

The "Studies in Ethnomethodology" Are a Way of Understanding and Handling Empirical Materials and Thoughts

*Eric Laurier in Conversation With Hannes Krämer,
Dominik Gerst & René Salomon*

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Abstract: In the following conversation Eric LAURIER talks about the role of ethnomethodology's foundational account—the "Studies in Ethnomethodology" (GARFINKEL, 1967)—within the UK and the influence of the book on his own research as well as on human geography, mobility studies, actor-network-theory, and a general social science methodology. He therefore underlines the peculiar focus of GARFINKEL on the everyday, his non-ironic position towards member's practices, and the plurivocality of the book. Giving an elaborated account on the methodological challenges with an ethnomethodological approach including video recordings he differentiates between the video as a research tool and video usage as a member's practice. LAURIER demonstrates the inspiring and initiating content of the studies as well as its limits. By doing so he can show the prolific quality for current research fields like the study of mobility and movement, the question of space and place, and the role of the "Studies in Ethnomethodology" as a political text.

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Biographical Note

Eric LAURIER, born in Glasgow in 1968, is one of the scholars that work between ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and human geography. LAURIER was lucky enough to undertake his doctoral research in the flourishing years of cultural geography at Saint David's University College, Lampeter, UK, before it closed. His formative career was deeply influenced by his supervisors Chris PHILO and Phil CRANG, who brought together the ideas of Michel FOUCAULT with those of Erving GOFFMAN. In archival and ethnographic studies, respectively, they were committed to recovering the orders of the ordinary. His doctoral thesis engaged with experimental writing techniques and the inscription of everyday life in the city. At the University of Glasgow he continued to work with Chris PHILO on the connections between Foucauldian approaches and ethnomethodology, while also beginning a collaboration with another ethnomethodologist, Barry BROWN, that brought him into connection with the field of human-computer-interaction (HCI) and computer supported co-operative work (CSCW). During that period LAURIER was pursuing two projects, one on how professionals undertook work while mobile in their car and a second on civil life in the, then exploding, café scene in the UK. It was at this time he began experimenting with digital video for documenting social practices. At the University of Edinburgh, where he has worked for the last fourteen years, his thinking on ethnomethodology was re-shaped by Stanley RAFFEL and his critique of GOFFMAN and GARFINKEL. LAURIER continued to develop his use of video for studying practices such as car travel, editorial work in film production, everyday and tourist navigation, family meals and family walks. His publications include "Doing Office Work on the Motorway" (LAURIER, 2004), "Cold Shoulders and Napkins Handed: Gestures of Responsibility" (LAURIER & PHILO, 2006), and "Maps and Journeys: An Ethno-Methodological Investigation" (BROWN & LAURIER, 2005). [1]

About the Interview

The following interview was undertaken via Skype in May 2017 as part of the project "Harold Garfinkel and the Studies in Ethnomethodology. An Interview Issue"¹ edited by Dominik GERST, René SALOMON and Hannes KRÄMER. The interview was conducted via Skype on June 14, 2017. Eric LAURIER was in his office in Edinburgh while the interviewing persons were placed in Berlin and Würzburg. The conversation has been revised via e-mail exchange. This is the final and authorized version approved by Eric LAURIER on March 2019. [2]

1 See the Introduction by Dominik GERST, Hannes KRÄMER and René SALOMON (2019) in this issue.

1. Conversations on Ethnomethodology Often Start With "How Did You Get Into This?"

Hannes KRÄMER: We would like you to talk about your experiences with GARFINKEL's "Studies in Ethnomethodology" (in the following also *Studies*) and ethnomethodology in general. So, how did you get to know the *Studies*? And when and why did you read the book for the first time?

Eric LAURIER: It is funny how lots of people begin conversations on ethnomethodology with "How did you get into this?," which I think says something about the character of it (GARFINKEL, 1996, p.5). And I think also it's an interesting question for people who somehow don't come out of a particular school. The field of ethnomethodology is small enough that people have a sense of who basically begets whom, so like who is whose student, where did they come from. People in the UK, for instance, come from the Manchester school and they would know what that means. But for those of us who don't come from one of the schools where ethnomethodology was known, then it's even more like a question, of "How on earth did you get into this?" I don't know if that applies in Germany as well, but it's certainly one of those questions I get asked a lot. [3]

In human geography, there was an awareness—and I guess this is speaking not quite personally yet—at the time, that ethnomethodology was happening and existing. But I don't think any human geographers were reading it or called themselves ethnomethodologists. So, for me there was no connection from within the PhD supervision that I did. One of my supervisors who was a GOFFMAN-guy,² a guy who is still into GOFFMAN, as am I—Philip CRANG³, he just mentioned ethnomethodology in passing. I had been reading things that must have mentioned it in some way. Lots of people, in doing their PhD, come across the *breaching experiments* (GARFINKEL, 1963, 1967). So, I don't know if I brought it up or he brought it up, but I still remember him being dismissive of it saying "Oh, it's just a bunch of people who study people fitting tires to trucks and I don't know what it's all about. I wouldn't bother." He put me off reading it at the time, although it remains intriguing as to why he didn't think it was any good. So I didn't bother reading it when I was doing my PhD, I came into reading the *Studies* through Mike LYNCH's⁴ work. Basically, I read a review Mike LYNCH (1996) had

2 Erving GOFFMAN (1922-1982) was a Canadian sociologist, key figure of studies in interaction and one of the most influential American sociologists. Professor in Berkley from 1958 to 1968, and from 1968 until his death in 1982 in Pennsylvania, president of the American Sociological Association in 1981-1982, author of numerous books. Major areas of work include sociology of everyday life, social interaction, the social construction of self, social organization (framing) of experience, and total institutions and stigmas (see GOFFMAN, 1956).

3 Philip CRANG is professor for cultural geography at the Royal Holloway Centre for the GeoHumanities University of London, England. His major interests lie in the geographies of material culture, transnational and diasporic geographies, the cultural geographies of consumption, workplace geographies, and methodological questions (see CLOKE, CRANG & GOODWIN, 2013).

4 Michael LYNCH (*1948), sociologist, is professor at the Department of Science & Technology Studies at Cornell University, USA. He was the editor of *Social Studies of Science* from 2002 until 2012, and president of the *Society for Social Studies of Science* in 2007-2009. His major areas of work include the production and uses of evidence in science and law, ethnomethodology and conversational analysis, social theory, and philosophy of social science (see LYNCH, 1993, and the interview with him in this issue, LYNCH, GERST, KRÄMER &

written of "The Mangle of Practice" (PICKERING, 1995), and it was I thought, a very clear review. That made me look at other things that Mike LYNCH had written. "Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action" (LYNCH, 1993), I read that and that was really my way into ethnomethodology. And that's another classic part of stories of getting into ethnomethodology: which of the books you read; whether you read the green book, the purple book, or Mike LYNCH's blue, I think his was blue. [4]

Hannes KRÄMER: Sorry, which is the green one?

