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# Reflexivity, description and the analysis of social settings<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The concept of 'reflexivity' has become an often-intoned mantra in contemporary social science, particularly, perhaps, sociology. This article, however, argues that the 'blanket use' of 'reflexivity' glosses over and confuses many different actual definitions and understandings of the concept - not least because the concept operates differently as a move within each of the divergent analytic 'games' that compose the overall discipline. One (among many other) crucial distinctions is that between 'stipulative' and 'essential' reflexivity - the former originating in part in G.H.Mead's notions of the 'I' and the 'Me', and extended within current theories of reflexive modernity. This concept has been wrenched by professional social scientist from its mundane moorings and has been 'elevated' into an analytic technique of self interrogation. By contrast, 'essential' reflexivity, as adduced by ethnomethodological sociologists, remains resolutely emplaced in the domain of lay society-members' ordinary sense-making practices: it here refers to the reciprocal, back-and-forth determinations of sense of members' mundane descriptions of their specific circumstances and of the circumstances they describe - description and circumstance reflect upon each other during the sense-making practices. A brief example of essential reflexivity is given- reflexive formulations in ordinary conversations.*

**Keywords:** reflexivity, description, ethnomethodology

## Resumo

*O conceito de 'reflexividade' tornou-se um mantra entoado muito freqüentemente na ciência social contemporânea, particularmente, talvez, na sociologia. Este artigo, entretanto, argumenta que o uso generalizado da noção de 'reflexividade' mistura e confunde muitas definições e compreensões diferentes deste conceito - além do que o conceito opera de modo diferente como um movimento dentro de cada um dos 'jogos' analíticos divergentes que compõem a disciplina como um todo. Uma (entre várias outras) distinções cruciais é entre reflexividade 'estipulativa' e 'essencial' - a primeira originada em parte das noções de G. H. Mead de 'Eu' e de 'Mim' e estendida dentro das teorias correntes da modernidade reflexiva. Este conceito foi arrancado de suas amarras mundanas por cientistas sociais profissionais e foi 'elevado' a uma técnica analítica de auto-interrogação. Em contraste, a reflexividade 'essencial', conforme tratada pelos sociólogos etnometodólogos, permanece resolutamente colocada no domínio das práticas cotidianas de produção de sentido dos membros comuns da sociedade: aqui, ela se refere às determinações recíprocas do sentido das descrições mundanas dos membros, de suas circunstâncias específicas e das circunstâncias que descrevem - descrição e circunstância refletem uma à outra no processo de produção de sentido. É dado um breve exemplo de reflexividade essencial - formulações reflexivas em conversações ordinárias.*

**Palavras-Chave:** reflexividade, descrição, etnometodologia.

<sup>1</sup> Paper delivered to the 'Symposium on Reflexivity and Description in Sociology', University of Paris VIII, 03/03/1998.

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- I. In this paper, I wish to distinguish between two opposed analytic definitions of reflexivity, namely 'stipulative' and 'essential' reflexivity<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, I wish to trace the consequences of each definition for the study of sociological description. By 'sociological description', I intend lay or practical descriptions rather than those of professional sociologists. However, since the latter are, necessarily and in various ways, predicated upon the former, I shall also be making some observations on how sociologists describe 'the world-as-seen-from-within-sociology'.

I shall also be treating sociological description as social activity, as an array of practices. This will be done with a view to offering an abbreviated empirical example of the reflexivities of lay descriptive practice, that of formulations in ordinary conversation and also in school classroom interaction

Reflexivity' has come to be employed in sociology as a 'portmanteau term', one that conflates and confuses several distinguishable analytic senses: indeed, it seems to have become the 'El Niño' of contemporary sociology, employed as the universal account for everything. The different senses of 'reflexivity', however, in fact belong to different and incompatible sociological 'language games' and, consequently, are put to very different, and often mutually-exclusive analytic uses.

