

Accounts, then, exhibit some interesting characteristics. When examined closely, the reasoning employed in accounts is not strictly logical, and the information contained in them is not precise, final, or consistent. Still, reasoning is done; communication is accomplished; activities are coordinated. How?

It is axiomatic to ethnomethodology that everyday accounts are not mistaken, careless, or sloppy approximations of traditional logical argument. But it is also axiomatic to ethnomethodology that everyday accounts are not strictly logical. Accounts differ from traditional logical argument, but not by error or imprecision. Accounts differ from traditional logical argument by having a different formal structure.

Two bits of jargon crept into the last paragraph—the terms *traditional logic* and *formal structure*. In apology, I offer this account of them. The term *logic* refers to several different, highly formalized systems of rules for correct argument and inference. In addition it refers to the sense of particular arguments and situations. Traditional logic is just one of those sets of formalized rules. Among philosophers, traditional logic is understood to refer to rules associated with Aristotle, although modified by his successors. Traditional logic is the subject of elementary logic courses. Among sociologists, however, the term *logic*, without qualification, almost always refers to traditional logic. Hence the term *formal structure*, which is synonymous with *logic* as defined in the dictionaries and as used by philosophers, but not as it is used by sociologists. The term *formal structure*, then, is an attempt to avoid confusion between *logic* and *traditional logic*.¹

Is it reasonable to doubt that traditional logic is an adequate approximation of everyday reasoning? One of the main emphases of this chapter, and the central philosophical concern of ethnomethodology, is to demonstrate formally that it is. My strategy will be to consider two questions and to show that each, treated carefully, leads to difficulties for traditional logic. These difficulties are peculiarities of meaning, similar to those exhibited in the accounts described in Chapter 1. Strict application of traditional logic, then, cannot eliminate those difficulties. They may appear to be carelessness or error, but they can not be avoided by greater care. They are, rather, problems that arise because traditional logic is not an appropriate model of everyday accounts. They will remain forever mysterious unless their occurrence is explained in terms of a different formal structure.

We are about to play a word game. It has been aptly called “square-the-circle-till-you’re-tired.” In this game, words are taken seriously. They are used as precisely and consistently as possible. Then the words are manipulated logically. The objective is to apply the rules of logic accurately until we are led to un-

¹ Further elaboration of the varieties of logic and the specific characteristics of traditional logic are found in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edwards 1967).

acceptable conclusions and then to discover why the unacceptable conclusions occur. The discovery of simple mistakes in logic or definition is no fun. The fun begins when we must profoundly alter our understanding of reasoning or of using words to explain the unacceptable results of logical thinking and how we avoid them in everyday life.

Traditional logic and this game have one rule that you will need to keep in mind: the *law of the excluded middle*. Every category or term must be well defined to be manipulated logically. When a category is well defined, everything is either in the category or it is not in the category. Nothing is both in the category and not in the category; nothing is neither in the category nor out of it. There is no "middle"; no ambiguous borderline case. Consider the category "horse." To use the term in traditional logical argument, the term must be defined so that everything is clearly either a horse or not a horse. If this rule seems too innocent to cause any trouble, reflect on the category "woman."

TWO QUESTIONS

How Tall Is Still Short?

This question is a member of a family of questions whose roots can be traced back more than two thousand years to the Greek philosophers called Sophists.² The issue involved is sometimes called "the heap" and sometimes "the bald man." These dignified names for the problem derive from two of the earliest questions used to pose it: "How many grains are there in a heap?" and "How many hairs can be removed from a hairy man's head before he becomes bald?"

Let us begin by agreeing, for the sake of argument, that any adult person who is 4 feet tall is short. Let us consider, then, the person who is 4.0001 feet tall. Is that person also short? Well, then, what about the person who is 4.0002 feet tall? 4.0003 feet tall?

The drift of this argument should be clear by now. We continue to increase the height under consideration by increments of .0001 feet. It will take some time, but eventually we will be considering people 6 feet tall and 10 feet tall for that matter. Sooner or later, a choice must be faced. We could continue to call everyone short. If that becomes uncomfortable, we could begin, at some point, to call people not short. But, so long as we follow the procedure I outlined, to make that shift requires us to say that a person at some height is short, but another who is taller by an amount imperceptible to the unaided eye, say, .0001 feet, is not short. If we refuse to name a precise boundary for the concept short, to define the concept well we will soon be calling people 7 feet tall short. In fact, we will soon be calling every person short. To make matters worse, if

² This discussion follows the argument of the Max Black (1970a).

we begin at 10 feet, an assuredly tall height and subtract tiny amounts, we will soon be calling everyone tall as well. This is our unacceptable result. We must pick a precise point and claim, absurdly, that an imperceptible increase from that point marks the transition from short to not short or we are driven to the absurdity that everyone is short (and also tall).

Why don't we just draw a boundary on shortness, then, and have done with it? All that is required is to pick a height to which any addition, no matter how small, is sufficient to change a person from short to not short. The difficulty is that selecting a height in that way is not appropriate to the meaning of the term short. The boundary would be placed differently by different people and even by the same person at different times. (Select a height, if you'd like, and compare it with the ones your neighbors select.) Whether a person is short or not depends, in part, on the practical or theoretical interests at stake. A short basketball player is a tall jockey. The term short, as it is used colloquially, is not precisely defined. It is, in Black's term, a loose concept, a category in which some things do not clearly and finally either belong or not belong. Further, Black argues, this looseness is not accidental but, rather, is intended among users of the term. No sensible person would consider it possible to specify the precise height at which shortness stops. There is no specific, well-defined boundary between short and not short, and to impose one would indicate a misunderstanding of the term.

Now, at least, we know why the attempt to play logically with the term short led to absurd conclusions. Short is a loose term, and traditional logic only applies to well-defined concepts. But this is not a solution; this is the problem itself. How frequent are loose concepts? If there are many of them, then traditional logic is inapplicable to a large variety of situations. Well, there are a lot of them. In fact, all empirical concepts are loose in the same way as shortness. This is most obvious in terms that make quantitative comparisons or judgments—short, bald, fat, rich, cheap, intelligent, and so on. But it is also true, as we have seen, with respect to the term "woman," with respect to assigning responsibility, and with respect to deciding who has violated the law and what law has been violated. The effect of conceding that shortness is a loose concept, then, is to disqualify the application of traditional logic to empirical matters. That is why the problem has intrigued philosophers for so long. And since there is no defensible precise and final boundary for shortness, we cannot resolve the difficulty by defining the term and insisting that common usage is in error.

Some philosophers are prepared to admit that logic is inapplicable to the empirical world. Logic, and with it philosophy, are restricted to the realm of well-defined concepts. This concession has two drawbacks. First, it makes philosophical reasoning inapplicable to real events and situations. For example, systems of ethics are developed that define "the good" precisely but only in ideal terms that do not properly apply to any ethical decisions involving factual considerations. Second, this approach leaves philosophy with nothing to say

about the conduct of reasoning with empirical concepts in everyday use and in science.

Black suggests a different resolution to the dilemma. He is committed to the applicability of traditional logic to empirical matters. His resolution, then, is to describe how reasoning is done with loose concepts and to defend the validity of that reasoning within appropriate bounds. Black argues that loose concepts are not always troublesome. There are cases in which the terms can be applied unquestionably. A person 4 feet tall is short. In these cases, logical manipulation of the concepts will not cause trouble. We will run into no logical difficulties because we call a person who is 4 feet tall short or a person who is 6 feet tall not short. But somewhere between these heights we will indeed encounter difficulties. We will be uncertain as to whether a person is short or not short. People will disagree. We will change our minds. Attempts to draw inferences about the person based on the judgment that he or she is short will prove unreliable. People will sometimes wear short sizes and sometimes not; people will sometimes be able to spike a volley ball and sometimes not. Predictions will be erroneous; deduction will lead to false conclusions. Logic will not apply.³

In creating this zone, Black attempts to reconcile the looseness of empirical categories with the law of the excluded middle. He suggests that loose concepts are sometimes not precisely and finally applicable in empirical cases. That is what makes them loose. On the other hand, sometimes these categories can be confidently and finally applied. In those cases, one can reason with them as if they were well defined. Some things are clearly short or not short. About them, you may reason logically. Some things are not clearly short or not short. About them you must reason warily because the application of traditional logic may lead to untoward results. Overall, the concept is loose, but in clear cases it may be manipulated as if it were well defined. The clearness of the empirical instance substitutes for clear definition of the term.

The nature of the vague cases must be considered. The boundaries of these problematic areas cannot be precisely fixed. We cannot place a single boundary between short and not short. For the same reasons, we cannot place two boundaries that precisely distinguish the ambiguous cases from the clear ones. So this borderline category is as loose as any other empirical category. But it is not worthless on that account. Black argues that the looseness of empirical concepts is a matter of consistency and confidence in judgment. A height is not, in itself, short or not short or borderline. Rather, in some cases we are confident and reliable in our judgments, in others we are not. The borderline category is not a group of cases whose definition is unclear; it is a group of judgments about which we are uncertain and inconsistent even though we are able to make provisional judgments. These provisional judgments, however, because they are apt

³ In the same way, the terms "man" and "woman" can usually be used unambiguously despite the existence of troublesome, ambiguous cases such as Agnes's.

to be reversed, do not support logical manipulation. Thus, as our confidence in judgment decreases, it becomes necessary to place correspondingly little confidence in any inferences we draw. In the extreme, logic becomes, in effect, completely inapplicable.

Black's solution acknowledges an element of skill and activity in reasoning beyond the application of rules of logic. There can be no precisely and finally fixed rules for applying empirical terms. Still, one must apply them. One must decide when the terms have become too imprecise for the practical or theoretical occasion. This is a skilled estimate, not completely formulated. One must then apply logic with as much confidence as the case allows and constantly check the results of reasoning against empirical events to be certain that one has not misplaced that confidence. Weighing the adequacy of the results of reasoning is another loose judgment. The results must be judged against the standard "good enough for now."

Black's analysis of reasoning with loose concepts, then, recognizes the relevance of practical, imprecise judgment in the reasoning process. It is an important step toward an ethnomethodological approach because it seriously considers how people actually reason. Ethnomethodological studies, though, attempt more thoroughly to replace traditional logic as a model of the formal structure of everyday reasoning. We can see more clearly how this effort is justified by considering some questions implied by Black's analysis, but left unanswered. First, Black's analysis implies that judgments are made without precise rules for guidance. One must decide that a case fits a particular loose category and with a particular degree of confidence; one must check the results of reasoning to be sure they are reasonable. How are these judgments made? There is a borderline region of doubtful judgments. Logic does not apply to these cases. How do people reason when they are unsure? Are we reduced to trial and error? To blind intuition? To confusion and anomie? Is there a formal structure to activities and reason undertaken in doubt?

Black's analysis implies that either there are (1) two or more distinctive reasoning processes used in empirical matters, each employed with its appropriate level of confidence in one's categorizations, or (2) a realm in which logic does not apply and there is no formal structure to reasoning and action. Ethnomethodologists are convinced that practical reasoning and action have a formal structure and also that this unspecified formal structure, when fully elaborated, will encompass all reasoning with loose concepts. That is, it will replace traditional logic.⁴

⁴ This fundamental change in the way in which reasoning is formulated is one of the bases for calling ethnomethodology fundamentally different from the rest of sociology. Wilson (1970) clearly shows the sociological implications of different understandings of how practical reasoning is done.