Eric LAURIER: The green one is John HERITAGE's (1984) "Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology," the purple book is the "Studies in Ethnomethodology" by Harold GARFINKEL (1967) and the blue one is Michael LYNCH's (1993) "Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action." There may be other colors out there that I'm not aware of. It's just funny, the color often gets mentioned. So, before I read Mike LYNCH's book I had read Bruno LATOUR already, because in geography actor-network-theory (ANT) was very popular and continues to be very popular.⁵ My background was more knowing a little bit about sociology of scientific knowledge and socio-technological studies and ANT, and then in reading Mike LYNCH thinking: "Oh this is really interesting." At the same time I had been doing interview studies as part of a post-doctoral project and reading Harvey SACKS⁶, but at that time I didn't understand the full nature of the connection. There was a parallel reading there, and then, through Mike LYNCH's book, I realized there was this stronger connection between conversation analysis and ethnomethodology. Finding this connection, I was excited about it, because that happened at a moment in cultural geography, which was about textual experimentation and reflexivity. And bumping into ethnomethodology, it was one of those very different takes on what reflexivity was and one that for me then was satisfying in that I, like Bruno LATOUR, had found certain aspects of the reflexive writing program frustrating, even though I initially was very excited by it (see ASHMORE, 1989; CRANG, 1992; LATOUR, 1988). And that's my basic way in. I had no existing connection through a disciplinary background or supervisors. I guess that happened probably around 1997, 1998 when I had finished my PhD and I was doing my second post-doc. [5]

SALOMON, 2019).

- 5 Bruno LATOUR (*1947) is a French sociologist and philosopher. He is one of the inventors of the ANT where he votes for a symmetric consideration of human and non-human entities in accomplishing the social. His sociology and social theory rests on his examination of microsociological approaches like ethnomethodology and French social philosophy like Gabriel TARDE, and semiotics like Algirdas Julien GREIMAS. His major work areas encompass the science and technology studies, materiality and agency, nature, and culture (see LATOUR, 2013).
- 6 Harvey SACKS (1935-1975), founder of conversation analysis and prominent figure of early ethnomethodology, had a huge impact on sociology, linguistics and discursive psychology. Lecturer (1964-1975) in Los Angeles and professor in Irvine, USA. Major areas of his work include sequential analysis, membership categorization, and social science methodology (see SACKS, 1992).

2. This Stylistics of Writing has a Positive Quality

Dominik GERST: Could you describe how the *Studies* or ethnomethodology in general have influenced your geographical imagination or questioning?

Eric LAURIER: That's difficult because it is a plurivocal book. I've read some GOFFMAN, so I was used to that style that GARFINKEL was writing in and both GOFFMAN and GARFINKEL are stylistically interesting in their writing. Something, I was attuned to having been come out of the reflexive writing program, where there was a strong orientation to how things are written. A quality that is sometimes underrecognized in both GOFFMAN and GARFINKEL is the stylistics of the writing which lends itself to being able to read it many times over, but also to finding different things each time you read it. I read the *Studies* initially one time around, finding it fascinating and thinking I understood it. And then, while reading it again, I realized there were all sorts of things I've missed. And with other people providing alternate readings, you come to realize that he's up to certain other things in chapters that you don't realize the first time around. So yes, I've read it and enjoyed it. You know, he's very funny in places, as GOFFMAN is, so there is a certain enjoyment in his humor. [6]

Another thing that was satisfying was, while ANT was much more directly influential on your ideas, when you try to do fieldwork, it can be harder to draw on. Because, if you're not doing a study of the development of a technology, it's not always clear how actor-network-theory is going to fit in, or, how the stories it has, fit well with other sorts of fieldwork. I didn't particularly study the extension or development of technologies, even though I was interested in the material, mediated aspects of environments. With the *Studies*, you get a sense of a way of doing research and engaging with problems that seems much more open to you drawing on in all sorts of contexts. You see that inside the *Studies*, it's a very eclectic mix of studies that are in there, from studying how statistics is done⁷ and record keeping is done⁸ to something that looks much more like traditional social science, when it's the study of "Agnes"⁹. In terms of how it influenced my work, it was something that was easier to draw on than ANT was. Yet you also got a sense of the beginnings of trying to understand something, where, when you come across certain works you realize there is more to them and you're going to have to return to them. It was a sense of "Well, I haven't really worked out quite what he was up to here or how he's doing it and I'm going to need to go back to it quite a few times anyway, trying to understand what's happening in this strange collection of studies." [7]

7 Chapter seven: "Methodological Adequacy in the Quantitative Study of Selection Criteria and Selection Practices in Psychiatric Outpatient Clinics."

8 Chapter six: "Good Organizational Reasons for 'bad' Clinical Records."

9 Chapter five: "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an Intersexed Person, Part 1."

3. GARFINKEL's Peculiar Take on the Everyday

Dominik GERST: As you spoke about the different parts of the book: is there any part that's especially interesting for you?

Eric LAURIER: Well, I picked it up this morning to look at it before talking to you guys. [Takes the book and pages through it.] The opening chapter "What is Ethnomethodology?" is a good one, of course. But the two chapters that I've used the most are "Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities and the Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in the Intersexed Person, Part 1"—the "Agnes"-chapter. And those are the two which I suppose are the ones often situated as being the early GARFINKEL and early ethnomethodology, and in contrast with the later sort of radical program (GARFINKEL, 2002)—for those that make that division (LYNCH, 1993). It was particularly the second chapter "Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities," because I think that this is also the one which appears as a journal article as well, am I right? [8]

Hannes KRÄMER: Yes, in 1964 it appeared in *Social Problems* (GARFINKEL, 1964).

Eric LAURIER: So yes, that was the one. Because I had an interest in the everyday, and so GARFINKEL's peculiar take on the everyday and on things like trust and, of course, breaching that trust, and on common sense assumptions and expectations, were very productive and material for me, in terms of thinking through or dealing with issues with familiar and everyday matters (GARFINKEL, 1963, 1967). [9]

René SALOMON: Do you see any differences in the history of the reception of the *Studies*? So, when you remember the time you first encountered the *Studies* and think about your scientific community you were surrounded by, did the reception of the *Studies* differ back then in comparison with today?