- II. We might define 'stipulative reflexivity' as a theory-formed and theory-driven concept, one that refers to the implication of the sociological or anthropological observer in the field s/he is observing. Observer and the observational field are treated as reciprocally (often dialogically)-defining. For instance, the observer is seen as constituting the field in terms of his/her culturally-based and/or disciplinary-based presuppositions. This has led to a position - found mainly though not exclusively in interpretive and critical anthropologies - that when the analytic observer is saying something about his/her object, s/he is also saying or manifesting something about him/herself. This self-referentiality is held as having its roots in the reflexivities of everyday life, as, for instance, characterized by the philosopher George Herbert Mead in his notion of "taking the role of the other" or "the 'inner conversation' of the 'I' and the 'Me'". In other words, Mead offers us a conception of the reflexive alternation of the self as subject and the self as object<sup>4</sup>.

As so frequently happens in social science, a method of ordinary reasoning quickly ceases to be examined as such. Instead, it comes to be both arrogated and reified by the professional analyst, becoming elevated to the status of a methodological prescrip-

tion. Indeed, in this reading of stipulative reflexivity, the concept ceases to have primary import in its ordinary terminations and acquires such import in its professional-methodological ones. Thus we find that the professional observer is enjoined to 'switch into reflexive mode', involving perhaps a confessional self-examination of the observer's relation to the observed, of his/her descriptive devices (including, for instance, linguistic transactions and fieldnote writing), the claim to authoritative writing the pervasive use of ethnocentric, historic or disciplinary bias or some other form of perspectivalism, eg. Gender-based or age-based.

In this way, there is (allegedly) a constant self-monitoring of the analytic perceiver's implication in the perceptual field: this form of reflexivity is, then akin to what the existential psychoanalyst David Cooper termed 'dialectical rationality'. This 'riding shotgun' on oneself implies, clearly, a claim concerning the realignment of the observer with the observed, if not a professed reformulation of the entire 'relation' between the two. It is a way of dispriveleging the accounts of other analysts as well as one's own. Paradoxical as it may seem, the element of reciprocity or mutual implication of observer and observed can also lead to the selective dispriveleging of one's *subjects* descriptions of their world relative to those of others. This may be effected on an *ad hominem* basis, eg. an authority-holder's account may be undercut whilst an "underling's" account may be accorded authority: hence the 'stipulative' aspect of this form of reflexivity. Other undercutting techniques may also be used, eg the deconstruction of the organising logic of the account or the attribution of vested interests. Thus, one may end up with a reciprocal discounting of descriptive accounts, a denial of authoritative speaking to various parties, the observed as well as the observer.

This, then, is the version of reflexivity that is (largely tacitly) presupposed in contemporary studies of 'reflexive modernity' - the self-aware, self-interrogating society: here, reflexivity is taken out of its natural home of ordinary social action and interaction and reified, in hyperbolic form, into the basis of an entire moment of modernity.

The arrogation by the analyst of this ordinary reflexivity to an analytic mentality has, oddly, served to reinstate something akin to the introspectionism that all the classic sociologists eschewed - where 'criticism' becomes self-awareness and self-interrogation of the ana-

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Roger S. Slack (1994). I wish to thank Roger Slack for many instructive conversations on issues concerning reflexivity.

<sup>4</sup> For some comments, albeit ill-focused ones, on this issue, see the editors' 'Introduction' in F. Steier (1991).

lysts' own purported own biases, moral commitments, etc., and of her/his self-conscious self-placement vis-a-vis the field of observation in which s/he is implicated. Ethnomethodology, however, has a different and, I should argue, logically prior conception of 'reflexivity'.

III. The ethnomethodological notion of reflexivity differs almost totally from the above one. The only point of coincidence is that reflexivity is seen as being, *au fond*, a property of the natural attitude, of ordinary peoples' commonsense descriptive activities. Certainly, in the attributing of primary import the two approaches differ. Whilst the proponents of 'stipulative reflexivity' tend to pay only lip service to reflexivity as a phenomenon in the natural attitude, the ethnomethodology places the essential reflexivity of natural accounting practices on 'centre stage', as a topic for explication in itself. 'Reflexivity' is not, for the ethnomethodologist, to be arrogated and reified into the cornerstone of an analytic method. Nor is it even conceived as the same kind of phenomenon as that proposed by the interpretive or critical anthropologists and their fellow travellers.