*Would You Like to Hear of a Race Course That Most People Fancy They Can Get to the End of in Two or Three Steps, While It Really Consists of an Infinite Number of Distances, Each One Longer Than the Last?*⁵

The race course in the question is a syllogism, the most fundamental form of argument in traditional logic. Carroll's proof utilizes an axiom of geometry, Euclid's first proposition. This axiom contains no necessary loose terms, and the proof applies to any syllogism whatever, even when it is expressed in well-defined mathematical terms. Thus, the difficulties that arise in argumentation are not the result of loose terms. Instead, Carroll shows that some difficulties of argumentation are inherent in traditional logic itself.

Carroll's proof begins with a standard syllogism:

- (A) Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.
- (B) The two sides of this triangle are things that are equal to the same thing.
- (Z) The two sides of this triangle are equal to each other.

The tortoise is willing to accept (A) and (B) as true statements but is not willing to accept (Z) without further proof. The tortoise challenges Achilles to explain why it must accept (Z), to compel the conclusion that (Z) is true. Look carefully at (A), (B), and (Z). (Z) cannot be false if (A) and (B) are true. And so Achilles answers, if (A) and (B) are true, (Z) must be true. It follows logically. The tortoise accepts the argument of Achilles on the condition that it must be added explicitly to the proof.

- (A) Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.
- (B) The two sides of this triangle are things that are equal to the same thing.
- (C) If (A) and (B) are true, (Z) must be true.
- (Z) The two sides of this triangle are equal to each other.

Certainly if the tortoise accepts (C) as true, it must accept (Z) as well. But the tortoise is nothing if not methodical. Before accepting (Z), it wants Achilles to explain why it ought to do so. Why must (Z) be true if (A), (B), and (C) are true? Achilles examines the three statements to which the tortoise agrees and observes that they compel one to accept (Z) as well. And so he answers the tortoise. It follows logically. If (A), (B), and (C) are true, (Z) must be true. The tortoise is willing to accept this argument as true, but only on the condition that it be made explicit and added to the other steps.

⁵ This question was posed by the tortoise to Achilles in a logical proof cast as a fable by Lewis Carroll.

- (A) Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.
- (B) The two sides of this triangle are things that are equal to the same things.
- (C) If (A) and (B) are true, (Z) must be true.
- (D) If (A), (B), and (C) are true, (Z) must be true.
- (Z) The two sides of the triangle are equal to each other.

The infinite number of steps between (A), (B), and (Z) is apparent. So is the sense in which each is longer than the last. The tortoise has treated the statement, "It follows logically," differently from Achilles. For Achilles, that statement is an indication that something is obvious and that no further argument is needed. For the tortoise, it is just another argument. The issue between them is the acceptance of fundamental assumptions about what is obvious without further proof or elaboration.⁶

For our purposes, the tortoise taught Achilles that logic is not a neutral, universally acceptable set of rules. It rests on the acceptance of axioms and definitions. If those axioms and definitions are not accepted, or if they are replaced with others, a different formal structure is generated. Specific questions, pursued diligently, raise difficulties for the application of logic to everyday reasoning. One possibility, raised by this consideration of logic as a method of reasoning, is that the difficulties arise because the axioms of everyday reasoning are different from those of traditional logic. So ethnomethodologists argue.

REFLEXIVITY AND INDEXICALITY: TWO ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

Ethnomethodologists have made two commitments concerning the formal structure of accounts. Together, they summarize the difficulties inherent in trying to apply traditional logic to everyday reasoning, formulate fundamental characteristics of everyday reasoning, and provide a research program. The two commitments are

1. All accounts are *reflexive*.
2. All accounts are *indexical*.

At least the first of these is axiomatic. The status of the second commitment is not clear. The indexicality of accounts may be an implication of assuming their reflexivity axiomatically, or it may be axiomatic itself. You can judge for yourself as the two are discussed. It is an important commitment, in either case, and will be discussed here as a separate topic.

⁶ For additional discussions of this proof, see Winch (1958) and Black (1970b). Those who are fond of mathematical puzzles should note that Carroll has applied Zeno's paradox to steps in an argument rather than steps in space.

Reflexivity

Originally, the term *reflexive* was used in grammar and logic. In logic, a reflexive relationship is one that something could have with itself. For example, everything is equal to itself; equality is a reflexive relationship. Nothing is greater than itself; "greater than" cannot be a reflexive relationship. In grammar, the term is used in a related way. A reflexive verb is one whose subject and object are the same. "Shave" is a reflexive verb in "I shave myself." In the same sentence, "myself" is a reflexive pronoun. In a sense, the reflexive verb describes a relationship of an actor with itself. The action is taken upon the agent of the action. The barber may shave me or himself. When he shaves me, the verb is not reflexive; when he shaves himself, it is. By extension, the actions themselves are often called reflexive when the person acts upon himself. Shaving oneself is a reflexive action. So are feeding oneself, pampering oneself, deluding oneself, and improving oneself. The term reflexive has been extended to include the action upon oneself or relationship with oneself as well as the grammatical form we use to describe them.

Ethnomethodologists argue that all accounts are reflexive. All accounts are not in the distinctive grammatical form called reflexive; they are not even all linguistic. Rather, using the extended sense, ethnomethodologists argue that all accounts have a reflexive relationship with themselves and take some action upon themselves, regardless of their content and regardless of the medium in which the account is expressed and regardless of their grammatical structure, if any. We can begin to understand the nature of the reflexivity of accounts by examining the special case in which the content of accounts is concerned. Theories and empirical descriptions of perception, language, nonverbal communication, reasoning, or any other aspect of accounting are accounts about accounts. Since they are accounts, whatever they say about accounts will apply to themselves as well. That is, they are reflexive. An example of this type of reflexive relationship has been built into this book. The first few pages serve as an introduction to ethnomethodology and are also about introductions. That introduction, then, describes itself. It is reflexive.

Ethnomethodologists are very concerned with this aspect of reflexivity because they are convinced that all empirical accounts are loose. When this scientific assessment is applied reflexively, it implies that scientific accounts are also loose. Until quite recently it was commonly held that science escaped the looseness of other empirical accounts. This belief provided a justification to put more confidence in science and technology than in other systems of knowledge. Religious faith, for instance, declined dramatically as science became more prominent. The looseness of scientific accounts undermines the unquestioning belief in science—it provokes a crisis of confidence. In recent years, science has been increasingly open to the challenge of justifying itself and increasingly subject to political decision making. In Chapter 5 we will review ethnomethodological research on this aspect of reflexivity.

It is not so obvious that every account is reflexive, regardless of its content. To understand how every account stands in a relationship with itself or acts upon itself, we must be very careful about the reference of an account—what it is about. I shall suggest that accounts do not more or less accurately describe things. Instead, they establish what is accountable in the setting in which they occur. Whether they are accurate or inaccurate by some other standard, accounts define reality for a situation in the sense that people act on the basis of what is accountable in the situation of their action. Later, if it becomes inconvenient to continue to act on some account, the content of what is accountable changes. For example, people drill wells when the probable presence of oil or water or gas underground justifies it. The accuracy of this account is ultimately judged by whether the well is successful or not. Regardless of the success of the well, however, the probable success is accountable, and it is that judgment that people act upon. At some point, if the well does not produce, people decide that the probable success of the well is not an accountable basis for action. They stop drilling. Drilling a well can be accountable when “in reality” there is nothing to drill for; stopping the drilling can be accountable when “in reality” a little additional effort will bring success. The account provides a basis for action, a definition of what is real, and it is acted upon so long as it remains accountable. *If men define things as real, the definitions are real in their consequences.* Whatever the content of an account, whatever it seems to be about, the effect of accounts is to provide a definition upon which action can be based. Accounts establish what people in a situation will believe, accept as sound, accept as proper—that is, they establish what is accountable.

I do not mean to imply that people, in attempting to establish what to believe, are aware of accountability as an issue. Nor do I mean to imply that, when people talk about things, they think they are defining them for the situation rather than attempting to reach the truth about them. Rather, this emphasis on establishing accountability as a socially ratified agreement about what to believe and act upon for the time being is an evaluation of what accounts accomplish from a researcher's perspective. We need to connect this assertion about the function of accounts with what the researcher actually observes. To that end, I will review some aspects of the study of categorizing juvenile offenders discussed in Chapter 1.

Cicourel observed that all participants in the legal system worked hard to establish the true character of the juvenile offenders and their families. They reasoned that the task of dealing with juveniles was to separate those who would continue to cause trouble from those who could be straightened out and to assign them to proper treatment. The nature of the offense was not so important in itself, but mostly for its reflection on the character of the juvenile. So, at each step in the official process, the files would be reviewed; the juvenile would be discussed with those who knew the case; attempts would be made to show

the youth the danger of continuing to misbehave; signs of contrition were encouraged; the aid of the family was enlisted to supervise and discipline the youth; and so on. But the files that developed were not consistent, despite the seriousness of the efforts to establish the facts of the case. Different officials had different ideas of the character of the juveniles. As the case progressed, the fixing of responsibility and the understanding of the events changed. No effort was made to reconcile them in a final coherent package. When the same events were relevant to different cases, there was no effort to reconcile the contradictory versions of events reached in the various cases.

The key to understanding this approach to fact finding, even when everyone is serious and concerned with being accurate, is to place the investigation in the context of the practical decisions it supported. Each time a new official entered the case, each time the file was reinterpreted, the attempts to understand the case were undertaken in the process of making or justifying decisions. The practical question was always, "What should we do with this child?" The concern with the character of the child was instrumental to that decision. Whenever enough was known about the case and the child to support a plan of action, the inquiry stopped. In effect, the inquiry was concerned with defining events in as much detail as the practical problem required, *and no more*. In effect, the inquiry provided an accountable basis for action rather than a final truth about its content. In effect, the accounts establish what is accountable in the situation, not knowledge for general use. Each time the situation called for a decision, accounts would be assembled to justify a plan of action. Except as they compromised the current plan, accounts offered at other times were not interesting enough to correct, and no practical need existed to keep all the accounts consistent.

This characteristic of accounts is not limited to defining the characters of juveniles. The accounts of Agnes's gender also displayed inconsistency from occasion to occasion and incomplete investigation suited to the practical needs for which the investigation was undertaken. Even a doctor performing a physical examination for a job did not check Agnes carefully enough to discover her physical peculiarities. In some settings, the accounts of Agnes's gender justified treating her as a normal woman. In other settings the accounts of her gender justified treating her as a male child who had left home and returned looking like a female and drawing on family loyalty to exact treatment as a female from her family.

The people offering and accepting these various accounts of Agnes's gender believed, as far as we know, that her gender was a real, permanent, unchanging state of affairs. As far as we know, they were not cynical about their efforts to define it but, rather, believed that their accounts did not affect Agnes's gender and were approximations of an independent reality. In effect, though, these various accounts were Agnes's gender. At least they were her gender as it

entered and influenced social relationships. In effect, each account of Agnes's gender established that gender as accountable for the situation in which it was accepted.

The variety of accounts is not the important issue. In each situation, people define a reality upon which they will act. They do so without expending more effort in the investigation than the action dictates. They do not work to be consistent with the definitions found in other settings. They do not reconsider all the evidence available in other settings to be sure of accuracy. A gender can be made accountable by no more than a gender-typed name such as Agnes. Leslie, Dale, and Pat do not work in the same way. By establishing what is accountable in each situation, people restrict their accounts, in effect, to local significance. So far as I know, my gender remains consistently male in all accounts of it. Still, since that gender must be made accountable in each setting, the accounts of gender still establish that gender as accountable *in a setting*. Consistent accounts are still not descriptions of their content; they still establish things as accountable rather than describe them. This becomes accountable to ethnomethodologists because they conduct research by doing exactly what is not normally done with accounts—they compare accounts from different settings and examine the evidence in more detail than the practical tasks of those settings require. The ethnomethodologists' practical task is to understand how accounts work, for which their detailed investigations are necessary.