Eric LAURIER: Yes. I think there is definitely a greater openness to the *Studies* now, and I think that's through ethnomethodology's dispersal through a series of other disciplines. In meeting a lot of the ethnomethodologists for the first time, people like Rod WATSON or Wes SHARROCK¹⁰, I realized that they have troubled histories with sociology as a parent discipline. There are a lot of stories of disciplinary conflict or misunderstanding. There are the politics of who gets hired in which departments. One of the things about GARFINKEL's arrival in other disciplinary domains is that there isn't that same history. Within human geography there was no history of earlier conflict between ethnomethodologists and human geographers. The openness allows an interest in what ethnomethodology has to offer. How it relates to something like actor-network-theory for instance. How it might interconnect with particular topics of interest, like mobility (something that I

10 Rodney WATSON is a sociologist who worked at the University of Manchester, England, from his postgraduate studies in 1972 until his retirement. His main research focus is concerned with conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, and research methods (see WATSON, 1992). Rod WATSON's colleague WES SHARROCK (*1943) is a sociologist and former professor at the University of Manchester, England. He is concerned with ethnomethodology, the social studies of science, language philosophy, and research methods (see SHARROCK & ANDERSON, 1982).

have been interested in). There is an awareness of it that has grown as it has shifted outside of just being a sociology and linguistics subject. I have a history in anthropology to some extent as well, but you guys would know more about this than I do. It remains part of the social science pantheon that you should be aware of, rather than something where it's seen as a live collection of scholars who are working in it. [10]

And the slightly, I suppose, worrying part is that it gets consigned to the history of intellectual endeavor rather than being seen as: "Oh, there is a group of people who are actively involved in this and their work is in some ways disruptive of our work." And that's what's lost without having that history. Sociology has a history of: "Well, these are the disruptive people and they've caused this trouble and maybe they still will." Whereas in human geography it's: "Oh, that's a really interesting bunch of work that was done by some people in the 60s, 70s, 80s' and it's a few people still doing it now. And it's kind of interesting, you know, we don't really need to see it as disruptive or as changing things, it just fits in quite easily to other bodies of work." So, that would be this openness and awareness, but yet, that lack of deeper awareness or engagement, in terms of these potentially radical qualities and how you might have to rethink fundamental ideas like *indexicality*, *accountability* and so on. So, that would be my sense of where it is in human geography just now. [11]

4. Reading the Book

Hannes KRÄMER: Were there other people within geography or human geography who were reading this book at the same time that you did and who you could talk to? I think it's hard to read it alone. Well, for us—or at least for me—it was hard to read the book and it helped me to speak to René SALOMON at the time when I first read it.

Eric LAURIER: No there weren't really ... no. Some people may have had some awareness of it, and they might have looked at it, but they weren't working on it in a more extended way, trying to understand it. While they would have some sense for or were situated within a larger intellectual history of the social sciences, they weren't, then, actively reading the *Studies* to try to make sense of it, or for using it in their own work. So yes, I was struggling with it by myself for a while. But then I started going to some of the events such as the two ethnomethodology conferences "Orders of Ordinary Interaction" and "Producing Local Order" in Manchester in 2001 and 2003 and getting a feel for it there. [12]

And then what happened—I think I was working in Glasgow at the time but living in Edinburgh—was that David SUDNOW¹¹ was on tour and he came to Edinburgh and to Manchester. Roger SLACK¹², who's now at Bangor, who was here, and

11 David SUDNOW (1938-2007), American sociologist and first generation ethnomethodologist, well known for his thoroughly research on the interactional care of dying, learning music, and video gaming (see SUDNOW, 1972a).

12 Roger SLACK is a lecturer in sociology and research methods at Bangor University, Wales.

Mark HARTSWOOD¹³, who was here at Edinburgh University, invited him. And I think I must have emailed them or had chatted to them at some point, and they invited me to that event. So SUDNOW came and gave a paper. The actual attendance was small in Edinburgh, maybe just seven or eight people in the audience. It was an amazingly peculiar seminar in that David SUDNOW came in with his electric piano and played music and sang through the seminar. He was going through the jazz thing¹⁴. And for me, I thought, I've never been to a talk like this before in my life, this was crazy and interesting. But sitting across from him was a sociology lecturer called Stanley RAFFEL¹⁵, who's now retired, but he's still very active. He was shaking his head all the way through the talk and then, at the end, asked a series of annoyed questions at David SUDNOW. I was intrigued by Stanley RAFFEL. He was supervised by Peter MCHUGH, a student of GARFINKEL's. They had taken a critical approach to GARFINKEL's work and to ethnomethodology in general. I got talking to him and we started a reading group here. We read ethnomethodological pieces and read the related work from two scholars called Alan BLUM and Peter MCHUGH¹⁶. Alan BLUM is still an active scholar now, but Peter MCHUGH has passed away. They have a variant way into ethnomethodology where they ask: "What would happen if ethnomethodology becomes more theoretical again and starts theorizing?" That then gave me someone to read ethno-pieces with, but in an interesting way, because Stanley RAFFEL was someone who was also critical of a lot of that work. So that was really where it became something where I wasn't just reading it by myself. [13]

5. Theory and Methodology Are Interwoven

René SALOMON: Because you just mentioned the theoretical dimension of ethnomethodology. Are the *Studies* for you more a theory or a methodology?

Eric LAURIER: Well, I always understood it exactly as you guys said right in the beginning. I always understood them as very interwoven, so that you couldn't strip away something and say "Well, this is the methodology." And you knew there had been quite a strong response to theory in this book. It had this theorizing character, but one that was quite peculiar and one that seems to be the opposite of something like grounded theorizing, which places theory on one side and the empirical on the other and then somehow weaves between the two. This seemed to be an approach that started right in the middle. That was part of trying to understand the peculiarity of the book. The book didn't have a clearly

13 Mark HARTSWOOD was until 2016 a post-doc researcher at the Department of Computer Science at the University of Oxford, England.

14 David SUDNOW developed a method to learn playing (Jazz) piano, the so called "Sudnow method" (see <https://www.sudnow.com/> [accessed: November 5, 2018]), which was a huge success. The scientific reflections on this method can be found in SUDNOW (2001).

15 Stanley RAFFEL (1944-2018) was a lecturer at the Sociology Department of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. His research comprised the fields of ethnomethodology and self-reflection, qualitative methodology, social theory, and social philosophy (see RAFFEL, 1979).

16 Alan BLUM (*1935), sociologist, executive director and founder of The Culture of Cities Centre, professor in the Faculty of Arts at University of Waterloo, Canada. His research interests comprise the sociology of health, city, reflexivity and science (see BLUM & MCHUGH, 1971). Peter MCHUGH (1929-2010), sociologist, was professor at the Sociology Department of York University, Toronto, Canada. Major research interests: social theory, ethnomethodology, reflexivity, and moral (see MCHUGH, 1968).

theoretical character, but then you couldn't say it was very empirical. Well, you could say it's very empirical, but not in the way that other works that would traditionally be described as empirical. So, for me that was very satisfying, because one of the things I found frustrating in my work was the gap between theoretical work, which I was very interested in, and empirical work, which I was also interested in—in that sense that the two are often set far apart and would simply miss one another in practice, when you are either trying to do analysis or when you are writing something. The theory would trample all the empirical material, or the empirical material would seem very strong, while the theoretical work would seem weak. [14]

Hannes KRÄMER: Would you say there is some special clue about the *Studies*? Any methodological clue, which helped you to do your research?

Eric LAURIER: Well, something which helped me to do my research? [15]

Hannes KRÄMER: Or maybe in general as well. So, not only limited to your research.

