4 Situated actions

> This total process [of Trukese navigation] goes forward
> without reference to any explicit principles and
> without any planning, unless the intention to proceed
> to a particular island can be considered a plan. It is non-
> verbal and does not follow a coherent set of logical
> steps. As such it does not represent what we tend to
> value in our culture as "intelligent" behavior.
>
> (Gladwin 1964, p. 175)

This chapter turns to recent efforts within anthropology and soci-
ology to challenge traditional assumptions regarding purposeful
action and shared understanding. A point of departure for the chal-
lenge is the idea that common-sense notions of planning are not in-
adequate versions of scientific models of action, but rather are
resources for people's practical deliberations about action. As pro-
jective and retrospective accounts of action, plans are themselves
located in the larger context of some ongoing practical activity. As
common-sense notions about the structure of that activity, plans
are part of the subject matter to be investigated in a study of pur-
poseful action, not something to be improved upon, or transformed
into axiomatic theories of action.

The premise that practical reasoning about action is properly part
of the subject matter of social studies is due to the emergence of a
branch of sociology named *ethnomethodology*. This chapter describes
the inversion of traditional social theory recommended by ethno-
methodology, and the implications of that inversion for the prob-
lem of purposeful action and shared understanding. To designate
the alternative that ethnomethodology suggests – more a

reformulation of the problem of purposeful action, and a research programme, than an accomplished theory – I have introduced the term *situated action*. That term underscores the view that every course of action depends in essential ways upon its material and social circumstances. Rather than attempting to abstract action away from its circumstances and represent it as a rational plan, the approach is to study how people use their circumstances to achieve intelligent action. Rather than build a theory of action out of a theory of plans, the aim is to investigate how people produce and find evidence for plans in the course of situated action. More generally, rather than subsume the details of action under the study of plans, plans are subsumed by the larger problem of situated action.

The view of action that ethnomethodology recommends is neither behavioristic, in any narrow sense of that term, nor mentalistic. It is not behavioristic in that it assumes that the significance of action is not reducible to uninterpreted bodily movements. Nor is it mentalistic, however, in that the significance of action is taken to be based, in ways that are fundamental rather than secondary or epiphenomenal, in the physical and social world. The basic premise is twofold: first, that what traditional behavioral sciences take to be cognitive phenomena have an essential relationship to a publicly available, collaboratively organized world of artifacts and actions, and secondly, that the significance of artifacts and actions, and the methods by which their significance is conveyed, have an essential relationship to their particular, concrete circumstances.

The ethnomethodological view of purposeful action and shared understanding is outlined in this chapter under five propositions: (1) plans are representations of situated actions; (2) in the course of situated action, representation occurs when otherwise transparent activity becomes in some way problematic; (3) the objectivity of the situations of our action is achieved rather than given; (4) a central resource for achieving the objectivity of situations is language, which stands in a generally indexical relationship to the circumstances that it presupposes, produces, and describes; (5) as a consequence of the indexicality of language, mutual intelligibility is

achieved on each occasion of interaction with reference to situation particulars, rather than being discharged once and for all by a stable body of shared meanings.

4.1 Plans are representations of action

The pragmatist philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934) has argued for a view of meaningful, directed action as two integrally but problematically related kinds of activity. One kind of activity is an essentially situated and *ad hoc* improvisation – the part of us, so to speak, that actually acts. The other kind of activity is derived from the first, and includes our representations of action in the form of future plans and retrospective accounts. Plans and accounts are distinguished from action as such by the fact that, to represent our actions, we must in some way make an object of them. Consequently, our descriptions of our actions come always before or after the fact, in the form of imagined projections and recollected reconstructions.

Mead's treatment of the relation of deliberation and reflection to action is one of the more controversial, and in some ways incoherent, pieces of his theory. But his premise of a disjunction between our actions and our grasp of them at least raises the question for social science of the relationship between projected or reconstructed courses of action, and actions *in situ*. Most accounts of purposeful action have taken this relationship to be a directly causal one, at least in a logical sense (see chapter 3). Given a desired outcome, the actor is assumed to make a choice among alternative courses of action, based upon the anticipated consequences of each with respect to that outcome. Accounts of actions taken, by the same token, are just a report on the choices made. The student of purposeful action on this view need know only the predisposition of the actor and the alternative courses that are available in order to predict the action's course. The action's course is just the playing out of these antecedent factors, knowable in advance of, and standing in a determinate relationship to, the action itself.

