

Understanding Qualitative Research and Ethnomethodology

Paul ten Have (2004) **Understanding Qualitative Research and Ethnomethodology**. Sage Publications. London. Thousand Oaks. New Delhi. (199 pages).

Reviewed by *Egill Hedinn Bragason*, Ph.D.

How is qualitative social research possible? This important but often neglected question is the main theme of Paul ten Have's new book. Ten Have answers from the perspective of ethnomethodology, and his conclusions are often enlightening and delightfully surprising. This is a rare book in many ways because it focuses on qualitative research in general from the point of view of ethnomethodology, a discipline not widely known among qualitative researchers. Ten Have states in the introduction that his book is the first that "systematically discusses qualitative research from an ethnomethodological perspective" (p. ix). This in itself is interesting and the book contains much food for thought. The general approach taken is that of an ethnomethodological reflection on qualitative research with the aim of pointing to new ways of research in different avenues of social inquiry. This book brings many messages relevant to people engaged in the field of qualitative inquiry. It offers much more than one would expect at a short glance. There is a subtlety about many things here that only appears gradually to the reader. Ethnomethodology is a complex field that offers a different perspective in qualitative research. After reading it, I felt inspired to obtain some of the work of Harold Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology.

Ten Have outlines new ways and possibilities in qualitative social research that have consequences, for example how we think about the practice of doing interview research. Moreover, he discusses the logic at the base of qualitative inquiry and research designs and compares this with the approach of ethnomethodology. Ten Have begins by arguing that the difference between various qualitative research methods is only a relative one, and that there is no *essential* difference in method, for example between interview research, the analysis of natural documents and the whole field of ethnographic approaches. Another point made here is that there is no best or fixed method in qualitative social research since method can only be discussed as a heuristic possibility, taking into account the circumstances and the nature and aim of a particular project.

What, then is ethnomethodology? The answer to that question does not jump out of the first pages of this book; it becomes clear as the reader gradually starts to grasp its meaning. First of all, it can be said that ethnomethodology is a special way or approach to doing and understanding qualitative social research. Ethnomethodology does not make a sharp distinction between "doing science" and other life activities. It focuses on "local accountability of any kind of practice" (p. 17) and is after "local and time-bound features of phenomena" (p. 24). It

seeks to study the *detailed features of the production of social order*. Ethnomethodology aims at making science ordinary in a sense by arguing that there is no *essential* difference between scientific practice and other kinds of daily-life practice. This of course is a strong and revolutionary statement but it is convincingly explained and supported in this book. Ethnomethodology can also be said to be an approach that seeks to bring about an understanding of how practice is embedded in ordinary competence. At the same time it is stressed that practice is always unique since it must always be part of a local culture. Formal definitions of ethnomethodology tend to be complex because they are coined in unfamiliar terms such as *indexicality*, *indexical expression* and *reflexivity*, concepts that are either not met with in general social science or used in a sense that is different from their more common usage. Reflexivity, for example, means here only an *object's relation to itself* and not a self-conscious view of social science activities. These and other concepts are well explained by ten Have and the reader may gain considerable knowledge and insight from them.

Ethnomethodology is not interested in individuals, its field is the dynamic property of social life and its procedures. The individual is only seen as a member of a social cohort that populates social scenes which are the object of inquiry. Internal processes, emotions, values, beliefs and other psychological phenomena that go on in the mind fall outside the scope of ethnomethodology's interest. Moreover, ethnomethodology does not find it useful to formulate general rules, laws statements or description of general practices of social groups. The idea that a stable core exists that can be used to describe any class of social practice in general terms is totally rejected and knowledge is always seen as local and time-bound. The argument here is that it is useless to discuss social practices in general, independently of the specific occasions on which they are being used. It follows from this way of reasoning that more "conventional" qualitative social studies have often missed the essential "what" of trades and crafts. Ten Have names activities such as laboratory work, mathematical proofing and piano improvisation to make his point.

This book comes in nine chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to a discussion of qualitative methods in social research. This is done in an introductory manner and the emphasis is on major analytical issues and concepts that are important from the ethnomethodological stance. The basic concepts introduced here are used throughout the book and are discussed in this chapter in relation to interview studies, natural documents and ways of doing ethnography. Ragin's (1994) model of social research is presented and acts as a framework for understanding ideas and evidence in social research. There is an interesting discussion in this chapter about styles of conducting research, the analytic status of research materials, theoretical objects and other important issues.