ERIC LAURIER: No, that's a good question. Yes, I guess a clue to help me understand the book was in LYNCH or maybe it was Stanley RAFFEL saying "Well, the *Agnes*-paper is an extended critique of GOFFMAN." Which is just one way of reading it, but when you have a clue like that, where you re-read it in the light of "Oh, he's writing this in some ways with GOFFMAN in mind," that became a way to help me understand what the book was doing. [16]

I mentioned the issue of writing style with GOFFMAN and GARFINKEL before. There might be a temptation in writing to start taking that same dry tone in relation to human affairs. So, one of the ways it became influential was taking that stance on practice and everyday action as a writing issue. Despite the non-ironic stance, the fact is that the writing itself is traced through with certain ironies, even though there is a different sense in which it is trying to be non-ironic in relation to how it treats members' practices. So, it's influential in that way. [17]

At the same time, it wasn't, as we've already said, in terms of it somehow being like a methodology, it wasn't saying: "Do studies in this way." There wasn't something that you could straightforwardly lift and say "Alright, if I do it in this particular way, then that will make it ethnomethodology." It was much more a way of understanding empirical materials that you have and a way of handling them. And I guess that's where something like being non-ironic comes into it. While you might have a style of writing that's laced with irony from time to time, there was a way of treating members' practices, which was about taking them seriously in their own terms. Which I think was then something that, again, I was very ready to read and try to understand, because I've been aware of it, particularly from doing things like traditional social science, like big interview studies, where it seemed that I had ironized the words, the stories that were being told. Also, in doing ethnographic fieldwork the use of theory had again ironized the accounts or activities of members. And so, there was that desire to try not to do that. What

became very influential in what I was doing was: "How do I take the member's practices seriously in their own terms?" [18]

6. It Is a Book You Always Return to

René SALOMON: Talking about style of writing: Did you find it easy to understand GARFINKEL the first time you read the *Studies*? Even today, there seem to be problems to understand certain parts of it. And it's very open to interpretation, too. Did you experience that style of writing as something that was a problem or that was even inspiring?

Eric LAURIER: (laughs) Thinking back, one of the things I was struck by an early reading, or the first reading, was just that it was a very eclectic mix. It was puzzling to think about: what have all of these things got in common, despite there being an introduction that tries to explain what they all have in common, it still seems that was already a puzzle: OK, so this is being presented as a collection of things, which should somehow seem like one another and yet, they, in various ways, seem different from another. And although, like I said, when I read it for the first time I read it through and thought: "OK, I think I understood that, that was enjoyable. I'm going to need to go back to it." It was on reading particular chapters, I was interested in, a second time or a third time, that it became clear that they were more difficult than I possibly first appreciated. Even now, if I have to work on a chapter, for a reading group, or if I look back to it because I'm writing something that's related to it, that's when I appreciate again the sort of density of ideas that are actually in it and the complexity of each chapter as an object. So, I think it's one of those things that, as you said very nicely, provides for multiple readings. It's interesting that you found it difficult in the beginning, because, as I said, I thought it wasn't so difficult and it was more with the time reading it more closely that I began to realize it was more difficult than I'd first appreciated. Even though there was this puzzle around what is it that ties all these different studies together. [19]

Hannes KRÄMER: Are there any concepts in the book you would particularly highlight? You mentioned the lack of irony, which is maybe not a concept but more a theoretical or methodological mentality? Right in the beginning you mentioned reflexivity, for instance; are there any others you use for your work?

Eric LAURIER: Well, I guess because I've come through Mike LYNCH's work as the primer, I worked my way through understanding what indexicality is, and understanding what accountability is, and accountability of action and the relationships between accounts and actions. Mike LYNCH provides a nice primer on "Alright, here are some of the things you should understand from the *Studies*." So, I have taken those and those have never gone away. For most people that are involved in ethnomethodology those ideas are there from then on. Although one tries to think through how you develop them or move on from them, and that becomes interesting. Also, of course, you can't just keep returning to the fact "Well, things are indexical" even though indexicality is interesting and causes all sorts of problems for social science and computing science. Some of those things definitely were there in the book and they don't go away. [20]

The idea of expectations and assumptions; those become key things that stay with you. Although I've mentioned reflexivity, because that was one of the things I was wrestling with at the time, ethnomethodology influenced my understandings of even basic things. Thinking about what an interview was through an ethnomethodological lens was very helpful. To think that this is an account and there are issues of accountability involved in any of these accounts and they carry a future-orientation. Giving an interview now, has a future-orientation to it in the forms of future accountability that will go with anything I say now. [21]

It wasn't as if there was just that one idea, in the introduction GARFINKEL warns of taking up slogans. You're wary of trying to extract the key ideas in GARFINKEL as if you could simply take them away and you could then leave the *Studies* behind. The thing that we keep returning to is the idea of keeping returning to the book. There aren't simply these ideas that could be stripped out of it, there is more to it than that. There is this distinctive writing style, there are these multiple studies. They are trying to do different things and each one should be seen somehow as a whole in terms of the thing that it's trying to do. You see that in the way that it is organized: the writing style, the way the empirical materials feature in it. And I think that's one of the counterbalancing features of it that stop you from simply saying: "Well the only thing I need to know out of the *Studies* is about indexicality and accountability and members' own methods for producing their reasoning." I think that's one of the satisfying things about it and why you keep going back to the book: you can't really do that with it. [22]

7. Ethnomethodology and Actor-Network-Theory, Language Philosophy, Conversation Analysis

Hannes KRÄMER: I have another question which runs in a theoretical direction as well. Earlier, you mentioned actor-network-theory. I'm interested in the relation between ethnomethodology and actor-network-theory, especially in your work. How do you bring them both together?

Eric LAURIER: Yes, I was very interested in the dialogues between Mike LYNCH and Bruno LATOUR and I was interested in the fact that they were working at roughly the same time in the field of laboratory studies. I had come in from the Bruno LATOUR/Steve WOOLGAR-side¹⁷ with an interest in textuality and material semiotics (that's what this theory sometimes gets called). Mike LYNCH's critical comments around actor-network-theory identified my unease over aspects of that work. The back and forth between them was very interesting for another idea that's there in the *Studies*: what something like *local accomplishment*, *local order* might mean. Trying to think through from a very basic interpretation of what someone might misunderstand as "Well, actually actor-network theory is very good at looking at big things and how they stretch out around the globe and how

17 LATOUR and WOOLGAR's book (1979) on work practices within a natural science laboratory is one of the seminal publications of the laboratory studies. Steve WOOLGAR (*1950), sociologist, is an emeritus professor at Oxford University, England. Major research topics are governance and accountability relations, mundane objects and ordinary technologies, provocation and intervention, social theory, and neuromarketing (see WOOLGAR, 1988, for LATOUR see above Note 5).