The alternative view is that plans are resources for situated action, but do not in any strong sense determine its course. While plans presuppose the embodied practices and changing circumstances of situated action, the efficiency of plans as representations comes precisely from the fact that they do not represent those practices and circumstances in all of their concrete detail. So, for example, in planning to run a series of rapids in a canoe, one is very likely to sit for a while above the falls and plan one's descent.[1] The plan might go something like "I'll get as far over to the left as possible, try to make it between those two large rocks, then backferry hard to the right to make it around that next bunch." A great deal of deliberation, discussion, simulation, and reconstruction may go into such a plan. But, however detailed, the plan stops short of the actual business of getting your canoe through the falls. When it really comes down to the details of responding to currents and handling a canoe, you effectively abandon the plan and fall back on whatever embodied skills are available to you. The purpose of the plan in this case is not to get your canoe through the rapids, but rather to orient you in such a way that you can obtain the best possible position from which to use those embodied skills on which, in the final analysis, your success depends.

Even in the case of more deliberative, less highly skilled activities, we generally do not anticipate alternative courses of action, or their consequences, until *some* course of action is already under way. It is frequently only on acting in a present situation that its possibilities become clear, and we often do not know ahead of time, or at least not with any specificity, what future state we desire to bring about. Garfinkel (1967) points out that in many cases it is only after we encounter some state of affairs that we find to be desirable that we identify that state as the goal toward which our previous actions, in retrospect, were directed "all along" or "after all" (p. 98). The fact that we can always perform a *post hoc* analysis of situated action that will make it appear to have followed a rational plan

[1] This example was suggested to me by Randy Trigg, to whom I am indebted for the insight that plans orient us for situated action in this way.

says more about the nature of our analyses than it does about our situated actions. To return to Mead's point, rather than direct situated action, rationality anticipates action before the fact, and reconstructs it afterwards.

4.2 Representation and breakdown

While we can always construct rational accounts of situated action before and after the fact, when action is proceeding smoothly it is essentially transparent to us. Similarly, when we use what Heidegger terms equipment that is "ready-to-hand," the equipment "has a tendency to 'disappear'":

> Consider the example (used by Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty) of the blind man's cane. We can hand the man the cane and ask him to tell us what properties it has. After hefting and feeling it, he can tell us that it is light, smooth, about three feet long, and so on; it is present-at-hand for him. But when the man starts to use the cane (when he grasps it in that special mode of understanding that Heidegger calls "manipulation") he loses his awareness of the cane itself; he is aware only of the curb (or whatever object the cane touches); or, if all is going well, he is not even aware of that. Thus it is that equipment that is ready-to-hand is invisible just when it is most genuinely appropriated. (Dreyfus, in press, ch. 6)

In contrast, the "unready-to-hand," in Heidegger's phrase, comprises occasions wherein equipment that is involved in some practical activity becomes unwieldy, temporarily broken, or unavailable. At such times, inspection and practical problem-solving occur, aimed at repairing or eliminating the disturbance in order to "get going again." In such times of disturbance, our use of equipment becomes "explicitly manifest as a goal-oriented activity," and we may then try to formulate procedures or rules:

> The scheme peculiar to [deliberating] is the "if-then"; if this

or that, for instance, is to be produced, put to use, or averted, then some ways and means, circumstances, or opportunities will be needed (Heidegger, cited in Dreyfus, in press, ch. 6)

Another kind of breakdown, that arises when equipment to be used is unfamiliar, is discussed in chapter 6 in relation to the "expert help system" and the problem of instructing the novice user of a machine. The important point here is just that the rules and procedures that come into play when we deal with the "unready-to-hand" are not self-contained or foundational, but contingent on and derived from the situated action that the rules and procedures represent. The representations involved in managing problems in the use of equipment presuppose the very transparent practices that the problem renders noticeable or remarkable. Situated action, in other words, is not made explicit by rules and procedures. Rather, when situated action becomes in some way problematic, rules and procedures are explicated for purposes of deliberation and the action, which is otherwise neither rule-based nor procedural, is then made accountable to them.

4.3 The practical objectivity of situations

If we look at the world commonsensically, the environment of our actions is made up of a succession of situations that we walk in to, and to which we respond. As I noted in chapter 3, advocates of the planning model not only adopt this common-sense realist view with respect to the individual actor, but attempt to bring concerted action under the same account by treating the actions of others as just so many more conditions of the actor's situation. In the same tradition, normative sociology posits, and then attempts to describe, an objective world of social facts, or received norms, to which our attitudes and actions are a response. Emile Durkheim's famous maxim that "the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental principle" (1938) has been the methodological

premise of social studies since early in this century. Recognizing the human environment to be constituted crucially by others, sociological norms comprise a set of environmental conditions beyond the material, to which human behavior is responsive: namely, the sanctions of institutionalized group life. Human action, the argument goes, cannot be adequately explained without reference to these "social facts," which are to be treated as antecedent, external, and coercive *vis-à-vis* the individual actor.