'Reflexivity' in the ethnomethodological mode is conceived in terms of the inextricability of ordinary descriptions (such as typifications of persons, actions or situations) from the circumstances they describe: in natural descriptive accounts, the description and the circumstances are reciprocally-elaborative. It is this back-and-forth elaboration of description and circumstance that is termed '(essential) reflexivity'. Thus reflexivity is inextricably bound up with the indexical properties of language, such that with reference to descriptions:

"...a description, for example, in the ways that it may be a constituent part of the circumstances it describes, in endless ways and unavoidably elaborates those circumstances and is elaborated by them. That reflexivity assures to natural language characteristic indexical properties such as following: the definiteness of expressing resides in their consequences...(etc.)" (Garfinkel e Sacks, 1970, p. 338).

It is in this sense that professional analysts' descriptions partake, though derivatively, in the reflexivities of ordinary members' descriptions. Reflexivity, here is not a methodological prescription but an essential feature of all description<sup>5</sup>. The reflexivity is 'essential' in that it can not be "wished

away", can not be remedied or eliminated either by members or analysts: attempts to eliminate that property not only serve to proliferate it but also the attempts themselves will themselves inevitably possess it. Instead of becoming a methodological prescription, this analytic understanding of reflexivity remains firmly emplaced as a property of ordinary members' descriptive accounts of their situations, conduct, etc. It has little to do with the problem of self-reflexion whether conceived as a mundane process or as a methodological injunction.

In his earlier work, Garfinkel (1967, Chapter 3) locates the property of reflexivity in what he terms 'the documentary method of interpretation' – or, rather, in his recontextualization of Karl Mannheim's earlier formulation of the documentary method. Garfinkel conceives of the documentary method as an assemblage of sense-making practices organised around the reciprocal determination of contextual particulars and imputed underlying pattern. The ongoing alternation between particular and pattern is what Garfinkel terms 'reflexivity'.

In his latest article, Garfinkel (1996) has explicitly rescinded any reference to the documentary method and instead has come to refer to the 'haecceities' of a social setting<sup>6</sup>. However, the term 'haecceities' works, in effect, to preserve what Garfinkel has always referred as the reflexive and indexical properties of descriptive accounts. 'Haecceity' is a term that refers to Garfinkel's proposition that any particular social setting consists in the locally-embedded methods for its describable, identifiable production in a 'here and now' sense. What the term 'haecceity' focalises is the ways in which members bring about a given setting as a 'naturally-accountable' local object.

I hope it is clear, then, that the two 'types' of reflexivity differ in many basic respects: the term 'reflexivity' is not theory neutral. Stipulative reflexivity can be seen as a property of social actors<sup>7</sup> – a mundane, self-reflective property that came to be elevated to the level of methodological precept that expanded to include the issue of self-criticism (where 'self' could denote, for instance, the representative of a discipline or of a cultural tradition).

Essential reflexivity may, by contrast, be seen as a non-extractable property of ordinary descriptions or descriptive accounts considered as social actions. No elevation of this concept to the level of a methodological precept is envisaged – save, of course, the recommendation that the reflexivities of natural language use be attended to: and, quite evidently,

<sup>5</sup> On the 'essential' nature of reflexivity, see H. Garfinkel (1967, p. 7-9).

<sup>6</sup> See also H. Garfinkel and D. L. Wieder (1992).

<sup>7</sup> This part of my paper owes much to M. Czyzewski (1994). Czyzewski uses the distinction between these conceptions of reflexivity as *inter alia*, a template for assessing the analytical coherence of some canonical ethnomethodological texts: indeed, he notes that a 'pre-ethnomethodological' paper by Garfinkel himself is singular in that, amongst other things, it contains a notion of reflexivity as the reflective capacity of actors. We might add to Czyzewski's point the observation that such a notion can be found in the work of some classic phenomenological philosophers, too. Nor does Czyzewski note the arrogation of reflexivity as a professional research technique.

since academic sociology partakes so intimately of the descriptive resources of natural language, that discipline may itself be inspected for its discursive reflexivities.