they make connections and build networks. And ethnomethodology always seems to go to some particular place, to look at these particular people and it always seems very localized." But how would you deal with extending this out of this particular setting? The interesting thing is, from LATOUR's side, you can find him rereading GARFINKEL and coming to different understandings of him. In one of his interviews he talks about having read gloss and not really understanding what *glossing* meant.¹⁸ And I can't remember all the details of the joke he makes, he thought it had something to do with painting, and then later on he comes to realize that it's to do with providing reductive accounts which then have strong harmonies with his own desire not to provide reductive accounts, or to avoid being "irreductive," as he puts it. [23]

There is irony and humor in LATOUR's work and yet, with his work, a strong desire to take sciences seriously in their own terms and not provide externalist critiques of the kind that came around with the *science wars* and the SOKAL *hoax* (SOKAL, 2010).¹⁹ He is very keen on taking the sciences seriously. You see, the harmony is there between these two bodies of work. [24]

From the ethnomethodological side, the critique of ANT is about the translation work, or the shifting of terms that LATOUR does, often quite playfully, and that someone like Mike LYNCH is much more careful around. There are certain slippages in language that LATOUR sometimes gets away with, but with the ordinary language philosophy urge, that is in ethnomethodology, and in Mike LYNCH's work, you are much more careful with how terms can be shifted around. That's one way in which they diverge. [25]

And then there is what happens, which is where my own work connects, when you're not working on scientific practice and you're not working on the development of new technologies with an interest in how they develop, but you're interested in things that have much more to do with social settings, workplaces, everyday life. That's where actor-network-theory doesn't seem to work quite so well. That's where you find yourself then reading other works from ethnomethodology that have grown out the *Studies*. [26]

Dominik GERST: I would like to ask another question concerning the specific relation of ethnomethodology and language. You told us about your conversation analytical experiences and your influence from ordinary language philosophy, for example. How would you describe the connection of ethnomethodology and language and specifically regarding your work?

18 GARFINKEL and SACKS (1986 [1970], p.184) refer with the term "glossing" to the practical actions within certain situations that people perform to give explanations of an issue by using other ways/phrases/words to describe it. This is one ethnomethod members' use to meet the unrepairable challenge of indexical expressions.

19 The term *science wars* refers to the controversy between scientific realists and postmodern critics about the status of scientific theory and scientific knowledge. The realist's position argues in favor for the possibility of discovering objective facts through the usage of scientific methods. In contrast the postmodernists hold against such a view by highlighting the constructional character of scientific facts. This dispute was staged in scientific journals as well as mainstream media (ASHMAN & BARINGER, 2001).

Eric LAURIER: Yes, this connection is one of the fascinating qualities to it. As I've read more since first reading it and read more about what ordinary language philosophy is, I came to understand the connection. In Manchester, they were trying to look at WITTGENSTEIN's work²⁰ alongside GARFINKEL and that's probably something John HERITAGE would speak about, I guess, as well.²¹ You start to see: "OK, there is this work in social science, which is the *Studies*, but actually it's very helpful to see it in relation to ordinary language philosophy, and what its location is and what it's trying to do in philosophy." That helps you situate the *Studies*, for having something of its character and something of what it's up to, and also helps you understand what Harvey SACKS is doing in terms of a similar turn to language as practice, language as doing things. With that shift, which of course is the very Harvey SACKS shift of: doing actions together through speaking together and the complexities that go with that. Ordinary language philosophy nods toward the social, but its enterprise is still one which is more essentially about philosophy. [27]

Trying to understand how ordinary language philosophy relates to continental philosophy was also important because in cultural geography, and other social sciences, continental philosophy has become incredibly influential and is very important and very interesting. Trying to understand the relationships between ordinary language philosophy, continental philosophy and something like the *Studies* is one of those things that help you understand what GARFINKEL is up to and how his work may have connections with other things that were going on at the time and before and after. He wouldn't write it, because he deliberately tries to avoid being straightforwardly a theorist and just doing literature reviews that situate his work within the literature and so on. So, part of the radical quality of the *Studies* is not doing that, even though you might need to do that, to try to understand what the *Studies* is doing. Was that sufficient? I'm sure there is more I can say about the language aspects if you want. [28]

Hannes KRÄMER: Yes, please, a few more remarks would be nice.

Eric LAURIER: Well, I guess Harvey SACKS' lectures (SACKS, 1992) were very influential for my understanding of what the *Studies* are up to. What you see is what conversation analysis could do to have a certain inflection and where it sometimes can be mistaken as a quite empirical program. You could see how people could read the *Studies* and make that mistake about it as well. Understanding how ordinary language philosophy works is a response to a certain kind of philosophy. What's happening in the *Studies* is a response to a particular kind of theoretical work in the social sciences. The obvious one in ethnomethodology is *brain* and *cognition* and how ethnomethodologists have responded to that along with cognitive psychology. You start to see the moves

20 Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN (1889-1951), philosopher, is one of the most influential philosophers in the 20th century. His ordinary language philosophy forms the bases for the linguistic turn (see WITTGENSTEIN, 1953).

21 John HERITAGE (*1946), sociologist, distinguished professor of sociology at University of California, Los Angeles, USA. One of the key figures of conversation analysis. Areas of his work include institutional talk, turn taking, epistemic authority. His book "Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology" introduced EM to a wider public (see HERITAGE 1984).

within the *Studies*, within ordinary language philosophy more generally and within Mike LYNCH's work, which also borrows from WITTGENSTEIN: "OK, let's trace the particular language games that are in relation to these particular words, the particular sense of these words when they're used, either in conversation or within particular texts." If you start to trace those linguistic details, seeing them within practices unfolding, that becomes helpful in dealing with theoretical ideas that come in continental philosophy. Where the *Studies* gives you a certain confidence in a *modus operandi* about how to respond to theory. Either through something that's about a kind of reading and WITTGENSTEINian response to abstract ideas—or in the classic fashion where the *Studies* provides inspiration to misread ideas as instructions, to go off and do some kind of study. To do a study, where for some bunch of members that's their routine problem, which is the classic SACKS' gloss move. And that's what you see in the *Studies*. [29]

GOFFMAN (1956) has said members sit within a dramaturgical understanding of society, they do performances. So GARFINKEL in the *Studies* thinks: "Alright, is there a person out there who actually has lived in a GOFFMAN-like world? Yes, it's someone who's trying to pass as member of the opposite sex. OK, I'll go spend some time with that person and see what that's like." So, you have the study with *Agnes* and this becomes a response to GOFFMAN's work, where GOFFMAN's is—despite his way of writing it as if it's not that way— a grand theory of society in terms of it being one of performances and self-presentation. You come to see, through the study of *Agnes*, that it's not that way at all. There are all sorts of problems with seeing society constantly through that frame. For "Agnes," she does have to do the kind of work that GOFFMAN describes, but if we compare our own experience of the world to Agnes' we see: Well actually, while we might have moments that seem a bit like Agnes' experiences with society, the rest of the time in our everyday lives we don't have to go around doing performances and presenting ourselves. GOFFMAN is missing huge swathes of our existence through the ways in which he's trying to describe it through the metaphor of performance. I think that's where you could read the *Studies* more like a linguistic response in a WITTGENSTEINian way, about tracing out language, in what ways do we talk about *thinking* and *mind* and so on. You can see those sorts of studies. In Jeff COULTER's work (1979) that become actual empirical studies, of course, of what happens with psychiatrists when they commit someone. Therefore if you have some particular thing that you're interested in that might be often framed as a theoretical problem in a particular way, go find a bunch of people whose everyday business it is to wrestle with that particular thing that you're interested in. And part of that becomes how they talk about it, but, of course, they've got a series of other practices which aren't only ones of talking. These may be ones of looking at things, seeing things, handling things, building things—so you get a wider sense of social practices there. [30]

8. Critique of the *Studies*: Theory, Agency, Plurivocality

René SALOMON: Taking up on that point, would you say there is another part or idea in the *Studies* you would disagree with? Or is there something where you would say this needs an extension or there's something missing in the *Studies*?