Accounts, then, regardless of their subject matter, do not describe things. Rather, they establish what is accountable in the setting in which they occur. We shall now see that these settings are made up entirely of accounts. To understand this point, we will have to consider what else might be part of a social setting.

For most purposes, manufactured objects such as buildings, automobiles, garbage cans, chain saws, and disposable diapers can be conveniently understood to exist on their own, independent of our accounts of them. However, these objects are the products of considerable human activity. Each serves as an account of the activity that produced it, just as words on a page serve as an account. A disposable butane lighter is, in its plastic convenience, an account of considerable invention, marketing, distributing, exploring (for fuel), chemical engineering, and our way of life. We do not usually make this much of butane lighters, but I am only treating them in the same way as archeologists routinely treat the fire-making tools they uncover. A butane lighter, properly considered as an account of the activities that produced it and the uses to which it is put, tells as much about our way of life as chips of flint tell about our forebears'. Manufactured objects, then, serve as retrospective accounts of how and why they were produced and as prospective accounts of uses to which they can potentially be put. We simply treat the object as a medium of communication and decipher its message.

Objects that are not manufactured are treated in essentially the same way.

The only difference is that the information they provide was not encoded by humans. I have distinguished these objects from manufactured ones to make it clear that we can perceive decipherable messages in things and events that were not arranged for us by the actions of other people. Every human perception is manufactured, even if the perceived object is not. It is made by the very active process of seeing. We make things by perception as well as by manufacture.

Technically, then, we can view situations as made of our perceptions or accounts of objects rather than as the objects themselves. Things may exist independently of our accounts, but they have no human significance until they become accountable. Things may not exist, but they may take on human significance by becoming accountable. To understand how accounts work, we do not need to know what is true in some final sense. Rather, we need to know what is accountable or accepted as true. For example, we do not need to decide Agnes's true gender; we need to know how her gender is made accountable. What things really exist is an extremely important question. The more closely accounts approximate such real conditions, the better actions based on them will work. However, for the purpose of understanding the formal structure of accounts, we do not need to know what really exists. When people differ, we need not take sides.

We can now understand how every account is reflexive. Accounts establish what is accountable in a setting. At the same time, the setting is made up of those accounts. This reflexive relationship can be understood in two ways. If we think in terms of the definitions that are established through accounts, we can see that the accounts define reality and at the same time that they are that reality. If we think in terms of accountability, we can see that accounts establish what is accountable at the same time that they are the things that are accountable. Accounts are always in this reflexive relationship with themselves because they are the medium of definition and accountability and because they make up the defined, accountable world at the same time.

The theoretical importance of accounts and how they work is also clear. If social settings are made up entirely of accounts, then the processes by which accounts are offered and accepted are the fundamental social process. The formal structure of accounts is the fundamental social structure. This is exactly the position that Garfinkel has taken.

In exactly the ways that a setting is organized, it *consists* of members' methods for making evident that setting's ways as clear, coherent, planful, consistent, chosen, knowable, uniform, reproducible connections i.e., rational connections.

Garfinkel (1967, p. 34)

the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those affairs "account-able."

Garfinkel (1967, p. 1)

Indexicality

Each account is part of the setting in which it occurs and which it helps organize. Reciprocally, each account is organized, in part, by the setting in which it occurs. The setting, remember, is itself made up entirely of accounts. The abstraction of one account from the rest eliminates information that contributes to the meaning of the abstracted account. In general, the participants in a social situation will have particular purposes, particular time references, particular resources available, and particular skills. All these matters, as we have seen, affect what will be accepted as an adequate account. These practical circumstances, and others, affect the meaning of accounts. Loose concepts take on a specific sense. Temporal references make some events meaningful, others irrelevant.

Consider the interactions between the police and the citizens of skid row. The police were inclined to allow vulgar familiarity and back talk from people on skid row without reprisal. However, when there was an audience, disrespect was likely to be punished by a display of police power, even arrest. The person's words and behavior in response to the police may have been the same on two occasions. Told to stop drinking and get off the street, the person may have insulted the police, responded slowly, and generally displayed disrespect. When no one was there to observe the performance, it was accepted without retribution. But, when others were present, the police responded forcefully. The same actions and words are a threat to authority on one occasion, a tolerable nuisance on another. The situation in which the episode occurs influences its meaning.

The term for influence of the setting on the meaning of accounts is *indexicality*.⁷ Historically, indexicality has been considered only as a characteristic of linguistic accounts. An indexical expression is a linguistic expression that has different meanings on the different occasions on which it is used. The meaning of the expression may be quite clear on any occasion, but, when the expression is repeated, its meaning changes. For example, "It's raining" is an indexical expression. Its meaning is generally clear enough, but in different instances it refers to different times and different places. "I am hungry" is another indexical expression. The sentence refers to different times, places, and people on the various occasions of its use.

Indexical sentences are often clear in their meaning because supplementary information is communicated nonverbally when they are used. If everyone knows where he or she is and what time it is, the ambiguity of "It is raining" is greatly reduced. Similarly, when everyone knows who has said so, when, and where, the ambiguity of "I am hungry" is reduced. While their meaning is made clear by this contextual information, the indexicality of these sentences is not reduced. Ambiguity is not a necessary feature of indexical communication. The

⁷ This discussion of indexicality draws most heavily from those of Bar-Hillel (1954) and Garfinkel and Sacks (1970).

crucial feature is the dependence of the meaning on its context. Often, the context makes the meaning quite clear. The topic for study is how people are able to use contextual information to achieve clarity and adequate reasoning for their purposes.

The meaning of indexical sentences varies in more consequential ways than just the identity of the speaker and the time and place of the utterance. "It's raining" has different meanings: on the day of a long awaited picnic, at the end of a drought, when the rivers are already overflowing their banks, or when one is driving and the temperature is near freezing. These variations are similar to the transformation of an insult from tolerable to unacceptable by the presence of an audience.

One of the major purposes of philosophy is to think, speak, and write clearly. A condition of success in those endeavors is precision in the use of language. Indexical expressions subvert those goals. The variability of their meaning may not cause trouble in ordinary discourse, although sometimes it does. But stripped of contextual information, as language is in written communication, indexical expressions are rendered more unclear.

Indexical expressions have been noted for over two thousand years by philosophers. "Loose concepts" are one kind of indexical expression, pronouns are another. These, and other kinds of indexical expressions, frustrate clear communication and the use of logic. Accordingly, indexical expressions have been addressed as a problem.

Indexical expressions have traditionally been contrasted to unproblematic, objective expressions. Objective expressions are clear and consistent in meaning, regardless of the nonlinguistic context in which they occur. Objective expressions will be understood to have the same reference by anyone who knows the language in which they are made. Mathematical formulations have this characteristic. Scientific reports are said to have it. The description of the research procedures gives a determinate sense to the results so long as the reader knows the specialized language employed and so long as all significant procedures are described.

Recently, the universality claimed for the meaning of objective statements has been broadened. We have begun to launch projectiles that will leave this solar system and to include messages in them which we hope will be understood by any beings who are intelligent enough to encounter the missiles. This sense of objectivity is not limited to those who share a language or even to members of a species. Our *Voyager* missiles, carrying images of us, mathematical notation, music, maps of our solar system, and, perhaps, coupons for special extraterrestrial rates at selected motels, mark the boundaries of our belief that a message can be completely self-contained. We are not hoping merely that an alien species will make something of the message; we are hoping that they will make the same of the message as we do. With luck, if they take offense they will not be able to decipher the maps.

Many approaches have been suggested to solve the problem posed by indexical expressions. In common, these approaches attempt to replace indexical expressions with objective ones and to justify a domain for precise linguistic expression. In scientific work, for example, looseness is a constant problem. The report of methodology and the development of precise measurement helps to reduce unclarity. The report of scientific research procedures is a special case of a general approach—expressing the nonlinguistic context of an expression linguistically. For example, tones of voice, the situation, and facial expressions can be described along with the words spoken.

The attempt to remedy indexical expressions tends to ignore the formal structure of ordinary language. Increased clarity may result, but, if the formal structure of accounts is different from that of traditional logic, the effort will never succeed completely. Also, this approach does not explain how indexical expressions are actually used in everyday life. In effect, approaching indexicality as a problem disregards what people actually do in favor of what they might do. Ordinary language is treated as having no distinctive formal structure. At its best, ordinary language approaches traditional logic in precision; at its worst, it is unclear and mistaken in its standards for argument. In either case, only logic and other rigorous formal systems are recognized as standards for adequate reasoning.

Garfinkel and Sacks describe this approach in a pleasant simile. Indexical expressions are like a spot of dirt on the white wall of language. For over two thousand years philosophers and scientists have unsuccessfully attempted to scrub the wall clean. For over two thousand years philosophers and scientists have debated how best to remove the blemish. (If I may embellish the simile, the treatment of indexicality is like a two-thousand-year-long series of commercials for various laundry products, each claiming to make the wall bright and clean.) Garfinkel and Sacks propose, instead, to examine that spot closely and to describe its characteristics. Perhaps, upon examination, the spot may prove to be a work of art. Ethnomethodologists are interested in the formal structure of commonsense accounts. To continue with the simile, they propose to put a frame around the spot and study it.

There is another fundamental difference between the ethnomethodological approach to indexicality and the traditional philosophical one. Philosophers define indexicality as a characteristic of linguistic expressions. Information is understood to be transmitted in other ways, tone of voice for example, but the information is treated as subordinate to linguistic expression and, generally, no formal structure is attributed to nonlinguistic expression. Ethnomethodologists consider indexicality as a formal characteristic of any account, regardless of the medium. For example, Agnes's urine sample is an *indexical particular*⁸ whose

⁸ An indexical particular is anything that communicates meaning and communicates different meanings on different occasions. An indexical expression is a linguistic indexical particular.

meaning changes depending on the contextual knowledge of the person interpreting it. To the lab technician who analyzes it, it is just another urine sample; to Agnes's roommate, it is a favor to a friend; to Agnes, it is a threat to discovery; to us, it is an example of an indexical particular; to us, while reading Chapter 1, it is an example of how perceptual routines can be manipulated. The linguistic portion of accounts is not awarded special status in ethnomethodology, although it is studied more. Any information, carried in any medium of communication, is considered as an account. It is assumed to have the characteristic formal structure of accounts; it is considered to have all other information as its context and to be context for all other information. Any account is reflexive. Insofar as it draws its meaning from its context, its meaning changes as the context changes. Any account is indexical.

An exercise may help to bring this topic into focus for you. Think about the various meanings of the phrase "It's raining." Imagine the various situations I mentioned as clearly as you can, and, with your mind's ear, listen to the way in which the words would be said on each occasion. Are the tones of voice, inflections, volume, and so on interchangeable from situation to situation? How would Joan of Arc say it? You know when. The tin man? Noah? Noah's next-door neighbor? Notice the relationship among the words, the situation, the nonverbal aspects of communication, and the meaning of the sentence. Now, stop abusing your imaginations and listen carefully to people talking.