In a still-unpublished paper by Garfinkel, there is a perspicuous summary of the ethnomethodological view of reflexivity:

The reflexivity of descriptions is a collecting gloss for the innumerable ways in which descriptions can be parts of what they describe: the 'reflexivity' of questions is a collecting gloss for the innumerable ways in which questions can be part of what they question. And so on for stories, quantities, lists, instructions, maps, photographs and the rest.<sup>8</sup>

One might also characterise the distinction between stipulative and essential reflexivity by pointing to the analytic work done through the two concepts. Stipulative reflexivity, when arrogated by the analyst into a methodological precept, has as its outcome the relativisation of accounts, certainly of analytic ones and often, selectively, of mundane accounts, too. In this 'ironic' mode<sup>9</sup> it represents but the latest incarnation of the *ad hominem* undercutting device so frequently employed in the sociological tradition, through which a given descriptive account is discounted or demoted as partial, (perspectival), flawed, misconceived, superficial, distorted, etc. Stipulative reflexivity, then, operates in a language game whose outcome is methodological irony, that is, the establishing of a competitive relation as between ordinary and analytic accounts with, of course, the dice being loaded in favour of the latter.

By contrast, essential reflexivity operates as part of a language game of methodological explication or explication. It serves as part of the task of explicating the ordinary activity of describing or accounting as these occur in context as part of ordinary actors' lived experience. In particular, the ethnomethodologist is committed to the explication of the practical organising logic of a given, situated descriptive account. There is no attempt to undercut the account by applying an external (i.e. not integrated to the situated account itself) standard to adjudicate its efficacy, validity, objectivity, etc., unlike the case of stipulative reflexivity where an external standard is so applied.

IV. A highly perspicuous example of essential reflexivity is that of formulations in discourse. Garfinkel and Sacks (1970, p. 350):

A member may treat some part of the conversation as an occasion to describe that conversation, to explain it, or characterise it, or furnish the gist of it, or take note of its accordance with rules or remark on its departure from rules. That is to say, a member may use some part of the conversation as an occasion to formulate the conversation.

In some work I did with John Heritage, we observed that although all conversation may be said to have self-descriptive, self-explicating properties, formulations are utterance types where this property is highlighted by interlocutors themselves. We noted that formulations are utterance types - and *ipso facto* conversational action types - where, to employ Cicourel's felicitous term, the conversation descriptively 'folds back on itself'.

In addition, formulating utterances are characteristically the first part of two-utterance units known as 'adjacency pairs', (of which questions and answers are another pair type). Through the adjacency pair format, a proposed description or understanding of the conversation on the part of one speaker may be confirmed or disconfirmed on the part of his/her interlocutor. Thus, the sense of the conversation may be 'negotiated' as between speakers: or, put another way, speakers can, through using formulations, align themselves to 'the' sense of a conversation. In these ways, we can refer to descriptions (or definitions), sense, understandings, etc., non-psychologically as 'public' rather than 'private' (mental) matters. This transparency is a culturally-based and (in each and every specific circumstance) interactionally-achieved phenomenon. Definitions, understandings, etc., are not just social actions but are interactionally-produced, interactionally-monitored and interactionally-ratified. In that a formulation is a proposed 'gloss' of the sense of a conversation or some part of it, that gloss possesses only a 'candidate status' as 'the' sense, as a proper gloss, until it is confirmed (or disconfirmed) by a co-conversationalist.

An example of a confirming of a formulation is to be found in the following:

(SLR:11:9, DRW) Police interrogation (conducted by two officers) of a murder suspect who allegedly killed his homosexual victim in the victim's home.

1. Suspect: 'Ee' ad no chance ah took im bah: surprah:ze
2. Officer 1: Okay
3. (ul.) hhhmh
4. (0.9)
- F 5. Officer 2: 'N other words whin he invited you
6. in ther his idea wz uh, foolin
7. arou:d right?
- D+ 8. Suspect: Yeh his idea wz, b't not miine, ( )
9. Officer 2: En you didnt give im a chance tuh
10. right?
11. (0.3)
12. Suspect: Aftuh 'ee did wut 'ee gotta do
13. You know
14. Officer 2: Yah

<sup>8</sup> H. Garfinkel, 'A Manual for the Study of Naturally-Organized Activities' (unpublished mimeo, 1976, cited in Czyzewski, 1994.).

<sup>9</sup> On methodological irony and its alternatives, see R. Watson (1998) and to a considerably lesser extent, R. Watson (1997).

Here the formulation-confirmation pair is indicated by letters and arrows, (F=formulation, D=decision, + =confirming decision). Police Officer 2's utterance (line 5) formulates a circumstance of the alleged killing and this formulation is confirmed or ratified by the suspect at the appropriate point, i.e. the immediately subsequent utterance.