By adopting Durkheim's maxim, and assuming the individual's responsiveness to received social facts, social scientists hoped to gain respectability under the view that human responses to the facts of the social world should be discoverable by the same methods as are appropriate to studies of other organisms reacting to the natural world. A principal aim of normative sociology was to shift the focus of attention in studies of human behavior from the psychology of the individual to the conventions of the social group. But at the same time that normative sociology directed attention to the community or group, it maintained an image of the individual member rooted in behaviorist psychology and natural science – an image that has been dubbed by Garfinkel the "cultural dope":

> By "cultural dope" I refer to the man-in-the-sociologist's-society who produces the stable features of the society by acting in compliance with preestablished and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides. (1967, p. 68)

Insofar as the alternatives of action that the culture provides are seen to be non-problematic and constraining on the individual, *their* enumeration is taken to constitute an account of situated human action. The social facts – that is to say, what actions typically come to – are used as a point of departure for retrospective theorizing about the "necessary character of the pathways whereby the end result is assembled" (p. 68).

In 1954, the sociologist Herbert Blumer published a critique of traditional sociology titled "What Is Wrong with Social Theory?" (see

Blumer 1969, pp. 140–52). Blumer argues that the social world is constituted by the local production of meaningful action, and that as such the social world has never been taken seriously by social scientists. Instead, Blumer says, investigations by social scientists have looked at meaningful action as the playing out of various determining factors, all antecedent and external to the action itself. Whether those factors are brought to the occasion in the form of individual predispositions, or are present in the situation as pre-existing environmental conditions or received social norms, the action itself is treated as epiphenomenal. As a consequence, Blumer argues, we have a social science that is about meaningful human action, but not a science of it.

For the foundations of a science of action, Blumer turns to Mead, who offers a metaphysics of action that is deeply sociological. Blumer points out that a central contribution of Mead's work is his challenge to traditional assumptions regarding the origins of the common-sense world, and of purposeful action:

> His treatment took the form of showing that human group life was the essential condition for the emergence of consciousness, the mind, a world of objects, human beings as organisms possessing selves, and human conduct in the form of constructed acts. He reversed the traditional assumptions underlying philosophical, psychological, and sociological thought to the effect that human beings possess minds and consciousness as original "givens," that they live in worlds of pre-existing and self-constituted objects, and that group life consists of the association of such reacting human organisms. (ibid., p. 61)

Mead's "reversal," in putting human interaction before the objectivity of the common-sense world, should not be read as an argument for metaphysical idealism; Mead does not deny the existence of constraints in the environment in which we act. What Mead is working toward is not a characterization of the natural world *simpliciter*, but of the natural world *under interpretation*, or the world as

construed by us through language. The latter is precisely what we mean by the *social* world and, on Mead's account, interaction is a condition for that world, while that world is a condition for intentional action.

More recently, ethnomethodology has turned Durkheim's maxim on its head with more profound theoretical and methodological consequences. Briefly, the standpoint of ethnomethodology is that what traditional sociology captures is precisely our common-sense view of the social world (see Sacks 1963; Garfinkel 1967; and Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). Following Durkheim, the argument goes, social studies have simply taken this common-sense view as foundational, and attempted to build a science of the social world by improving upon it. Social scientific theories, under this attempt, are considered to be scientific insofar as they remedy shortcomings in, and preferably quantify, the intuitions of everyday, practical sociological reasoning.

In contrast, ethnomethodology grants common-sense sociological reasoning a fundamentally different status than that of a defective approximation of an adequate scientific theory. Rather than being *resources* for social science to improve upon, the "all things being equal" typifications of common-sense reasoning are to be taken as social science's *topic*. The notion that we act in response to an objectively given social world is replaced by the assumption that our everyday social practices render the world publicly available and mutually intelligible. It is those practices that constitute ethno-methods. The methodology of interest to ethnomethodologists, in other words, is not their own, but that deployed by members of the society in coming to know, and making sense out of, the everyday world of talk and action.

The outstanding question for social science, therefore, is not whether social facts are objectively grounded, but how that objective grounding is accomplished. Objectivity is a product of systematic practices, or members' methods for rendering our unique experience and relative circumstances mutually intelligible. The source of mutual intelligibility is not a received conceptual scheme,

or a set of coercive rules or norms, but those common practices that produce the typifications of which schemes and rules are made. The task of social studies, then, is to describe the practices, not to enumerate their product in the form of a catalogue of common-sense beliefs about the social world. The interest of ethnomethodologists, in other words, is in how it is that the mutual intelligibility and objectivity of the social world is achieved. Ethnomethodology locates that achievement in our everyday situated actions, such that our common sense of the social world is not the precondition for our interaction, but its product. By the same token, the objective reality of social facts is not the fundamental *principle* of social studies, but social studies' fundamental *phenomenon*.