Let It Pass

"Let it pass" is a fundamental rule of accounting that Garfinkel (1967) suggests is part of the formal structure of everyday accounts. By relating this rule to reflexivity and indexicality and to the studies described in Chapter 1, we can begin to see what is implied by "formal structure" and how ethnomethodologists attempt to study it. We begin with the axiomatic premise that any account is only part of the total account of a situation. Every account is incomplete. Put another way, every account is technically loose or indexical.

In everyday life, people organize their conduct with reference to the information available to them. This information is always incomplete and always less than perfectly clear in the technical sense. It may, however, be quite satisfactory and cause no trouble. A persistent practical problem, then, is to make do with indexical, more or less imprecise, accounts. Whenever people decide to act, they will be acting on information that is imperfect from a technical standpoint. People may be aware of inadequacies of their information from their own, non-technical standpoint too. Sometimes information will seem adequate and people will be confident in it, even though a technical analysis would show it to be indexical. Sometimes, however, circumstances may compel action or information that appears inadequate and that is undertaken hesitantly or reluctantly. These feelings about the information and the action based upon it are different

responses to data that are always technically indexical but vary in their value from other standpoints. Agnes, for example, needed to respond to a request for a urine sample without clear knowledge of what urinalysis could reveal about her. Her resources did not permit her to ascertain whether the risk of requesting a sample from her roommate was greater than the danger that she would be embarrassed by the analysis of her own urine. In so doing, Agnes was aware of the discrepancy between the knowledge available to her and the knowledge that she would prefer to act upon and let it pass. That is, she acted without seeking more knowledge.

"Let it pass" applies to steps in reasoning and to categorization. It provides that minor discrepancies be overlooked, at least temporarily. By letting it pass, people forgive each other minor disagreements over the applicability of loose concepts, the degree and nature of appropriate detail, and so on. Another's account is perceptibly imperfect in some way, but close enough to the account that one wanted to be accepted without undue complaint, at least temporarily. Later, new information may retroactively disqualify prior accounts. A teenage girl may be transformed from innocent victim to delinquent.

There are many reasons to let things pass, reflected in the many idioms in which the rule can be expressed. "You can't fight city hall." "Don't worry, it's (I'm) insured." "Caveat emptor." "It's his (or her) life." "Everybody does it." "That's good enough for what they're paying." Application of this rule in any of its forms allows disagreements to be acknowledged as problems but still accepted as accountable reasoning for the time being. The person giving the account is temporarily forgiven slight deviations from one's expectations. Simultaneously, the person receiving the account is temporarily forgiven the failure to accept the account more enthusiastically. Each lets it pass. A person who does not let things pass may be regarded as uptight, grumpy, demanding, and a nuisance, although others may let that pass without too much trouble. Of course, if challenged too much, others can retaliate. To be social is to be forgiving.

The studies in Chapter 1 provide many illustrations of what can be involved in letting things pass. The doctors went to considerable pains to determine the truth of Agnes's condition when they were considering whether to perform her sex-change operation. But Agnes refused to let them interview her family, boyfriend, and others, and they ultimately decided to let her account pass as an adequate justification of surgery even though they wanted that information. Juvenile officers and the other authorities with whom they work do not attempt to reconcile the discrepancies in their various files. They let them all pass as adequate, even when it is apparent that they disagree with one another. Skid-row police allow disrespectful and illegal behaviors to occur openly unless there is a special reason to respond to them. The citizenry, for its part, does not strenuously challenge or resist inconsistencies in the application of these laws.

In all these settings, the people involved are able to maintain orderly social arrangements by forgiving accounts that are inconsistent, incomplete, or otherwise flawed from a technical standpoint. This practice and the constant reevaluation of situations as new information becomes available are part of the formal structure of accounts. It is studied by finding ways in which accounts are technically imperfect and then observing the conditions under which the accounts remain acceptable anyway, the troubles caused by acting on incomplete accounts, and the resolution of those troubles. Instead of a fixed standard of acceptable information such as the law of the excluded middle used in technical arguments, practical circumstances are managed by using information judged by flexible standards, often with little confidence. To let it pass is to apply those standards.

ANTECEDENTS TO THE ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The substance of the ethnomethodological approach and its terminology have been influenced by earlier attempts to incorporate fundamental implications of indexicality and reflexivity in social theory. The work of Alfred Schutz on the attitude of everyday life or commonsense attitude and Karl Mannheim on the documentary method of interpretation have been the most strikingly influential. Although modifications have been made, ethnomethodological imagery and terminology are greatly indebted to Mannheim and Schutz.

*The Commonsense Attitude*⁹

Alfred Schutz, a phenomenologically oriented social philosopher, had considerable influence on the development of ethnomethodological thought. He argued that people can adopt different attitudes or different sets of assumptions about the world. Each attitude leads to the experience of a distinctive reality, and each includes a distinctive formal structure. The commonsense attitude, also called the natural attitude or the attitude of everyday life, is Schutz's model of the attitude of adult humans as they pursue practical affairs. Its characteristic form of reasoning is the use of indexical expressions, which Schutz calls typifications. This term indicates that all categorizations and inferences have typicality as the standard of adequacy, not the precision of traditional logic.

The foundation of commonsense reasoning is the unquestioned belief that the world really exists and has characteristics that are imposed on us indepen-

⁹ This discussion of Schutz is based primarily on Schutz (1964; 1967).

dently of our definitions of it. Fire burns. Speed kills. When confusion arises, when events appear ambiguous, the commonsense belief is that there is some determinate truth to the matter. The confusion or ambiguity is a failure of knowledge and can be resolved by investigation. In the commonsense world, there is continual interest in clarification, in reducing ambiguity. But this interest stands against a background of an unquestioned belief that answers can always be found if the question is addressed properly. The world exists and its existence is not questioned. The world has characteristics that are imposed on us. These characteristics must be discovered by investigation, not defined arbitrarily. The belief in the stubborn reality of the world guarantees that answers can be found to any question about it.

In the commonsense attitude, the world is always addressed from practical motivation. The world is, in part, a condition of action. To achieve one's ends, one must correctly identify the unalterable characteristics of the world and accommodate action to them. To some extent, the world is manipulatable and provides resources for action. The presence of an ocean between the United States and Europe is a condition of any action designed to move a person from one to the other. Gravity is another inflexible feature of the situation. However, we can build planes and boats.

In the commonsense attitude, definitions of events are judged to be better or worse. The criterion for judgment is the success of plans based on those definitions. As plans unfold in action, continuous minor imperfections lead to continuous minor adjustments of our definitions. It is characteristic of the commonsense attitude that one is not shaken in one's belief in a determinate world by the continuous, if minor, failure of our comprehension. It is also characteristic of common sense to communicate one's understandings to others with the premise that disagreements will be resolved by exposure to the common reality. Differences in perceiving and defining events are attributed to differences in purpose and perspective. Disagreements with others about the nature of events do not shake the commonsense belief in their imposed reality.

Neither imperfections in one's own definitions nor disagreements with others are corrected for the sake of perfect understanding. They are corrected only as they cause problems for the successful completion of one's plans. The belief that correct understanding can be achieved is not tested. Instead, one is concerned only that definitions are close enough to accuracy so that one's plans will work satisfactorily. The issue is not precision of thought for its own sake but, rather, practical success. And practical success is not judged against the harsh criterion of perfection; instead, it is judged by the practical criterion of being not worth the trouble to improve. Ethnomethodologists use the term "objective (adequate) for the purpose at hand (all practical purposes)" to describe knowledge that meets this practical criterion. As the purpose changes, knowledge may be transformed from adequate to inadequate, or vice versa.

*The Documentary Method of Interpretation*¹⁰

Mannheim was concerned with understanding social scientific knowledge from a social scientific perspective. That is, he was concerned with the reflexivity of social scientific statements. Specifically, he was concerned with understanding the interpretation and reinterpretation of historical events by historians of different periods and by historians of different political persuasions during a given period. You can see what concerned Mannheim for yourself without extensive research. Look at history books used in public schools with publication dates scattered over a thirty- or forty-year period and see what each has to say about a major event. The writing will be simple and the presentations brief, but even over such a short period of time you will find wide variation in attitudes toward the American Indian, the various waves of immigration, the Civil War, or what have you.

Mannheim argued that these changes of interpretation are essential to cultural and social scientific knowledge, but not to natural scientific knowledge. They occur, he suggested, because cultural and social scientific knowledge is different in kind from knowledge in the natural sciences and is apprehended in a different way. His concern was to characterize the formal structure of cultural and scientific knowledge, which he called documentary, and to consider how it is achieved and defended.

Mannheim argued that *documentary knowledge* is knowledge of the patterns that underlie behavior. Individual items—patterns of behavior, works of art, religious beliefs—serve as evidence or documents of the underlying patterns. For example, each work of art is a document of the overall meaning of an artist's work. Documentary patterns may be more or less complex and encompassing. The most encompassing of these patterns is the *Weltanschauung* or "world view" of an era. It encompasses the entire social and cultural reality of an historical period. The pattern can be discovered only by reflection upon all of the less encompassing patterns of the period—the style and substance of art and literature, etiquette, fashion, patterns of conduct, the issues of political life, patterns of social inequality, religious beliefs, scientific achievement, and so on. The more immersed one becomes in these documents of the era, the more completely can one grasp and formulate the spirit of the time. Reciprocally, once the pattern is grasped, it lends meaning to the less encompassing documents. For example, by looking at many paintings, one can grasp what the "Pop Art" movement was about. Once the pattern is grasped, each painting takes on meaning from its place in the pattern.

Mannheim suggested that there are three kinds of knowledge: objective, expressive, and documentary. *Objective knowledge* is knowledge of the meaning

¹⁰ This discussion is based primarily on Mannheim (1964).

of things from a taken for granted perspective of the era. For example, in our era, the objective meaning of authors' appearing on a series of local television and radio shows is that they are publicizing their books and promoting sales. *Expressive knowledge* is knowledge of what the actor subjectively intends to express in his or her conduct. On a promotional tour, it often appears that authors intend to express their concern for issues, commitment to an educational mission, their own brilliance, or the special quality or utility of their work. These are among the subjective meanings of their conduct, whether they succeed in communicating the intended message or not. The world view of the period serves as global background that allows both these interpretations to be made. It is by knowing the facts about promotional tours in our era that particular tours are recognized for what they are. It is by knowing patterns of self-expression in our era that we can grasp the intended messages.

Mannheim wanted to make this global pattern an object of scientific study. Instead of merely living in an era and intuitively sharing its perspective, he argued that students of society must formulate this perspective. They must come to know it explicitly. But a paradox arises. The perspective of an era intuitively grasped affects how items will be interpreted. This creates a special relationship between the documentary pattern displayed in a collection of items and the items. One's own intuitive grasp of one's own era influences the items to which one will attend and what one will make of them. Thus, the global perspective helps to create the documents that are employed as evidence in explicating the global perspective. One's place in the social structure—one's education, class status, income, religion, and so on—serve to influence one's grasp of the global perspective. Thus, documentary interpretation will vary with one's social position. It will also vary as one passes through different stages of the life cycle. The diverse documentary interpretations are documents of the era in which they occur. So, for example, the interpretation of their own era, and others, by medieval historians, is an important document of the nature of the medieval era. And the sense we make of that document is a document of our own era.