Chapters two and three are devoted to the methods and the perspectives of ethnomethodology. The work of Harold Garfinkel is described here as well as the development of his ideas, also the contributions of other writers to the field. Conversation analysis - as it is done by the majority of researchers today - is criticized as having developed into a "normal science in the Kuhnian sense of the term, as a relatively fixed and conventional discipline that is after the formulation of law-like generalities" (p. 25) Such a position has no place in the ethnomethod-

ology developed by Garfinkel and his followers. The main message of this chapter is that ethnomethodology must focus on the *procedural aspects of member's situated practice, not on overall causes, conditions or effects of those practices*. The objective of ethnomethodology is to study observable activities, that which is scenic, and the intelligibility and organization of social practice (p. 25).

Chapter four is about interview research and contains important messages to people engaged in this popular line of research. What strikes me here is the observation that interview situations are always artificial to some extent and created with the researcher's aims and needs in mind. Ten Have says that it is a problem for social research to collect data that can be called adequate for the construction of a valid representation of social life. Different data collection methods are not equally well suited to this task and the choice of method is based on many factors, including personal preferences and fashion in the social sciences. The interview method is immensely popular in qualitative social research, and ethnomethodology questions the usefulness of much interview research. Interviews are understood as topics, not as resources, by ethnomethodologists. Ethnomethodology seeks to understand how interviews are produced, not what comes out of their analysis. Ten Have traces the popularity of interview research to theoretical and practical causes. What comes out of interviews can be seen as a reflection of what happens in social groups or in society, that is to say, the interview material is a *product of persons* that are moral and accountable in their social practice. When this is taken for granted or accepted, the task of the interviewer is to make sure that as much relevant material is produced as is possible in the interview situation. This means that a researcher usually arranges interview situations in such a way that *interview productivity* will be optimal. The researcher also sets the agenda in most ways, trying to get to the information that is important for his or her interview project. What we have here is a situation where the interviewer has a certain amount of *control* over the people being interviewed. There is, of course, less control and more flexibility in open interviews and methods such as in focus group research, than there is in quantitative survey interviews, but the control is still there. The qualitative researcher using interviews should not believe that he has given the people in whom he is interested anything like total freedom. The simple fact that a research agenda is used limits the freedom of the interview situation and decides which topics are addressed etc. In other words, there is *control* of what is said or what can be said that is set up by the researcher and his design. Even when people are told that they can use their own words, they are still dislocated from ordinary life circumstances. Taking interviews in people's homes or workplaces does not even solve this problem because then we turn the home or the workplace situation into a kind of laboratory situation (p. 84).

Does this mean that interview research is seriously harmed by these limitations? To some degree it must be, but it is difficult to see how one can do qualitative social research without running into these and other difficulties that limit the validity of a project. After all, validity and ethics are research ideals that we can only approach and never attain to a hundred percent. The main message here is that we must be aware of the asymmetry of power relations between researcher and respondents. A researcher is responsible only for asking questions, while the people being interviewed are responsible for answering. The latter task is more dif-

difficult. For example, the person asking questions has had time to prepare them, while the person answering must do so on short notice and may not have time to think the answers through. Being aware of this and other limitations inherent in an interview situation more or less controlled and created by a researcher is important. It can be said that the interview method is the queen of qualitative inquiry today, but the queen sits on a chair that is perhaps not as well supported as many of us would like to believe. This is one example of how the study and practice of ethnomethodology can have a sobering effect on other qualitative social research and act to improve its validity.

In chapter five, the author discusses natural documents as a data source. Natural documents can be written or printed texts, photographs, drawings and paintings, photocopies, certificates, hospital records, diaries, soundtracks and films or other such artifacts that were not originally made for our research purpose. Ten Have focuses here on basic issues relevant to the use of these natural documents in research, for example the problem of incompatibility between the original purpose of the document and the research purpose. Another problem is the relativity of time. Reading a 30 year old newspaper article on the day it was published and today is not the same thing. As documents travel through time, they lose contact with their original context and grow weaker as a data resource. The discussion about documents as seen from a factist or a specimen perspective is especially relevant here. A document can be seen as being either a “source of information on some external reality or as a document in itself” (p. 105). Interpretation of natural documents requires both perspectives, and a dialogue between different frames of reference must take place during the research process. One additional frame of reference is the original purpose of the document and how it reflects on its producer and on the researcher as an observer. Natural documents, however, are primarily used as background material or core data in historical projects.

Ethnography and field methods is the subject of chapter six. Ten Have says about ethnography that it “...has a core value in that it resonates best with the heuristic and hermeneutic side of qualitative social research” (p. 110). This is true despite the fact that ethnography is difficult and time-consuming and fraught with methodological problems. The three well-known basic stages of ethnographic projects – gaining admission to the field, collecting data and final reporting – are discussed from the perspective of ethnomethodology in this chapter. Interesting studies are described here, for example euthanasia practices in two hospitals and a street corner society, an Italian slum in Boston. Ten Have goes to some depth into ethnographic topics such as the ethnographer’s “code” where data *resources* gradually change into *topics*. This is interesting because it shows how research experiences do not only lead to concrete findings but do also condition and affect the research and the research procedures themselves. This chapter ends by stressing that there are complex relations between ethnography and ethnomethodology, where the latter calls for carefulness in descriptive ambitions (p. 131). This chapter is a good introduction to ethnography despite its emphasis on the ethnomethodological perspective.