Eric LAURIER: I guess a key problem with the *Studies* is in one of the critiques that is phrased by BLUM and McHUGH (1984). In one sense the great thing about it is that it takes members, practices and their reasoning and so on very seriously and it doesn't try to ironize those, you must understand those practices first in their own terms. But that also could be seen as a certain pessimism about the possibilities for members, in that ethnomethodology gives up on the idea that members themselves could become theorists and that we would want members to become theoretical in some way and to become principled actors. That's one of the criticisms that comes from BLUM and McHUGH: You basically leave these members of society as they are and leave settings as they are. Of course, that's a classic critique of WITTGENSTEIN as well, that he leaves ordinary language as it is.²² In one sense, then, one of the limits of ethnomethodology is its pessimism about the actors' potentials for becoming a principled actor, or, in another way of talking about it, the actor becoming a theorist. The theorists themselves are a bit of a problem within ethnomethodology. The risk is that the theorist becomes a kind of villain that should be booted of the stage, whereas theorists are actually very interesting actors to engage with, for ethnomethodologists.

Ethnomethodology should really have some way of still being able to do theorizing and, indeed, you can see there is theorizing at work within the *Studies*. But as we said, it's a plurivocal text. One way of reading the "Jury-Studies"²³ is in some ways a critique of the jury and a critique of the justice system in terms of some of the work that's getting done is basically getting the job finished of being a jury. So, it has some elements of providing a critique, but they are often implicit, which is one of the ways in which it is enjoyable. There is social critique here, it's just an implicit one and indeed we could sometimes make our interpretations about what the critique is, for example what the critique around gender is that's in the "Agnes" chapter. And so, one of the problems of the *Studies* is how GARFINKEL sees members, the potential for them to become principle actors. [31]

René SALOMON: Are there other critiques?

Eric LAURIER: Yes, I mean another issue with it is indeed how many times you should go back and read it [laughter]. There is other interesting work out there! The knee-jerk reaction from an ethnomethodologist may be: "Alright, someone

22 In his later philosophical work WITTGENSTEIN criticizes the thinking of language as a system with an objective, abstract meaning. Rather, he argues, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (1953, §43).

23 GARFINKEL worked in the 1950s on a project from the University of Wichita (Kansas) where members of a jury were investigated (for the project see: KALVEN & ZEISEL, 1966). Especially recordings of the jury sessions behind closed doors build the core of GARFINKEL's analysis. Together with his colleague Saul MENDLOVITZ (*1925) he presented some findings at the American Sociological Association meeting in 1953 using the phrase "ethnomethods" to point at the different practical activities the jurors perform in order to work as a jury. A part of this research is published in the *Studies* as chapter four "Some Rules of Correct Decisions that Jurors respect" (GARFINKEL, 1967, pp.104-115).

has provided a really significant critique of my work here and that is why I need to go back and read the *Studies* again and I'll find a solution there." It can be an overly influential book for some people's work. Overall, it's still an under-read book because of the complexities of reading it and the time that it takes to make sense of it. Some people out there who have an interest in ethnomethodology, but have not come into it through reading the *Studies*, may avoid it because of its plurivocal character and it being a somewhat difficult book to make sense of. [32]

9. "I'm a Strong Advocate of Reading the *Studies* and Reading Harvey SACKS' Lectures in the Original"

Hannes KRÄMER: So, are there any recommendations for novices in the field? Would you recommend not to start with the *Studies*, but to start with Mike LYNCH for instance?

Eric LAURIER: No, you definitely should start with the *Studies*! I guess my worry is: don't go on and read it forever [laughter]. You need to be able to move away from it, and even if that's just to come back to it from time to time and enjoy it again. But no, I think you're right, I'm a strong advocate of reading the *Studies* and reading Harvey SACKS' Lectures (1992) in the original. If you read a lot of the secondary texts that are guides to those texts they do then digest it, situating it within a broader literature. In doing so they lose the radical character. You get a feel for the radical character in reading the original text, even if that's sometimes perplexing. That's part of what it is that makes it radical. And if you don't take on those original texts you will lose that perplexing character, the style of the writing, which can be puzzling sometimes but also very enjoyable. And it's at odds with much contemporary social sciences writing, which is often overshadowed by a slightly scientific character of: there is an introduction, there is a methodology, there are some findings and there are some conclusions. It's not a book that is written in that sort of way. You can see it has resemblances to that kind of work, but then there is something odd about it, it doesn't quite fit with that. [33]

So, I'd remain a strong advocate of reading the *Studies*, but you will need to read other things to make sense of it. You wouldn't understand all the achievements unless you read those other things around it, which help you then situate it in its time, see how it's a response to other bodies of work and see how it's deliberately of that style. I've read some of the earlier GARFINKEL pieces where he is in a more theoretical mode (e.g., GARFINKEL, 2008 [1951-1952]). And you see how the later work is very different from that. And so, in his own writing he has struggled to give that up. I know there is a lot of work going on by Tristan THIELMANN and others like Anne Warfield RAWLS, Christian MEYER and Erhard SCHÜTTPELZ about going through the GARFINKEL archive.²⁴ And I don't know what's in there and I know there is a lot of material, but one of the things I took away from something of what people have said about it, is that GARFINKEL was going over any piece that he was writing many, many, many times. And so, there is obviously a very deliberate character in the final style and form of the

²⁴ The GARFINKEL archive is a collection of papers, tape recordings and material devices which are stored in Boston and being currently assembled into an archive by Anne Warfield RAWLS, Tristan THIELMANN and others.

things that were in the *Studies*, which has been a result of very careful crafting of just how things should appear and how it should be written. Which, again, is something in contemporary social science that is rare. I think that's another reason why you want to go back and see something of a book like this, which has so much care has gone into the crafting of it. [34]

Well, it is a book, of course, that's one of the interesting elements here. He didn't work at book length, he worked on things that were somewhere between a book and an article. They're long pieces, they're long essays, they're long studies, but they're not book length in themselves. [35]

10. Ethnomethodology and the Usage of Video

Hannes KRÄMER: I have one more particular question concerning your use of video and the combination with ethnomethodology. Could you maybe just elaborate on this a little bit?