Book promotion through television interviews seems to document the importance of television as an arbiter of taste, especially with respect to mass marketing. Authors and their books are at one with doctors and their diet plans, psychologists and their sex and child-rearing advice, sellers and their records, acne medication, and kitchen tools, consumer advocates, and hucksters of diverse products and corporate images. Whether they pay for the exposure as an acknowledged advertisement or present themselves as newsworthy, all need television to create a market and all must accommodate themselves to its format and substantive restrictions. Perhaps in a few years, we will be less impressed with the importance of television to this period of time and draw new conclusions about these practices, and others. Notice that the proposed documentary meaning does not imply that authors recognize or intend their kinship to actors in laxative commercials. Some do; some don't.

Mannheim's methodological suggestions are sketchy. To probe the documentary meaning of events in an era, one must attend to as many items as possible, grasp and express the pattern they display, and then test one's comprehension by attending to additional items suggested by the explicated pattern. The goal is to make a statement that encompasses as many items as possible. The importance of Mannheim's discussion to ethnomethodology lies more in his recognition of the reflexivity and indexicality of social knowledge than in the adequacy of his methodological suggestions.

Ethnomethodologists have applied the documentary method of interpretation to a different domain. Mannheim was concerned primarily with the interpretation of global cultural patterns. His temporal reference was the passage of historical eras and within each era his contextual concerns were with the overall structural arrangement of society. He did acknowledge, however, that the formal structure of documentary interpretation was also exhibited in the interpretation of the relatively faster and less encompassing events of face-to-face social interaction. Ethnomethodologists have made these relatively quick, small activities their major concern.

The justification of this diminution of scale is relatively simple. Mannheim was concerned with defining events as they appeared from the perspective of an era. However, every attempt to define events from the perspective of an era would be, in fact, a definition of those events from the perspective of an era at a particular moment during the era and from a particular practical standpoint. No matter how extensive the research, ultimately, the account is constructed in a particular situation of relatively short duration. We have already seen examples of this in the attempt to define events in the relatively short histories of problem juveniles. This does not imply that extensive research is unnecessary; only that the facts must be understood as they are assembled in a particular situation and that they must be understood to change from situation to situation. Claiming that the facts are valid, relevant, coherent, and credible over an extended period of time and in many situations does not alter the fact that their validity, relevance, coherence, and credibility are established in each situation for its duration and for its purposes.

WHY ETHNOMETHODOLOGY IS SO ABSTRACT

It should have become apparent by now, that ethnomethodologists discuss data that are picayune. Ethnomethodologists are quite seriously interested in the meaning of urine samples and how that meaning is achieved, the response of beat police officers to snide remarks, the observation that simple phrases change meaning from occasion to occasion, and so on. But these matters are considered in terms of highly abstract issues. So abstract are the issues, in fact, that ethnomethodologists most frequently attempt to conduct empirical research on topics

ordinarily treated as matters for philosophical discussion. Instead of leaving logic to logicians, for example, ethnomethodologists treat logic as a substantive theory of reasoning and are attempting to improve upon it by empirical research.

A moment's reflection will indicate why this schism between the extreme concreteness of the data and the extreme abstraction of the sense made of them is necessary. Accounting occurs everywhere and always. I mentioned, for example, that primitive social groups do not have petroleum in their environments, even when, by our accounts, it is in the ground under them. Still, they are accounting, making sense, in the same way as we are. The factual evidence they accept is different, and this difference is important in many ways. But it is not important to the study of how accounting is done with the facts at hand. If I wanted to say something that is true of all professional football teams, I should have to ignore quite a few differences among them, searching for the common features. If I limited my search to NFL teams, my task would be reduced. If I expanded my interests to all professional athletic teams, I should have to abstract my common features from among still more variations. Ethnomethodologists are interested in constructing an account that encompasses the common features of all situations in which humans make sense. They are attempting, after all, to study the process of reasoning itself. This process will have to be abstracted from situations as diverse as winos' arranging proper turns on a wine bottle and bankers' attempting to project housing values in the various neighborhoods in a city. There are many differences to be disregarded for this purpose. What remains will be highly abstract.

SUMMARY

Categorization and inference display a formal structure. Insofar as not every categorization will be accepted as accurate and not every inference will be accepted as valid, people act as if there are rules for making sense. In their own reasoning, oriented to the successful achievement of practical goals, people attempt to reason and categorize accurately. They judge the reasoning of others, as well, and attempt to reconcile differences of opinion through communication.

Traditional logic has been utilized as the model for this reasoning process for over two thousand years, although the details of the model have been modified from time to time. By all accounts, it has been a very successful theory of reasoning. However, the model is not without its difficulties. Empirical terms are problematically accommodated by traditional logic. This difficulty has been recognized for almost as long as the model has existed, and without an acceptable remedy. Adequate descriptions of events are easily demonstrated to be a function of temporal reference and, in turn, a function of the practical circum-

stances under which the events are described. The question of "What happened?" has no single answer.

These formal difficulties have been addressed, typically, under the assumption that traditional logic is the proper model for reasoning. Where common usage does not seem to fit the model, common usage is held to be erroneous, sloppy, careless, and so on. But the assumption that traditional logic must be the model of everyday reasoning need not go unchallenged. The premises of traditional logic are axiomatic, accepted without question or proof. Alternative axioms are already available, although none seem more appropriate to the reasoning of everyday life.

Ethnomethodological thought begins with the premise that a new formal structure of accounts is a prerequisite to understanding human activities. Two fundamental commitments have been made as premises for research. All accounts are reflexive. All accounts are indexical. The goal is to explicate a formal structure that respects these principles. The principles are formalizations of the variety of problems encountered when traditional logic is applied to everyday reasoning.

A number of terms were introduced. Reflexivity refers to the premise that all accounts are part of the situation that they organize. Indexicality is the dependence of an account upon the context in which it occurs for its meaning. The attitude of everyday life is the orientation of people who are engaged in practical activities. It is a partial specification of the rules for using indexical expressions. The documentary method of interpretation is another term for the formal structure of activities involved in understanding indexical expressions. It stresses the reciprocal influence of inference and evidence upon one another. The reciprocal influence of one's social circumstances and one's social knowledge is a special case of this.

A FORMAL EXERCISE

This exercise is an extension of the first. Go out and observe people interacting when you are not part of the interaction. Do not invade privacy. Go to a public place and pay attention. Watch. Listen. Take notes about a few episodes in as much detail as you can. Episodes may be as brief as two people greeting one another in passing. Bring your notes to class and proceed as in the first exercise. Do this while the episodes are still fresh in your mind and can be filled in from memory when you are questioned.

The goal of this exercise is to improve your ability to take notes. Attend closely to what you and others must add to your notes from memory. In taking notes for a more extended project, there will be many entries dispersed over a long time period. Memory will fail. Repeat this exercise a few times until your notes are adequate.

*forgetfulness
as interactive resource*

THE STANDPOINT OF CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Conversation analysis is a distinctive approach to research within ethnomethodology. Conversation analysts study the social organization of talk by practices contained in the talk itself. The reflexivity of conversation, as embodied in its self-organizing practices, is the core topic of the research. Conversation analysis culminates in the specification of rules to which conversations and conversationists are held normatively accountable. The rules are understood to be a necessary component of an adequate model of the actor. The rules are relatively independent of the specific topics of conversation. Many apply invariantly in conversation on any topic. Thus, the structure provided by the rules is a formal structure. The rules, though, are indexical in their application. Whether the rules have been adequately followed is a practical judgment made in and for practical situations. The formal structure of practical reasoning applies. In all important respects, then, conversation analysis is conceptually ethnomethodological. The state of conversation is conceived as a social situation. Its organization is studied operationally and with the same concerns that ethnomethodologists bring to the study of other situations. The distinctiveness of conversation analysis lies in its research strategy.

Ethnomethodological studies have typically reflected three principles of abstraction in the selection and bounding of topics. First, each study has selected either a single person or a relatively small collection of people for study. When a collection of people has been studied, those people have not only shared occupancy of a particular social role or interlocking set of roles but have also participated in those roles together. For example, Cicourel's (1974a) study of interviewers working on demographic studies concerned researchers who were part of the same research team rather than, for instance, a sample of researchers working on different projects throughout the United States. Second, the studies have typically been concerned with activities in a geographically and socially defined setting. Hospital clinic workers were not followed home, or observed during off-duty recreation, or studied in all aspects of their lives. Rather, they were selected for study as holders of a particular role and studied only in the clinic, the primary place in which the role was enacted. Third, the studies have typically explored only one, or a very few, substantive themes in the activities of the subjects. We have considerable information concerning how Agnes managed her gender identity but none about her skills as a typist, how she and her roommate divided the household chores, or how successfully she budgeted her income. We know about the social organization of paranoia as a theme in the drug-using community, but we do not know the mating etiquette of that community, whether they read books, or how seriously they pursued their studies. The abstraction of one theme from the complexity of everyday life allows the practices that organize that theme to be studied in detail.

These characteristic modes of abstraction give the empirical portion of ethnomethodological studies a distinctive character. First, they tend to be detailed studies of narrowly delimited aspects of social life. They seldom attempt to capture the life of a group or community as a whole. Second, themes other than the main topic enter the studies as practical contingencies of organizing the selected theme. For example, the conditions imposed by the social organization of physical examinations enter the study of Agnes only as they become practically relevant to the management of her gender identity. Reciprocally, studies of physical examinations would include such special problems as Agnes's anxious modesty only as they are practically relevant to the organization of physical examinations.¹ What is the central theme, and the practically relevant context, is relative to the purpose of the study. As a collection, the various studies provide background for one another.² Finally, in elaborating how a theme is sustained in a social setting, verbal and nonverbal behavior are both discussed. The overall result is detailed description of how a wide variety of activities contribute to organizing one theme in a setting. The social context of the activities must also be described in some detail because it gives the indexical practices the particular sense they have in that setting.

In contrast, conversation analysts typically abstract a single communication practice, or small family of related practices, and explore the normative structure that that practice imposes on accounting and practical reasoning on any topic, in any setting. The practices are, almost exclusively, ways of talking. So long as the appropriate practices are employed in the conversations studied, there is no need for the conversations to have occurred in a single setting or among a single group of individuals. Any conversations will do. For example, if one wanted to analyze the practices by which strangers are introduced to one another by mutual friends or acquaintances, one could gather conversations occurring in any group and on any topic, as long as they included such introductions. Second, the substance of the conversation (even in the limited sense of requiring introductions to occur) are only sometimes relevant to analysis. For example, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1978) analyze how turns at speaking are coordinated in conversation. Turn-taking occurs in all conversation. Conversation on any topic will do as data. Third, the situation in which the talk occurs is not necessarily relevant. Studies of turn-taking, for example, can sample conversations that occur in any situations that are convenient. Sometimes, though, the setting of the conversation is a factor in the selection of data

Emerson (1975) has done detailed studies of interaction between gynecologists and their patients from the perspective of its consequences for the organization of gynecological examinations. In her study, the origins of the patients' anxieties and fears are addressed only peripherally. Only the expression and control of anxiety in the examination itself, as a condition of sustaining the medical definition of the examination, are addressed systematically. Thus, in important respects, her study is a mirror image of Garfinkel's (1967) discussion of Agnes's experiences with doctors and provides context for it.

See J. Handel (1979) for a discussion of the methodological implications of this reciprocity among field studies.

and sets limits to the generality of the findings. For example, Schegloff (1979) has studied greetings in telephone conversations. In some respects, telephone conversations differ from face-to-face ones because supplementary nonverbal information is not available to the speakers. Thus, telephone greetings have some characteristic features, and care must be taken not to overgeneralize from them.