Chapter seven is focused on grounded theory. As most of the readers of this newsletter will know, the purpose with grounded theory, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967) was to close

the gap between theory and research by pointing out the possibility of discovering theory directly from qualitative data. Ten Have criticizes grounded theory from the ethnomethodological standpoint on several accounts. First, grounded theory is seen as having a tendency to decontextualize and break interview materials up into smaller data fragments that are later analyzed separately and out of their original context. As was mentioned above, the same criticism is held against conversation analysis. A second contrast is that ethnomethodologists reject the making of generalized theories as separated from the main data body. The conclusion is that ethnomethodology is a much more radical departure from doing more “conventional” kinds of qualitative social research than is grounded theory. Against this, it can be said that the two approaches aim at different kinds of results and therefore use different styles of inquiry, each with its own merits.

In chapter eight, the author presents practical exercises, activities and strategies as examples of how to carry out ethnomethodological studies. This chapter is not written as a manual on practical ethnomethodology but as a source of inspiration to people who plan to do research. The examples given here, based on the work of Harold Garfinkel, Livingstone and others, are really interesting and throw a great deal of light on the practical side of ethnomethodology. Any social activity can be used as a field of inquiry, and even ordinary daily activities can be made interesting by the use of ethnomethodology. The emphasis here is on do-it-yourself experiences, observation, intensive interaction, observing-recording and combining ethnography and on-the-spot recording. This chapter is full of wonderful examples that are a good source of inspiration.

The title of the last chapter is *Reflections*. It contains reflections on qualitative research methods and ethnomethodological studies and addresses the problem of “generalities”. This refers to the tendency of researchers to generalize the results of their analysis to other groups and situations, i.e. to more general levels than the actual research situation covered. The danger that ten Have warns about here is that one may “...lose one’s grip on the data at hand” (p. 173) and end up with doing something that is not in the line of true ethnomethodology. In quantitative analysis, the data is seen as an approximation of social facts, and the object of interest is the covariation within large data sets, for example relationships between variables and their strength. “General” qualitative research may be called the study of commonalties or common attributes of a smaller number of cases, for example in hermeneutic text analysis. Ethnomethodology uses intensive examination in order to understand and describe the *procedures* of social life without any generalizations in mind. The contrast here is between resource and topic; with ethnomethodology addressing the latter subject. Ethnomethodology should not be viewed as an attempt to replace formal analytic knowledge or its application, it is rather “...an addition, supplementation, or even completion” (p. 179). This modest statement reflects ethnomethodology’s humble approach to qualitative social research, and is a good reminder about the imperfections of all research methods. Another good reminder is to be found at the end of this chapter where ten Have warns about the futility of using and combining different kinds of data materials in order to establish a triangulation of methods in order to produce a stronger research design. The argument here is that research methods should be chosen primarily on the basis of their *informative value* with regard to the nature of the problem one

is investigating. Using two methods, for example interviews and ethnography, “does something other than positioning an object by determining its direction from two known positions” because “...one piece of data may be seen as an *instruction* to see the meaning of another, and sometimes vice versa” (p. 180).

This book, although designed as an introduction to ethnomethodology, is actually much more. It contains an in-depth treatment of many problematic aspects of qualitative social research. It is a book of revelation and inspiration with regard to the foundations of qualitative social research. From the point of view of psychology, one may wonder at the usefulness of an approach to research that is not interested in the individual person and rejects the formulation of general laws and statements. But ethnomethodological studies may often bring about a unique understanding of the individual in intersectional processes from its special viewpoint that is useful, for example in social psychology. From the perspective of ethnomethodology, living together in social groups constitutes *accountable work*, and the analysis of social accountability – a well-known theme in social psychology - is a major theme in ethnomethodological studies, although approached in a way that differs from that of mainstream social psychology.

Ethnomethodology is not something that can be easily and immediately grasped because of the sometimes complicated and unusual terms used in this field of inquiry, but the serious reader has much to gain from it. I enjoyed it primarily because it is a real eye-opener and its publication is bound to be noticed and welcomed by many people, students and professional researchers alike. Paul ten Have is known to readers of this Newsletter for another book, “Doing Conversation Analysis” published by Sage Publications in 1999, reviewed in Newsletter number 28, June 2000. In several ways the reader will perceive a continuum between the two books; for example with regard to the discussion of conversation analysis, which was originally a direct contribution of ethnomethodology to qualitative social research.

References

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