Eric LAURIER: What's interesting again when you start to read around and understand the wider body of work that is going on around the *Studies*, is if you read some of the "Purdue Symposium" (HILL & CRITTENDEN, 1968), they are messing around with video early on.²⁵ They are interested in this. SUDNOW is shooting short clips on film cameras and trying to work out what you can do with those. GARFINKEL at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), USA is in touch with the radical documentary makers there like Colin YOUNG for instance.²⁶ I remember I was reading about the history of documentary making bumping into one of the radical documentary makers from the *cinéma vérité* and observational cinema movement²⁷ and others, who were talking to GARFINKEL in California and listening to his ideas and then trying to take these on in their documentary work. I was realizing that, while he's maybe not using video himself at the time, he's part of a milieu where video is being explored. GARFINKEL was very interested himself in recordings, although it's often audio recording he's doing. There is an early scientific interest in what can you do with recordings, what are recordings. If we have this sort of material, what is it you can make of it? And of course, in Harvey SACKS' work that becomes a huge program, recordings play an important role. [36]

From another side ethnomethodological studies of video become studies of video as a practice. So how is video interwoven with different sorts of social practices? Which is, of course, at the current time something that is becoming interwoven with ever more practices, as video is on people's smart phones, as people carry around action cams while they do sports and so on. You have a series of video

25 For the uses of video within ethnomethodological research see also the interview with Chuck GOODWIN in this issue (GOODWIN & SALOMON, 2019).

26 Colin YOUNG (*1927) is a former British film educator who worked as a chairman of the School of Theater, Film and Television at UCLA, USA.

27 The *cinéma vérité* movement is a French school of documentary filmmaking, which was established in the 1950/1960s with the goal to capture the ordinary and real everyday life in the film. Known representatives are for instance John ROUCH (1917-2004) and Edgar MORIN (*1921).

practices, where as an ethnomethodologist, what you're interested in is how we make sense of the uses of video in these particular settings. Indeed, in a more GARFINKEL-like way it becomes part of how juries do their business, how courts operate through the use of video conferencing and so on. [37]

I think there is both: On the one side, there is the scientific use of video and its relationship to the idea of recordings. Videos can provide a resource for doing studies that reveal a kind of richness and complexity of member's practices. And on the other side, there are ethnostudies of video practices. Sometimes members themselves are using video in social science-type of ways where there is a relationship to ideas around recording. But at other times there are different sorts of practices, like what makes it acceptable as part of functioning of a court or what is it that makes videos part of the life. And then there are events where it's not about ideas of recording but much more about the liveness of something, it shows something is live. Yes, I think, there are these two broad connections between ethnomethodology and video, but there is more of course, only to give you a sense of it. [38]

11. Mobility and Space

Dominik GERST: Thank you! Let's talk a little bit about two fields that you are engaged with, and that is mobility and space. What do you think does ethnomethodology contribute to our understanding of mobility and space?

Eric LAURIER: Mobility is one of those things which is not really in the *Studies*, but in some of the early work from people like SUDNOW's "Temporal Parameters of Interpersonal Observation" (1972b). You see hints of early studies of what it is for people, vehicles and so on to be in motion. And you see it in GOFFMAN, of course, he is very interested in the public-space side of things. But that's not what GARFINKEL is really responding to in the *Studies*. But you get a sense in the *Studies* of how you might try and understand mobility through an interest in mobility. And that's describing some coherent theoretical frame or concept that it might be about understanding being mobile where mobile with a small "m" is about a myriad of different sorts of practices that in some way involve people moving around or objects moving around. And then that leads to a series of studies from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA) researchers, where they have become interested in mobility. In Lorenza MONDADA's²⁸ (2014) work it is about the relationship between speaking and walking and the ways in which those two are tightly interwoven in the sense of: As a sentence is coming to its end you also see members of a party preparing to walk off at that point and seeing that as a potential point to start walking away from wherever they are and they're at. [39]

You see it in non-verbal settings where, before my own work, people like Eric LIVINGSTON and Mike LYNCH were thinking about how traffic is organized through the orientation of one vehicle to another, through the flashing of lights,

28 Lorenza MONDADA (*1963), linguist, is currently professor for French and General linguistics at the University of Basel, Switzerland. Her major research interests are multimodality, embodiment, and studies in work (see MONDADA, 2016).

through that sort of thing (LIVINGSTON, 1987). And even studies within the science lab have shown that the walking of people between different stations within the laboratory is important to the doing of lab work. I guess you see an eclectic collection of member's practices that go with trying to understand what mobility is, which are useful in being a response to some of the more grand theoretical gestures in mobility studies, where they try to provide a theory of everything that's mobile. [40]

I think that's one part of what goes on around with mobility and it's, I suppose, a related move around space. Particularly within human geography, you get a lot of grand theoretical works, for example from people like Henri LEFEBVRE²⁹, on how we should understand space, either as economic space, cultural space or an abstract space. Whereas, when you take that ethnomethodological turn, it becomes not space with a capital "S" nor a constant obsession with a contrast between space and place, but it becomes the ways in which space itself may be a resource within member's practices and is reflexively tied to those practices. The members come to spaces with certain expectations of what could be done in those spaces. But they, once they are there, reshape those places, whether that be what you can do in a road system at a traffic light junction, the different ways in which going through traffic lights is accomplished to what it is to be walking around on a country path and nipping off to take blueberries or not. [41]

What I'd been thinking about, off and on, is one of the qualities that has tended to dominate in conversation analysis and multimodal linguistics is around temporality and timing. One of the interesting qualities of space is for the coordination of action, how things are done together, how particular settings are organized, it's another aspect that members orient towards and use and draw upon, and yet you could say it is somewhat under-appreciated. And so, that's to do the double move: There is responding to grand theory and doing ethnomethodological studies indifferent spaces and settings and the roles the spatial organization plays in those. And then, there is the spatializing of ethnomethodology and how you can orient more towards space while doing ethnomethodological studies. [42]

Hannes KRÄMER: Would you say there are certain aspects from the *Studies* which should get more attention within contemporary sociology or geography or social sciences in general?

Eric LAURIER: It's a difficult one, because GARFINKEL has become famous for the *breaching experiments*, of course. That's how most undergraduates or postgraduates in the social sciences encounter ethnomethodology for the first time. And, in one sense, you would want to say "Well, there is more to it than that, of course." But the problem for the book is that the *breaching experiments* are the bit everyone wants to read. But even if that's the way in, then I would hope that in coming into it that way you start to come upon the many other things

29 Henri LEFEBVRE (1901-1991), French sociologist and philosopher, was professor for sociology at the universities Strasbourg and Nanterre, France. His research focused on several topics ranging from the critique of everyday life, living in the city and the production of social space to Marxism, and alienation (see LEFEBVRE, 1991 [1974]).

that are at work in the book. The *breaching experiments* will never go away as a way into the book, and that's a way in which the book becomes well-known and circulated in sociology. [43]

12. Theoretical Work—Empirical Work

Hannes KRÄMER: We were thinking about maybe there is something missing today in discussions within geography or sociology or social sciences in general where re-reading GARFINKEL or re-reading ethnomethodological texts would help maybe because they offer insights which aren't discovered fully until now.