The overall effect of this approach is to limit studies to the verbal component of conversation without systematic discussion of the context in which the talk occurs. Very detailed attention is paid, instead, to the exact phrasing of messages, the placement of pauses and their effects, the fate of interruptions, signals in the talk that a new speaker will be chosen, regular sequences in the talk (such as question and answer), and so on. Transcripts of conversations are generally provided as illustrations of the analysis, and the normative rules ordering the conversation are specified in more detail and variety than is found in other ethnomethodological studies.

Conceptually, conversation analyses complement the studies of practical reasoning. In use, conversation is an indexical component of accounting practices. Talking is an accounting practice with its own rules. In effect, to engage in conversation is to perform a specific social role. This role can be performed simultaneously with virtually every other social role. Agnes talked. The police talked. The drug users talked. To understand fully how each role imposes contingencies on the other, each must be understood in its own right.

Conversation analysts study talk wherever it occurs, whatever it is about, whatever accompanies it. Studies of practical reasoning examine how socially defined themes are sustained in particular settings by a variety of practices, including talk. Ultimately, if both approaches to research continue, it should be possible to specify the social organization of settings and to differentiate the effects of the rules of conversation from those of other practical circumstances of the setting.

GENERAL RULES OF CONVERSATION

Conversational analysts argue that conversation, regardless of context and content, displays regularities of form. The term conversation is used, as Schegloff puts it (1968, pp. 1075-1076), to include "chats as well as service contacts, therapy sessions as well as asking for and getting the time of day, press conferences as well as exchanged whispers of 'sweet nothings.'" To account for the observed behavioral regularities, normative rules are posited that, if followed by conversationalists, would produce the regular behavior. These rules are intended as part of an adequate model of the actor. The specific interests and situation of the actors must be added to these rules describing how conversation should be ordered to account for the specific content of each conversation.

Taking Turns

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1978) specify rules for taking turns in conversation that are asserted to be invariant, to apply in all conversation. The rules are formulated in a way that accounts for three gross behavioral regularities of conversation. First, almost always, only one person speaks at a time. Second, the turns at talking are orderly. Third, the transition from one turn to the next is orderly. These three regularities, they suggest, are the most fundamental regular features of conversation.

Their detailed examination of a large number of conversations showed that it is common for two speakers to talk simultaneously but that these overlaps are typically very brief.³ Transitions from one speaker to another occur in the majority of cases, with only slight gaps or overlaps in talk, or none at all. That is, the end of one person's turn and the beginning of another's turn are well coordinated. The order and length of turns within a conversation vary and so do the number of parties to a conversation and the lengths of conversations as a whole. The length of conversations, their content, and the distribution of turns are not worked out in advance. Instead, they are worked out by participants in the course of the conversation and by practices contained in the conversation. Some talk is discontinuous, punctuated by pauses or gaps. A variety of behavioral techniques is employed during conversations to distribute turns within them. When errors or violations of smooth turn-taking procedures occur, a variety of behavioral techniques is used to repair the trouble and sustain orderly conversation.

Having identified a group of behavioral regularities in conversation, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1978) specify the normative rules that could account for them. They argue that the techniques for allocating turns are divided into two groups. Either the current speaker can select the next speaker or the next speaker can select himself or herself.⁴ A few simple rules can order these two modes of turn-taking. Turns at talk include places, such as the asking of a question, at which a transition from one speaker to another is relevant. At such places, if the current speaker has selected the next speaker (by directing a question to him or her, for example), that person has the right and the obligation to take the next turn. No one else shares that right and obligation. If the speaker has not selected the next speaker (by addressing the question to anyone who can answer it, for example), the next speaker selects himself or herself by starting first. If no next speaker selects himself or herself in such a situation, the current speaker may, but need not, continue until another opportunity for

³ Schegloff (1968) points out that in groups larger than two people, when more than one person talks simultaneously for an extended period, we perceive that two conversations are occurring in the group.

⁴ The possibility of a third party's selecting a speaker is ignored. At least among groups of children, transitions are sometimes made by one person securing a turn for another. "Come on. Let Harry talk."

transition occurs. When that next opportunity occurs, the same three rules apply. Assuming that people can recognize the places at which transitions from one speaker to another are relevant, these three rules, if followed, would produce the observed regularities of turn-taking. They are not necessarily the only rules that could account for the phenomenon, but, in the strong sense that we discussed earlier, they are adequate.

The application of these rules requires a catalog of behavioral techniques that could serve to select speakers and repair difficulties caused by overlaps or gaps. In addition, to understand the application of these rules in actual conversations, we would need to know why the various options are exercised in particular ways. The practical reasoning of the speakers would be relevant to that task. Some of the behavioral techniques might be generally recognized; others are surely specific to certain settings. That is, the collection of behaviors that might serve to direct the transition from one speaker to another is loosely defined or indexical, even though the rule for using them is quite specific. Once again, practical reasoning remains effective in the application of a formal system. The interdependence of the two types of ethnomethodological studies arises from simultaneous existence of adequate formal rules and loose collections of behaviors that meet their conditions.

Getting a Conversation Started

Once a conversation is under way, a small group of norms distributes the turns at talking and produces smooth-flowing conversations. These rules give considerable control of the conversation to the speaker. Within possible normative limits of turn length, the speaker controls when the transition to a new turn will occur and can select the next speaker if he or she chooses. This normatively guaranteed control is a considerable resource for the speaker.⁵ However, the normative ordering of turns assumes that a speaker has already been selected and that the conversation is under way. Somehow, people must determine who will be the first speaker and assume initial control of the conversation.

Schegloff (1968) studied the opening of conversations over the telephone. In all but one of five hundred recorded calls, the conversation was opened according to the rule that the person called speaks first. The initial turn is typically confined to a greeting, such as "Hello," after which the caller returns the greeting and introduces the first topic of discussion.

⁵ See Scheff (1975) for a discussion of how control of the conversation can be utilized to guide the substance of others' talk and the outcome of discussions. Scheff shows that psychiatrists' normative rights to determine what is a suitable answer to questions and to return the floor to patients for better answers leads patients to define their problems in psychiatrically meaningful ways. Lawyers' ability to hold the floor until they have explained the legal implications of various statements leads their clients to tell their stories in legally advantageous ways.

In the one deviant case, the person called picked up the phone but did not speak. After a pause of about one second, the caller said "Hello." Despite the overwhelming majority of cases in which the person called spoke first, Schegloff did not regard the rule as adequate. It did not account for the observed evidence. Instead, he reformulated the rule to include the deviant case and, in so doing, probably extended the generality of his analysis of openings beyond telephone conversations.

To accommodate the deviant case, Schegloff acknowledged the ringing of the telephone as the initial turn in the conversation. He argued that a ringing telephone is one of many ways in which one person may summon another to speak. In person, making eye contact, speaking to the other person, or tapping him or her on the shoulder could be used. These summonses normatively require an answer, and, when the summons is acknowledged, both parties have expressed a commitment to interact further. Thus, in effect, the caller opens the conversation, and, when the called person says the initial words of greeting, he or she is responding to a summons. A relatively long pause between picking up the phone and speaking a greeting produces a problematic situation. The phone has been picked up and someone is presumed to be holding it, but the summons to converse has not been fully acknowledged. When the caller says "Hello," the caller is repeating the summons in a new form. Until the summons is acknowledged, the conversation will not proceed. Over the phone, the acknowledgment must be spoken.

Schegloff's analysis is interesting in two respects. First, it recognizes a nonverbal event as the opening turn in conversation. Although he is concerned with the talk, he cannot make it fully explicable without reference to other accounting media. It is quite likely that, as analyses of talk become more detailed, the nonverbal context will be incorporated in additional ways. Already, for instance, conversation analyses occasionally refer to tones of voice, although not in a systematic way. Second, his explication of the different functions that can be served by the term "hello" illustrates the looseness of the application of rules. To understand even the word "hello," one must know when it occurs in the conversation. The word can serve to summon another to interact or to acknowledge the summons and commit one to further interaction. At least in old Sherlock Holmes movies, "hello" is also used as a mild exclamation of discovery to signal that a clue has been noticed.

Ending Conversations

Conversational exchanges must eventually be ended. The smooth termination of talk requires that the relevance of rules for allocating turns must be terminated. The parties to the conversation must agree, in effect, that it is no one's normatively protected turn to speak. The problem is not simply to stop talking. This could be accomplished by hanging up phones without warning,

by abruptly turning one's back and walking away from a speaker, or by nodding off to sleep. The problem is to end the conversation smoothly and cooperatively, with all parties knowing and agreeing that it has ended and all parties ceasing to make normative claims on the attention of the others.

Schegloff and Sacks (1974) studied how people use signals in a conversation to coordinate its end. The termination of a conversation requires a sequence in which the parties to the conversation acknowledge its end. The acknowledgment is signaled by the exchange of appropriate terminal remarks. The collection of appropriate remarks is loosely defined and probably varies from group to group. Some examples are "good-bye," "bye," "see you later," "later," "what it is," and "good night." The normative obligations of the people in the conversation to one another are changed by the exchange of terminal remarks. These terminal exchanges signal the end of a role relationship (engaging in conversation) and the irrelevance of its norms.

The closing exchange, however, is not sufficient to coordinate withdrawal from conversation. Rather, events occurring earlier in the conversation provide places in which terminal exchanges are appropriate, just as places are provided where the right to speak may be transferred from one person to another. One way of coordinating the end of conversation is the use of "preclosing" remarks. At the end of a topic, common phrases, such as "so," "well," or "okay," spoken with appropriate intonation, can serve to signal that the conversation can appropriately be ended. Participants then choose whether to terminate the conversation or to introduce another topic. This type of preclosing makes ending the conversation an accountable option because the topic is exhausted and no other one is introduced. Alternately, these preclosing signals make changing the subject an accountable option.

Other preclosing signals make ending the conversation an accountable option for other reasons. A person can announce, as part of the conversation, that he or she must attend to other matters that have priority over continuing to talk. For example, "I've got to go. I'll be late for dinner" can serve as a signal to begin terminating the conversation. Alternatively, one person can begin to terminate the conversation because of priorities or interests attributed to the other. "I'll let you get back to your studying," or "This call must be getting expensive," or "You must be tired after your trip" are examples. Truncated announcements may indicate that a person has reasons to end the conversation without specifying them. "I've got to get going" is an example.

The substance of these signals can be as varied as the practical interests that take priority over the extension of a particular conversation. Their candor, completeness, and explicitness can vary as widely as the intimacy of relationships and the privacy of conversational settings. They serve the common function, however, of signaling the end of conversation accountably, and without giving offense to others.

Even earlier in conversation, remarks may be made that provide a temporal reference for the length of the conversation. Remarking on the lateness of a

phone call or its closeness to dinner time may serve to justify the briefness of the call, independent of specific reasons to end it and of the exhaustion of topics to discuss. Such remarks provide a frame of reference for decisions concerning how long to speak on a topic, their order of introduction, how many topics to expect to cover, and whether to treat possible closing places as such. Knowing that a conversation will be brief, a person might decide to save complex topics for another time or be sure to raise important topics early.