An instance of a disconfirmed formulation is as follows:

Excerpt from an ITV news broadcast in Great Britain, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1977, with the Yorkshire Area Miner's Union President, Mr Arthur Scargill, about proposals concerning an agreement between the Government and national miners' union to allow local pay deals and differentials based on local productivity.

1. Scargill: ...but you can rest assured that I
2. will not sit idly by, and nor will my
3. area council, and allow any other
4. mineworker in Britain (.) to earn more
5. money than those I represent.
6. Interviewer: Well will you
- 7.
8. Scargill: We will i (.) ensure
9. that those we represent (.) get the same
10. amount of payment (.) that others (.) are
11. going to be, (in) fact they are (.) anywhere
12. else in Britain
- F 13. Interviewer: So i (.) pits in your area will be
14. allowed to go for productivity schemes.
- D- 15. Scargill: I didn't say that at all (.) I said
16. very clearly that my members would not
17. accept a position (.) where other mineworkers
18. were going to be paid more money for coal mining activity....

Here, on line 13 the Interviewer's formulation proposes a candidate gloss of Mr Scargill's utterances that Mr Scargill disconfirms, and disconfirm in an upgraded or intensified manner ("I didn't say that at all..."), and produces a reformulation, with a differing sense or understanding from that of the Interviewer, as a project basis for the continuation of the talk. In this respect, the disconfirmation + reformulation has sequential implicativeness not only at the utterance-by-utterance level but at the topic level, too, (see also the instances from Heyman's study, below).

Thus we may warrant the term 'decision' in the formulation-decision pair by reference to the observation that a confirmation or disconfirmation is made locally available here as what Garfinkel terms a "commonsense situation of choice" (where, for instance, not all of a conversation can be characterised as involving 'decisions'). In the case of an adjacency pair, 'deciding' is strictly an occasioned conversational activity.

We found that the proposed sense of formulations glosses "where we have got to", "where we are going to", i.e. retrospective and prospective senses of the talk. These

senses could involve the straightforward describing or persuasive proposing of a gist or upshot of the conversation: they could 'fix' interactionally the identification of a topic, or could reformulate or change the topic.

The general ethnomethodological position is that social order is linguistically-constituted and, consequently, that natural language can not be extracted from the natural circumstances it (*inter alia*) describes. This means that formulations may be seen as working in what I, with some trepidation, shall term ways that extend beyond the alignment of sense *vis-à-vis* the orderliness of conversation *per se*.

In his study of formulations of topic in a school science lesson (Heyman, 1986), formulations also operate to propose, monitor and ratify participants' understandings of work-thus-far, of work-to-come, of what element in the body of scientific knowledge held by the class is now being employed, or how a given classroom event is to be taken as evidencing this element, of what is to be achieved that day. In short, formulations also reflexively "gloss that which is to be learned, attended to or practiced that day, and for which all subsequently may be held accountable" (Heyman, 1986, p.37). In this respect, a given classroom event and participants' formulating work are inextricably interwoven and mutually-elaborative. Since classroom events are, for members, describable and discursive events, they are, through and through, amenable to discursive practice such as formulating.

Heyman (1986, p.43) gives an example of the formulation of topic in a school classroom science lesson. (T = teacher, K = Kelly, a pupil).

18. T: ( ) water pump's over here. The air pump's
19. [10.0]
20. F T: At the end of the last class we were discussing
21. some things as to why those, most of those volumes,
22. are different..... I want to start over again and
23. go through all of these.....

Here, Heyman makes clear such formulations of topics can set up the upcoming work for the day's lesson. Such formulations set up the proposed activity partly under a retrospective rubric, i.e. as that which was done in a previous lesson. The utterance therefore does 'double duty' as a formulation, namely formulating previous lesson material as well as that which will immediately ensue in this lesson. The formulation is a particular manifest instance of what A. V. Cicourel termed "the retrospective-prospective sense of occurrence": we might add that this sense pervades the conversational utterance types we have here called 'formulations'. We might note here, in passing, that such examples just how important it is for the analyst to take the 'linguistic turn' in analysing interaction, not least in these 'institutional' contexts.

Thus, I hope we can see that the ethnomethodological notion of essential reflexivity bears scant relation to that of stipulative reflexivity, i.e. of the problem of self-reflection in either its mundane or (especially) its professional incarnations.

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