Eric LAURIER: Okay, well, I think I get more where the question is going now. The reason I became, and still am, interested in the *Studies*, is the parallel interest in both theoretical work and empirical work. It's similar to Michel FOUCAULT. One of the main reasons FOUCAULT's work was immensely popular, and continues to be popular, is because, in his work he is clearly doing theoretical work, yet it always has this empirical character—in his case an historical-empirical character. And for those who find that sort of work very satisfying, but aren't necessarily working on historical materials, then in the *Studies* and ethnomethodology in general, you find something that has this double character of both being theoretical and empirical, and the two always seem to be interwoven and are very hard to pull apart. And when you pull them apart you do damage, in ways in which for other kinds of work you can somehow extract the theory quite unproblematically without damaging it. Or the empirical work can be distilled out of it and the theoretical work can be ignored, because it wasn't that important anyway. [44]

And then there is a series of ideas that remain abiding problems for the social sciences and philosophy, which will never go away. *Indexicality* is one of those, of course. *Accountability* is one of those. The *structure-agency-problem*, where you find a very different way of dealing with that within ethnomethodology. What the *local* means. The urge to *generalize*. There is a series of abiding problems for the social sciences, which never go away, which ethnomethodology is a very distinctive response to and some of those it seems to solve and other ones it doesn't. But even for those problems that ethnomethodology doesn't solve, it still provides an interesting response to and in a way, they're problems which don't necessarily offer themselves for a solution. Part of the interest in them is that they are abiding problems, you can do studies around them, but you can't ever solve them. They are not *that* kind of problem. [45]

13. Ethnomethodology and Politics

Dominik GERST: Now, let us come to a question that goes a little bit beyond the scientific dimension. Would you say that the "Studies in Ethnomethodology" are a political book? Is there a political reading possible?

Eric LAURIER: You know, that's a very good question, because one of the things that is interesting about ethnomethodology is it doesn't have a straightforward left-wing politics to it or a liberal politics with it, that goes with many other forms of social science which seem very obviously to be driven by a certain set of politics. And that partly comes out of the non-ironic principles in ethnomethodology. If the politics is too strong it's going to cause troubles for doing studies, which allow you to understand members' own orientations or their own forms of reasoning. So, its own principled approach to members and their settings leads to some complexities around the politics. Here you can make another parallel with FOUCAULT. The politics *in* the works that FOUCAULT writes are complex. He himself had a set of politics which sat outside of those, which are much more direct and straightforward. But the politics in the books themselves are complex and often hard to extract from them. And I think when the studies are really good, ethnomethodology should have that same difficulty about working out what the politics of the studies are, because they are enmeshed in the multiple politics of whatever setting it is that they are trying to describe. [46]

Although on the one hand you could say, and you see this in the *workplace studies*, there is a certain sort of *shop floor-politics* to it, in that the group that it seems to be taken most seriously are those that are on the shop floor. And so, in that sense it seems to have a certain politics or kind of politics that some people have taken from it. That, if they go work on the shop-floor of some particular workplace, whether that be a sort of call-center or whether that was a print production unit, that they are able to tell the stories of the people that are on the shop floor and those are voices that would otherwise be lost in more managerial accounts, for instance. And that's one sort of politics that goes with it. It is the bringing in of otherwise unheard or lost voices, because those are the weak. But on the other hand, it writes non-ironic accounts of management and so it also takes management workers seriously in their own terms. And so that's the sort of complexity the politics it has around it. [47]

And you see when people, interested in ethnomethodology, when they try to write something attached to a more traditional social science politics, they often face critique, particularly from someone like Mike LYNCH. He'd be a very interesting person to speak to about this. He has responded to Alec McHOUL³⁰, the Australian researcher who is trying to combine ethnomethodology with cultural studies. Since cultural studies has a more straightforward politics to it, Mike LYNCH was critical of that move and wrote a piece (BOGEN & LYNCH, 1990) in response to Alec McHOUL's work, reminding him of why Jeff COULTER's work (that McHOUL was using) couldn't be straightforwardly attached to a set of

30 Alec McHOUL (*1952), British/Australian sociologist and philosopher, was professor at the School of Media Communication & Culture, Murdoch University, Australia. Major areas of work: ethnomethodology, cultural theory, continental philosophy, and literary theory (see McHOUL, 1982).

politics. It also connects to the points I was raising earlier about BLUM and McHUGH and their pointing out that there are things there about the weaknesses of ethnomethodology, about an unwillingness to provide a sort of authoritative or critical account. Or also to deal with what it might be to have a principled actor within any of those settings rather than just an actor. [48]

Hannes KRÄMER: Great, thank you. There is one last question we are asking everybody: Do you have a favorite part of the book? Or is there any favorite quotation in the book which comes directly to your mind?

Eric LAURIER: There are two parts. One part is GARFINKEL's voice in *Agnes*. There is a humanity from him. Given all the stories that circulate around about GARFINKEL³¹, there is something about his voice in that chapter and realizing the character, the person is sort of intriguing. And that's not a theoretical thing, that's something about that person and his voice and his understanding of others. [49]

I complained about the *breaching experiments* as the thing that everybody is obsessed with. Those stories are of course fantastic and they have been things that have stayed with me, both in thinking about what GARFINKEL made of them and what I might make of them. So particularly the stories of the family members, the students sitting at their family dinner tables or going to the fridge and being so polite and, basically, driving the rest of their family slightly crazy. I've always found those fascinating for the radicalness of what he's asking those students to do and his own reflections on those, which I sort of re-read thinking about: "Do I agree with him? What might he have missed there?" And it seems a perfect encapsulation of his work, because you both got his strong relationship with his students, the sort of radical imagination of work there in terms of what he was getting them to do. The fact that it's an engagement with SCHÜTZ³², this very influential phenomenologist, and what you're actually doing there is rethinking SCHÜTZ's ideas. It's fun at the same time. And you see GARFINKEL's preciseness of his thought as he lists out the eleven or twelve issues that we're going to deal with and thinking about these experiments that he's just described. I think for me that's one that I definitely keep going back to. Especially because it connects to everyday life. There is nothing more familiar than a family meal, and yet also nothing more peculiar or strange at the same time than a family meal.

Hannes KRÄMER: (laughs) That's a very nice last sentence. Thank you very much!

Eric LAURIER: Thank you, that was fun. Good luck with the project. [50]

31 For some stories see the other interviews of this special section.

32 Alfred SCHÜTZ (1899-1959), Austrian/US-American sociologist, philosopher, banker and jurist, is the founding father of phenomenological sociology. Major areas of work include the life world, everyday life, social theory, and methodology of social inquiries (see SCHÜTZ, 1974 [1932]).

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