The smooth termination of conversation, then, is dependent upon the exchange of signals throughout the conversation. The minimal requirement is that one party provide a practical reason to terminate the conversation at a particular time and that all parties acknowledge the end of conversation with appropriate closing remarks. Earlier parts of the talk may provide temporal references for the appropriate length of the conversation, with or without specific reasons. While the rest of the work of the conversation is being accomplished, this organizational matter is generally resolved without being noticed.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED BY NORMATIVE STRUCTURE

Thus far, we have discussed normative structures that regulate all conversations. Every conversation must begin and end. Between beginning and ending, people take turns speaking. Other normative regulations do not apply to every conversation. When they become applicable, however, they regulate conversation in at least two distinct ways. First, it may be optional whether to initiate a kind of talk which, once it has been initiated, imposes a normatively governed sequence on participants. For example, one need not, but may, ask a question. Once the question has been asked, however, it is normatively required that the subsequent sequence of talk culminate in an answer. Second, there may be quite general rules for how a topic is to be discussed, if it is discussed at all. Raising the topic is optional, but, by raising it, normative rules are imposed on the conversation.

These normative rules are strategic resources that people use as needed in conversation. When one wants information, one may, but need not, get it by asking a direct question. The question can be relied upon to evoke an answer. It may also reveal one's ignorance, express impolite interest in a topic, embarrass the person asked or asking, or reveal the asker's intentions. Speakers are free to ask or not to ask questions, to seek information or do without it, as their practical purposes dictate. The normative constraints imposed upon conversation by, for example, questions, and the consequent predictability of the response to them, make the initiation of sequences that are optional but regulated a reliable tool.

Identifying People

Conversations need not include reference to people who are not present, but they often do. When people are discussed, it is necessary to identify them. A variety of forms of identification apply to any person and can be used to establish who is being discussed. I am Warren or Dr. Handel. I am Ethan's father and Judy's husband. I teach out at SIUE. Some people identify me as a friend. I'm the guy who wrote this book. I am a former paper boy. Every mail-order business in the country seems to have identified me as a mail-order consumer. Any fact about me, or about any person, could be used to identify me (or him or her) in certain situations. It is not the importance of the fact that matters but its utility in establishing the person's identity in a particular conversation among particular people with particular prior knowledge. Sacks and Schegloff (1979) discuss the norms that regulate the identification of people in and for conversations.

The substance of the identifying form is not normatively regulated. The form of identification, however, is constrained by two normative preferences, which occasionally conflict. The conflict between the two preferences is resolved in a normatively constrained way. The first norm is a preference that identification be accomplished with a single reference form. The second norm is that, if possible, clear recognition of who is being discussed should be established.

Following the two norms simultaneously, a person will attempt to establish recognition with a single reference form rather than listing several identifying facts about the person being discussed. If the hearer signals that he or she recognizes who is being discussed, the sequence is complete. No more will be said to identify the person, although specific things about him or her may be discussed. If the hearer signals lack of recognition, another form of recognition is attempted. Again, rather than describing the person fully, a single fact will be introduced. In such cases, the norms that give preference to clear recognition and the use of single reference forms are in conflict. Second, and subsequent, forms are employed because the preference for clear recognition is the stronger of the two. Additional reference forms are employed one at a time because the preference for single forms is not dropped when the initial attempt fails. Instead, it is modified to a preference for establishing recognition with one more form. Ultimately, either clear recognition is achieved and signaled or the parties signal one another that establishing recognition is not worth continued effort. Either signal terminates the sequence, allowing the conversation to proceed.⁶

These norms provide strategic resources in at least two ways. First, if people are a topic of conversation, these norms allow their identity to be estab-

⁶ Apparently, double reference forms such as "my dog, Spot," which includes the name and the relationship of possession, or "my son, the doctor," are normatively deviant and infrequent. Otherwise, it would be more parsimonious to formulate a single norm which gives a normative preference to establishing clear recognition with as few forms as possible. At each step in the sequence, speakers would decide which forms, and how many, would most efficiently identify the person.

lished in a quick, coordinated way. Second, the freedom of the speaker to choose the identifying form allows the selection to serve purposes other than those of simple identification. For example, the discretion to choose identifying forms is an important resource for keeping secrets in conversation and for communicating quite different messages simultaneously to different hearers, depending on their contextual knowledge of the person being discussed.

Consider talk about the person John Smith, a college student who lives on Elm Street, drives the old Edsel with the "Nuke the Discos" bumper sticker, used to date Emily, and pays his bills by selling illegal drugs on a small scale to friends. Any of these facts can identify him accurately. Let us send John on a trip to Florida and discuss it in a casual way with other acquaintances. This news will be interesting gossip, but it will have different implications for those who know he sells drugs than for those who do not know this fact. By not identifying John as a drug dealer, and not specifying the purpose of the trip, this news can be discussed in a group whose members are not all aware of his means of livelihood. To some, it will sound like a nice vacation; to others, a resupply mission.

The normatively preferred limitation of identification forms makes the omission of important identifying facts unnoticeable. Speakers can identify people without telling all that they know, and without revealing that they are holding anything back, so that speakers' trust of hearers does not become an issue. Hearers' knowledge about the person allows them to fill in their contextual knowledge and to receive information that is never mentioned. The hearer may even know more about the person than the speaker and may get more information from what is said than the speaker intends. The freedom to select the form of identification, coupled with the normative preference for brief identification, allows secrets to be preserved and allows hearers to assess the practical relevance of news in the contexts of their diverse knowledge.

The selection of identification forms can also communicate an attitude toward the person being discussed and establish which of the many facts about the person are relevant for the ongoing conversation. The form of identification may also signal something about the relationship between the people in the conversation. Identifying John Smith as a drug dealer, for example, reveals one's knowledge of such matters and can be used as a sign of trust and intimacy between speaker and hearer. The identifying form, then, provides a factual bit of information about the person being discussed. The choice of one form from among all the possibilities communicates other news as well.

Directing Remarks at Particular Others

By examining videotapes of a conversation among four people, Goodwin (1979) was able to establish two relatively simple norms that govern the addressing of remarks to particular others in groups by the coordination of gaze with talk. If the remark is directed at a particular person, the gaze of the speaker

should be directed at that person while speaking. When talk is directed in this way, eye contact should be made while gazing at the other person. These two norms allow remarks to be addressed to a particular person in a discriminable way and provide eye contact as a signal to acknowledge that the direction of the remarks is recognized.

This normative arrangement can also be put to other purposes. Gazing at a person may be an end in itself or a means to initiate further interaction. The normative right to gaze and establish eye contact can be established by speaking to the subject on any topic. The gaze and eye contact, not the talk, may be important. Asking for the time, then, or for directions, justifies eye contact which can then be exploited to signal other intentions.⁷

Formulating the Conversation

During a conversation, people may sum up what the conversation has been about, its purpose, or its implications. These capsule summaries are, at once, about the conversation and part of it. They are called formulations. No simple set of norms that regulates formulations has been specified because formulations take a wide variety of forms. However, Heritage and Watson (1979) point out that formulations normatively require a sequence (in a form appropriate to the formulation) that acknowledges the formulation and signals whether it is accurate or not. In a conversation including reference to several events, for example, the time sequence may be formulated. "All this happened last weekend, right?" could serve as a formulation of when the events took place, over what time span, and so on. Since this formulation employs a question, the sequence will culminate in an answer. The answer either confirms or denies the accuracy of the formulation. The formulation might take the form of an exclamation. "Wow! That must have been a busy weekend!" could serve to formulate the timing of the events. "Yeah" would acknowledge the accuracy of the time reference and the business of the weekend. "It wasn't that busy" would confirm the timing, but not the level, of excitement.

Formulations serve many strategic ends. One is to help people keep track of the content of conversations and confirm that they share an understanding of it with others. A very important function of formulations is to make the content of the formulation normatively binding on participants. Once a formulation has been suggested and acknowledged, all parties to the conversation are normatively accountable to respect that version of the conversation. One especially important function of accountability to an explicit formulation of the content of a conversation is to coordinate actions subsequent to the conversation. In our discussions of practical reasoning, it became clear that categorizing events often implies a course of action, even if the course of action is not made explicit. Agreeing to the accuracy of a formulation binds people to courses of action

⁷ Goffman (1971) discusses many variations on this strategy.

appropriate to the formulation. Thus the formulation can provide reassurance that others will act in preferred ways or warnings that they may not. Sometimes, the formulation can bring normative pressure to bear on oneself by establishing a public and normative commitment to a line of action. People who reveal New Year's resolutions to others in hopes of establishing an extra incentive to keep them are using that strategy.

COMMUNICATING CONTENT THROUGH FORM

Content can be communicated in conversation by the manner of speaking, independently of the topics explicitly discussed. Some preliminary work has been done along these lines with respect to the display of sex roles in conversation. A number of studies have shown differences between the ways in which men and women respond to each other. The work is preliminary in two senses. First, the norms governing the observed regularities have not been specified yet. Second, the exact theme expressed in the behavioral differences is not clear. The theme is related to the conversational display of male dominance, but the evidence does not yet support a precise specification.

Fishman (1978) gathered her data by placing a tape recorder in the apartments of three couples. The couples controlled when the recorder operated and recorded themselves for continuous periods ranging from one to four hours. The resulting tape recordings were of ordinary conversations around the house. Although the sample of couples was small, prohibiting generalization, the rareness of such detailed data concerning everyday talk makes the study valuable.⁸

Fishman (1978) found that the women asked questions approximately three times as often as the men. Questions are among the conversational resources that oblige others to respond. That is, they tend to ensure that the conversation will continue, at least until an answer is given. Conversation can be opened with a type of question that normatively obtains the right to speak for the asker. "Know what?" and "Do you know what?" were common forms of this type of opening in her data. Normatively, the person who is asked such opening questions must respond with another question such as "No, what?" The original questioner is then normatively entitled to introduce a topic. The women used this attention-getting device twice as often as the men. Statements such as "This is interesting" also tended to initiate a question and answer sequence that culminated in the introduction of a topic. The women used this device more than the men. Openings such as "You know" are less reliable than the other attention-getting openings but still tend to start sequences leading to

⁸ The detailed data make a very impressive case study of talk around a few homes. Sampling issues arise when we want to generalize the results of sex role behavior throughout our society. Other studies indicate that the conversations are typical.

the introduction of a topic. The women used this sort of opening eleven times as often as the men. Minimal, monosyllabic responses such as "yeah," "umm," and "huh" function in two different ways. At the end of someone's statement, they discourage further interaction. At short pauses during a turn at talk, they encourage the speaker to continue. The women's short responses tended to occur during men's turns at talk and to encourage the men to continue. The men's short responses tended to occur at the end of women's turns at talk and to discourage further talk. The men used direct statements twice as often as the women. The women almost always responded to the men's statements, but the men did not respond to the women as predictably.

In general, then, the women talked in ways that tended to extend conversation on any topic, both by encouraging men to continue and by introducing their own topics in ways that appended two or three turn sequences to their beginnings. Women's direct statements were not as successful in eliciting responses from men as men's statements were in eliciting responses from women. Fishman suggests that the indirect tactics are used by women because the direct tactics do not succeed as reliably for them. She also suggests that women do more of the "necessary work of interaction, starting conversations and then working to maintain them" (1978, p. 404). She concludes that women must do extra work to ensure that topics of their choice will be addressed in conversation because men, by their approach to conversation with women, express disinterest in what women have to say.

One interpretation of this asymmetrical distribution of the supportive work required to sustain conversation is that the men display dominance over the women by their manner of speaking. The conversational asymmetries are a reflection of the sex roles that operate in our society and are part of the operations by which those sex roles are sustained. Inequalities in conversational work are analogous to other inequalities, such as in rates of pay or employment opportunities. This interpretation gets some support from the observation that children utilize the same techniques in talking to adults that women use in talking to men (Fishman 1978). Children are known to have limited rights in conversation with adults, and those rights are defined by the adults by exercising the related rights to discipline children and teach them how to behave properly. If women are treated by men as children are treated by adults, and if women respond with conversational tactics similar to those used by children, it is reasonable to assume that they are being denied full adult rights in conversation.

