12.3 Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain the following laws within the Ideal Gas Law
- Define **ethnomethodology** and describe its purpose.
- Define and describe **conversation analysis**.

Though not unique methods of data collection per se, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are unique enough, and prominent enough in sociology, that they warrant some dedicated attention in this text. **Ethnomethodology** refers to the study of everyday reality. Rather than assume that the purpose of social science is to understand some objective reality, ethnomethodologists investigate how people construct, prolong, and maintain their realities. The term **ethnomethodology** was coined by sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967), Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, who, as described in his 2011 obituary, was a “sociologist who delved into the minutiae of everyday life” (Lynch, 2011). Lynch, M. (2011, July 13). Harold Garfinkel obituary. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from [http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/...inkel-obituary](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/...inkel-obituary) Ethnomethodology’s emphasis on the everyday, and on ordinary people’s methods for producing order in their social worlds, is perhaps its most distinctive characteristic.

An example of ethnomethodological research is C. M. Scharff’s (2008) Scharff, C. M. (2008). Doing class: A discursive and ethnomethodological approach. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 5, 331–343. study of how young feminist women “do” social class. In her study, Scharff examines data from interviews with 40 German and British young women to understand how they “think, talk, and feel about feminism” (p. 334). By focusing in on language, talk, and interaction, Scharff argues that her account is ethnomethodological in nature. Kevin Whitehead (2009) Whitehead, K. (2009). “Categorizing the categorizer”: The management of racial common sense in interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 72, 325–342. also takes an ethnomethodological approach in his study of the social organization of race. In Whitehead’s words, he considers “one mechanism by which racial categories, racial ‘common sense,’” and thus the social
organization of race itself, are reproduced in interaction” (p. 325). Whitehead, K. (2009). “Categorizing the categorizer”: The management of racial common sense in interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 72,* 325–342. To study these processes, Whitehead analyzed the interactions and practices of participants in an employment “race training” workshop and found that individuals use race as a framework from which to understand their own and others’ actions, thereby reproducing race as a relevant social category.

**Conversation analysis** grew out of ethnomethodology (Schutt, 2006) and thus shares its focus on the construction of reality as opposed to the discovery of reality. Conversation analysts focus specifically on talk in interaction: how talk progresses, how it is facilitated or impeded, how turns are taken in talk, and how these processes both shape and are shaped by social context. In conversation analysis, what people say is just as important as how they say it. Also important are the pauses people take in expressing themselves and how or whether they interrupt themselves or others while talking. Conversation analysts might study recordings of court proceedings or legislative debates to learn about the social construction of law and punishment. They might also study more simple interactions, such as a conversation between two people meeting for coffee.

Some research methods texts include coverage of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis in their presentations of qualitative data analysis (Schutt, 2006). It makes sense to do so; both represent unique approaches to analyzing qualitative data. Yet they also rest upon particular ontological and epistemological assumptions that set them apart, in some ways at least, from more traditional mechanisms of analysis such as coding.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Ethnomethodologists study everyday reality and how people produce those realities through their presentations of self and interactions with others.
- Conversation analysts focus specifically on the dynamics of talk.

**Exercises**

1. Professor Dhiraj Murthy requires his Introduction to Sociology students to conduct an ethnomethodology exercise to help them understand the sociological, and very social, aspects of “everyday activities.” To understand how these activities are social, Murthy asks students to engage in some activity that interrupts the “natural facts of life” (Garfinkel’s words). Read about their experiences here: [http://learn.bowdoin.edu/sociology/soc101/?p=68](http://learn.bowdoin.edu/sociology/soc101/?p=68). What do these students’ reports tell us about how “everyday activities” are also social activities?