearing, detailing and linkage making. We crave the indulgence of those for whom what is given is either too much or too little. Our hope is the Goldilocks among them will be of sufficient number to justify the balance we have tried to set.

One final preliminary point is probably worth making. We have made documents and ‘document-like’ objects the centrepiece of our analysis. Inevitably, then, we will be laying stress of ‘managerial ways’ of reading and writing. However, we do not want to be heard as claiming either (a) writing and reading documents is all or nearly all that managers do, or that (b) managers are all alike in what they do and how they do it. We have already pointed to the variegated nature of managers’ lives. This holds true across the range of those managing organisations as well as for any manager in their own daily life. Our claim is simply this: given the types of objects we analyse can be found in many organisations, these are some of the ways they are written, read and used.

The final arch in our bridge from foundations to studies is a list of common sense facts managers know about the documents and document-like artefacts they use. This list is not a set of findings. It is not the outcome of sociological investigations. On the one hand, it is simply some of the things all of us, as ordinary members of society, know about documents and, on the other, some of the things members of organisations know. In that sense, it comprises part the common sense knowledge of both categories. We do not want to set up a contrast between these *corpora* of knowledge. Rather, we assume specialist management knowledge rests upon and takes for granted common sense knowledge. We take these facts as *the departure point* for our analysis. The descriptions we provide show how, oriented to the shared knowledge we identify and using the objects we attend to, managers define, describe and resolve the managerial problems they encounter through the application of the common sense methods of interpretation we describe.

Below, then, is our list. For ease of presentation, we speak only of ‘documents’, but the points can be extended to all document-like artefacts. The objects we are concerned with are ‘formal’ in that they have their place in explicit and formulated organisational processes. We have excluded others equally prominent and important for the routine running of organisations devices such as notes to colleagues, post-its, to-do lists and the myriad of similarly informal inscriptions one can find everywhere:

Formal organisations are constructed around documents. They are one, if not the, primary ‘medium of exchange’ for transactions within organisations. As such, documents are trusted objects and this trustworthiness is taken for granted.

The routine use of documents testifies to their trustworthiness. They are produced everywhere and circulate everywhere. Their recognisability as organisational objects allows them to be used ‘thoughtlessly’.

The meaning of any document is discoverable. In large measure, this meaning can be ‘read at a glance’. Sometimes, however, meaning may have to be excavated through detailed work of tracking and cross-referencing. Even when such work is required, documents are not expected to be indecipherable.³

Documents are constructed for distinct uses but may be re-purposed for ends not envisaged by their creators. Their organisational historicity can be multi-purposed and multi-threaded. When documents circulate beyond their original domain of use, this can result in lines of organisational continuity as well as points of disconnect. Such migration may provoke issues of provenance, status and legitimacy.

The variety of purposes to which any document might be put complements the variety of users for a document. Given the permanent possibility of creator-user disjunction, document constructors have methods to circumscribe the 'open possibilities' of use.

Documents have a normative trajectory. This is what Harper meant by their 'moral career'. They pass through distinct identifiable phases, have proper places in each of these phases and should contain the structures and components appropriate to each. They are, therefore, 'accountable objects'.

Documents are organised into types or classes. The moral careers of different types are different. More particularly, different types of document can have very different organisational half-lives and hence very different associated structures of relevance.

Documents are socialised. They are found together and form proper collections (including collections of one). Such collections may comprise several different types of document, the appropriate conjunction of which constitutes a proper collection. Membership of a collection is organised in relation to specific organisationally given relevances.

~~Document socialisation allows them~~ to act as palimpsests for action. Layers of annotation, cross-referencing and explanation can build up across members of a collection. Equally, the collection so built can act as a palimpsest for its own constructed history. Documents singly and in collections tell their own historiography.

In contemporary organisations, document reproduction is trivial and largely unconstrainable. The resulting myriad versions create problems of tracking, provenance, ownership and control. Who owns a document, where it came from and how 'live' it is are frequently matters for investigation.

This list tells us some of what managers know/have learned about documents in organisations. It is part of the orientation they bring to any document with which they are dealing. Finding just how the considerations listed are exhibited in the particularities of any individual document is the use of locally and organisationally specific (hence endogenously shaped) documentary methods of interpretation. Once armed with organisationally contextualised instantiations of these methods, we can find our way around the document ordered world of any organisation.

Notes

- 1 The most extended explanation of lebenswelt pairs is contained in *Ethnomethodology's Program* (Garfinkel 2002). This work also contains the attempt to repeat Galileo's inclined plane experiment and the discussion of flat-pack instructions mentioned below. By far the most friction-free introduction to the concept is Eric Livingston's (1987).
- 2 That all of this was bound up with the imagined promise of 'hybrid disciplines' didn't help.
- 3 The familiar attributions of 'meaningless jargon' and 'management-speak' attest to the supposition of decipherability.

References

- Anderson, R.J. and Sharrock, W.W. 1993. "Can Organisations Afford Knowledge?" *Computer Support for Cooperative Work*, vol. 1 143–161.
- Ball, M. 2011. "Images, Language and Numbers in Company Reports." *Qualitative Research*, vol. 11, no. 2 115–139.
- Burns, S. 2001. "'Think your darkest thoughts and blacken them': Judicial Mediation of Large Money Damage Disputes." *Human Studies*, vol. 24 227–249.
- Garfinkel, H. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- . 2002. *Ethnomethodology's Program*. New York: Roman and Littlefield.
- , Lynch, M. and Livingston, E. 1981. "The Work of a Discovering Science Construed with Materials from the Optically Discovered Pulsar." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 2 131–158.
- Gibson, J. J. 1979. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Harper, R. 1998. *Inside the IMF*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Hartsfield, M., Rouncefield, M. and Carlin, A. 2011. "Documents." In *Ethnomethodology at Work*, by M. Rouncefield and P. Tolmie (eds), 151–172. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Livingston, E. 1986. *The Ethnomethodological Foundations of Mathematics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 1987. *Making Sense of Ethnomethodology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 2008. *Ethnographies of Reason*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lynch, M.E. 1993. *Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1988. "The Externalised Retina." *Human Studies*, vol. 11, nos 2–3 201–234.
- . In Press. "Garfinkel's Studies of Work." In *Harold Garfinkel: Praxis, Social Order and the Ethnomethodology Movement*, by J. Heritage and D. Maynard (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Psathas, G. 1989. *Phenomenology and Sociology*. Boston, MA: University Press of America.
- Rooksby, J. 2011. "Text at Work." In *Ethnomethodology at Work*, by M. Rouncefield and P. Tolmie (eds), 173–190. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Smith, D. 1978. "K is Mentally Ill." *Sociology*, vol. 12, no. 1 25–53.
- . 1990. *Texts, Facts and Femininity*. London: Routledge.