West and Zimmerman (1977) investigated another conversational asymmetry that reflects directly on this interpretation of sex roles in conversation. They found that men interrupt women in two-party, cross-sex conversation more than women interrupt men. Interruptions are especially significant because they compromise the right of the speaker to complete turns at talk and determine the place where transitions to new speakers can occur. The interrupter simply takes the floor by speaking simultaneously with the speaker. This violates the

fundamental norms that govern turn-taking and can be taken as direct proof that full rights are not being extended to the interrupted person. If men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, one can conclude that the women are not being granted equal rights to speak. The men are aggressively violating those rights, and/or by accepting the treatment, women are accepting or inviting their own subordination.

West and Zimmerman recorded conversations in a variety of settings. Some were between two men, some between two women, and some between a man and a woman. In the same-sex conversations, the interruptions were divided approximately equally between the two speakers. However, in the cross-sex conversations forty-eight interruptions occurred, of which forty-six were interruptions of women by men.⁹ To confirm the observation that women's and children's speech tactics were similar, West and Zimmerman recorded parent-child interactions in a physician's office. Fourteen interruptions occurred. In twelve of the fourteen cases, the parent interrupted the child.

The women studied by West and Zimmerman did not react in an obviously negative way to being interrupted. In fact, after being interrupted, the women tended to be silent. West and Zimmerman tentatively concluded that the women's right to speak without interruption was routinely abridged by males without protest. West (1979) conducted another study to determine whether women accepted interruptions more passively than men did. In addition, she attempted to provide some support for the typicality of the earlier findings.

West recruited five male and five female subjects from an introductory sociology class. The subjects were previously unfamiliar with the other-sex person with whom they were paired in the experiment. They were told to relax and get to know one another prior to a more focused discussion of a campus problem chosen by the experimenter. The informal talks lasted twelve minutes. Since the subjects were strangers, politeness was expected to be relatively greater than among friends. That should have reduced the number of interruptions. In addition, although the sample was still small and not statistically random, the use of strangers suggested that regularities in the talk were the result of norms that were not peculiar to a small group of friends.

Twenty-eight interruptions occurred in the conversations. In twenty-one cases (75 percent) the male interrupted the female. West argues that, despite the different frequencies of interruption, the men and women responded similarly once interrupted. The most assertive response—continuing to talk simultaneously with the interruptor—was used after 14 percent of the interruptions by both males and females. Men interrupted by women finished their utter-

⁹ To fully understand this asymmetry, it will be necessary to determine whether males interrupt each other more than females interrupt each other. Interruptions may be characteristic of male speech in all conversations, or they may occur more frequently when men talk to women than when they talk to other men. These are two quite different states of affairs.

ance briefly and then stopped in 43 percent of the cases. Women responded in that way about 38 percent of the time. Males interrupted by women stopped without finishing their utterances in 43 percent of the cases. Women showed this response after 48 percent of their interruptions by men. A larger sample is needed for a more thorough statistical appraisal, but the observed rates of response are not grossly different. This similarity suggests that the women do not accept interruption in a particularly passive way, and it undermines the argument that women accept, or even invite, dominance by men in conversation.

Other aspects of West's analysis are less clear in their implications. While the immediate response of the men and women were similar, the ultimate fate of the interrupted topics showed some asymmetry by sex. In a small percentage of cases (14 percent for men, 10 percent for women), the interrupted speaker reintroduced the interrupted topic later in the conversation. But, after interrupting a man, the women reintroduced his interrupted topic later in 43 percent of the cases. Men reintroduced women's interrupted topics in only 19 percent of the cases. As a result, only 43 percent of the males' topics were dropped after interruption, as compared with 71 percent of the females' topics. Women's and men's immediate responses to interruption were similar, but the results of the interruptions were quite different with respect to ending discussion of the interrupted topics. Thus, men's and women's responses to interruption, while behaviorally similar, are subject to different practical contingencies. Men can accept interruption gracefully, secure in the knowledge that the conversation will return to their chosen topic in the majority of cases; women must accept interruption gracefully despite the fact that 71 percent of their chosen topics will not be reintroduced. This result is quite similar to those reported by Fishman (1978).

These studies of asymmetries between men's and women's manners of speaking demonstrate clearly that conversational style is an important accounting medium. However, even if we grant that the observed asymmetries are typical, there are many unresolved empirical questions about them. For example, it is not clear whether women acquiesce in the abridgment of their rights relative to men's. The inconclusiveness of the research indicates the importance of carrying through the analyses of observed regularities until the norms underlying the observed behavior can be specified adequately. To illustrate the importance of that step of the analysis and the related step of specifying the practical reasoning by which the conduct and norms are related to one another, I should like to speculate about a possible set of norms that could account for all the conversational asymmetries just discussed.

It is important to remember that the asymmetrical conduct and its implication of male dominance are not necessarily intended or recognized. The regularities were only observed after careful examination of tape recordings, and their implications remain unclear even after considerable research. The norms that are followed in conversation may be quite unrelated to the theme of male

dominance, even if they promote it. The connection among the norms, the manner of speaking, and their thematic implication may be concealed in the process of practical reasoning. Even people who are aware of the cultural theme of male dominance, even those who also approve of the arrangement, need not recognize that they act out and display that arrangement in conversation. Nor do they need to be aware of the asymmetrical conduct of men and women, even apart from its implications.

The speaker's control of turns at talk must apply only within loosely defined limits of how long talk has proceeded. After all, the right to hold the floor in conversation is not open ended. Once having begun speaking, a person cannot normatively command our attention forever by never providing a place where another speaker could begin or where the conversation could be ended. The length of turns, the number of turns that a person may take during a conversation, the number of topics that a person may introduce, and so on, must all be normatively limited in some way so that speakers will not impose too long on the attention of their audiences and so that audiences can extricate themselves accountably from conversations with people who talk too long or about too many things, and so on. We cannot quantify the norm at this time, but speakers and hearers must follow rules such as (1) continuing to speak or encouraging others to speak until enough has been said and (2) stopping the talk or encouraging others to stop speaking when enough has been said. These norms set upper and lower limits on the proper quantity of talk.

Suppose, now, that men and women define the word "enough" differently as it applies to various quantities of talk. If men, on average, preferred less talk¹⁰ than women and if men and women applied the two conversation-limiting norms without attention to the sex of others in the conversation, all the observed phenomena would occur. Women would tend to talk more than men would prefer. That should lead to less frequent encouragement by men to continue, more interruptions by men, and less frequent follow-up by men on proposed topics. Men would tend to talk less than women would prefer. That should lead to fewer interruptions by women, to more frequent encouragement by women to continue, to more frequent follow-up by women on proposed topics, and to the reintroduction by women of their interrupted topics. Also, since these quantitative preferences are linked to gender, conversations between people of the same sex ought to display less asymmetry. People would still interrupt one another but would do so approximately equally.

Notice that the proposed norm does not call for different behavior toward the two sexes; nonetheless, it leads to that result. If the quantitative preferences are not recognized, the regularities, their factual connection to gender, and their implications could all go unnoticed. Each person, unaware of quantitative

¹⁰ The quantity of talk might be measured directly or by some ratio such as time talking versus time listening or topics self-raised versus topics raised by others.

differences, could just be following the norms in accord with his or her own definition of "enough." If the gender-linked bias of the results are noticed at all, they could be experienced as a sense by men that women talk too much and a sense by women that men are secretive, cryptic, or too quiet. In addition to the quantities mentioned, preferences for the amount of talk in a given time period, for the frequency with which topics are reconsidered, and for the number of topics discussed in a given time period might also operate. Similar self-concealing reasoning processes could be generated by, for example, gender-linked preferences for different accounting media. Women might prefer talk, for instance, when men prefer nonverbal cues for the particular message and situation.

This speculative exercise is intended to make several points. First, it is imperative to complete these analyses. We must know what the observed regularities are, and we must also know how these regularities occur. Second, the operative norms may be quite different from their consequences. This is an important implication of the principle that practical reasoning is self-concealing. Given simple, unnoticed conditions, such as gender-linked preferences on any of a variety of quantitative dimensions, norms that apply equally to men and women may lead to differences between men's and women's behavior and their response to one another. Third, the principle that practical reasoning is self-concealing allows the analyst some discretion in specifying norms. Fourth, the principle also suggests an obligation to specify how the norms could operate without notice, unless there is evidence that they are known to actors.

AN EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE FOR SPECIFYING THE IMPORTANCE OF CONVERSATIONAL RESOURCES

This discussion of conversational norms has distinguished between norms that are invariantly applicable and norms that are only occasionally relevant. Various optional conversational techniques may all be useful, but not all are necessary to conversation or equally valuable. Kent, Davis, and Shapiro (1978) devised an experimental technique to assess the function of questions in structuring and restructuring conversations. Some evidence indicates that their procedure can be adapted to the investigation of other conversational techniques. If that proves true, it should be possible to differentiate the functions of different conversational techniques and to assess their relative importance for organizing conversations.

Kent, Davis, and Shapiro divided experimental subjects into three groups. In one group, pairs of subjects held unconstrained conversations. In the second, the subjects were instructed not to ask questions or to imply them by the

intonation of their talk. The loss of questions as a resource was expected to disrupt the conversation. To be sure that the disruption was due specifically to the absence of questions, and not just to the difficulty of unnatural style, a second control group was used. In that group, the use of subordinate clauses was forbidden, limiting the speakers to simple sentences. This was expected to be unnatural, but not to pose any difficulties in getting messages across. Although the subjects did not perfectly follow their instructions, the reduction of questions and subordinate clauses was statistically significant.

Questions have the effect, among other things, of turning over the floor to a new speaker for the purpose of providing an answer. Thus, a specific hypothesis of the study was that turns at talk would be longer when questions were not permitted. This hypothesis was borne out. The absence of subordinate clauses did not have this effect. On the other hand, the absence of subordinate clauses and of questions both tended to slow down the speed of talk relative to the unconstrained condition. The general effects of the difficulty of talking in an unnatural manner, then, could be differentiated from the effects of losing a particular resource.

More pervasive effects of the absence of questions were also demonstrated. The talk was transcribed, and each turn was typed on a separate card. The decks of cards were then shuffled and sorters were asked to reconstruct the conversation. Even after the ability to connect questions with their answers was controlled, the ability of sorters to reconstruct the questionless conversations was impaired. That is, without the use of questions, the conversation could not be returned to its original order. The talk was less organized.

The importance of this study lies in the contrast between the prohibitions of questions and of subordinate clauses. Both were difficult and caused the conversation to slow down. But only the prohibition of questions disrupted the structure of the conversation or altered the length of turns. We can conclude, then, that the prohibition of questions disrupts conversation more than the prohibition of subordinate clauses. In that sense, questions are the more important conversational resource. This design may allow the comparison of various conversational resources with respect to how difficult it is to conduct conversation without them, the specific nature of the problems generated by their absence, and their importance to orderly conversation.

This experiment also suggests that conversation analysis may have direct practical implications. If instructions can be designed that disrupt conversation in predictable ways, it is likely that instructions can be designed to improve conversational effectiveness as well. As the norms of conversation are identified, perhaps they can serve as the basis for training programs to develop special skills to systematically improve the routine conversational skills learned in more traditional and more haphazard ways.