

# **An Explication of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory as Evidenced by Ethnomethodological Findings**

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## **Abstract**

For centuries the speculations on man's mental functioning posed a great challenge for the scholars in various disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, sociocultural studies, education, ethnolinguistics, discourse analysis, literary criticism. Researchers have been pondering over the ticklish question: is it the mind making the human society, or is it the society that shapes up the human mind? Researchers not informed in Vygotsky's contribution to the resolution of the issue, may still find the vicious circular question glaring in the face. But thanks to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT), the hazy horizon has cleared away and today we are convinced of the truth of Vygotsky's claim that man's mental functioning is mediated by sociocultural artifacts (physical and psychological tools) which imbue us with the capacity the shape natural environment, and in so doing change the natural circumstances in which we live, and the capacity to organize and gain voluntary control over our biologically specified mental functioning. The pivotal concept in this outlook is that man, released from biological constraints, emerges as the master of his own destiny. It goes without saying that a conception as such invests the educationists, social reformers, statesmen with a grave responsibility regarding the necessity of providing appropriate conditions for individual's cognitive, ethical and social development. Indeed, Vygotsky's position on the genesis of man's higher mental functioning which is said to be hinging on the social, cultural, and historical variables provides a viable solution to the mind-society enigma. This said, we intend to submit some ethnomethodological evidence in support of Vygotsky's claim regarding the genesis of man's higher mental conditioning.

**Keyword:** Sociocultural Theory, Ethnomethodology, Sociology, Phenomenology

## Introduction

The first inspiration for writing this paper comes from my reading Philip Riley's paper titled 'Towards a Contrastive Pragmalinguistics' in J. Fisiak (ed., 1981). In the same paper the author gives a two-line dialogue between the child and the father and then brings to light the presuppositions underlying the conversation, thereby sensitizing the reader to the methods and practices used by the participants in this ethno-discourse. Indeed, the author documents the methods and practices enacted by the members of a Western household, foregrounding a member's knowledge of his ordinary life affairs and of his organized enterprise. As such, the author rubs shoulder with Harold Garfinkel (1967), the pioneer of ethnomethodology, who makes systematic effort to investigate the foundational processes which everyday social activities, circumstances are constituted and rendered intelligible. Let me illustrate my viewpoint by quoting the following verbal exchange cited by the author (1981: 132):

Child: Dad, I want to go to the match.

Parent: I'm busy this afternoon in the garden.

The sentential meaning of each utterance is clear enough; any person with a modicum knowledge of English language will get the referential meaning. What causes a problem in understanding this verbal exchange is the inferential meaning – you say something but you mean something different. Why does this indexical meaning prove a hard nut to crack in comprehending speech? I tend to believe that it is the presuppositions held by the interactionists which subconsciously work their way to the texture of the discourse. These presuppositions, specific to a particular social setting, serve to establish a social order, the explanation of which is sought by ethnomethodologists. I will take up this issue in the coming pages.

It is quite clear to anyone who shares the presuppositions of the interlocutors in the above verbal exchange that the child is *requesting* and the parent is *refusing*. These are the speech functions/acts which are performed by the surface structures of the sentences in this short dialogue. We deduce the illocutionary/communicative meaning of this verbal exchange merely because the two sentences are juxtaposed in a particular homely context; otherwise, we would be left in the air as to arriving at a legitimate interpretation of the kind

we made. Some of the presuppositions, mentioned by Riley (1981: 132), are as follows:

- a) The child cannot or does not wish to go alone.
- b) The parent can be expected to take the child.
- c) The parent is responsible for the child in some way.
- d) The parent has the priority of choice.
- e) The parent cannot be in two places simultaneously.
- f) It is possible for non-players to attend, etc.

Needless to say, the uncovering the covert presuppositions in the above short conversation prompted me to visualize a family scene of verbal interaction of the same token between a mother and a child in the Iranian culture when the child takes leave to go to a nearby school/kindergarten:

- a) Child: Mama, I'm going to school. Bye-bye.
- b) Mother: Honey, may God protect you; hope to see you at home when you leave the school.

Following the example set by Riley, the present author, being part of the same culture, point out some of the presuppositions held by the interlocutors which remain hidden to the inquisitive mind of the external observer - the enterprise being of research interest of various disciplines - sociology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, conversation analysis, and not the least, ethnomethodology:

- a) The mother regards it a natural event for the young child to set on going to school on his/her own.
- b) The mother is happy that the child ensures his/her future by braving unsavoury events that might happen on his/her way to school.
- c) The mother is sure that the child will make his/her way back home after the school is over.
- d) The father has devolved the care of child schooling on the mother if she does not work out of home.
- e) The father is legally obliged to provide for the primary education of the child.

Obviously, the child's utterance is also indicative of methods and practices which constitute the requisite social order within the Iranian culture. Again, being a native member of community, I venture to figure up some of the presuppositions that are the correlates of this child-mother verbal exchange:

- a) The child does not expect a parent or an adult person to accompany him/her to school.
- b) The child is not haunted at all by the fear of being kidnapped.
- c) The child is certain that he can make his way back home on leaving the school.
- d) The child, generally speaking, thinks of going to school a happy event.
- e) The child, nicely perked up, is ready to flaunt his/her personal stationery, new clothes, and shoes.
- f) The child, feeling proud of being on his/her own, faces up to the new experience of going to school very bravely.

One can still go on looking for other covert presuppositions which will surely emerge by the investigation of a curious ethnomethodologist's effort. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that sometimes a short verbal exchange, as the examples given above, are imbued with a great number presuppositions; sometimes a long conversation indicates only one particular trait of a social order, though the social order may be constituted by a multiple methods and practices. The following conversation between a presumptive customer and businessman is not uncommon in business transactions in an oriental carpet bazaar, including Iran:

Customer: How much is this rug?

Salesman: Fifty thousand tomans. (approx. fifty hundred dollars)

Customer: (feeling the texture of the rug): Where is it made?

Salesman: In Tabriz; Tabriz carpets, you know, are well-known for their quality. In this rug there are silk threads woven into it.

Customer: What is the 'riz' of this one? [number of knots in terms of one centimeter]

Salesman: They say the 'riz' is fifty, but actually it is less than that. The weaver of the rug is selling it under its real price; he is in dire need of money.

Customer: Changing his position, he stares at the rug from different angles, mumbling some words under his breath.

Salesman: Following the direction of the customer's eyes, he goes on praising the colour, the design, and the texture of the rug.

Customer: (After almost an hour): Do you offer it at thirty thousand tomans?

Salesman: No. I make a loss. I can you give some discount.

The bargaining goes for some longer time; the salesman eventually sells the rug at two-thirds of the original price, and the customer pays the money and leaves the shop while he has the suspicion that he has been led up the garden path!

The methods and practices in this social order are indicative of mistrust that has infested the business transactions in the Middle East. For the ethnomethodologist to make sense of the foundational processes in this trading system, he needs to have some sociocultural insight both at the phylogenic and ontogenetic levels, the knowledge of which will lead the researcher to a domain of uncharted dimensions. The underlying sociological and cultural strata are often too deep to fathom and the vision of staking out a clearly delineated territory is very illusive.

Well, the reader may have noticed that the present author has adopted an inductive approach towards the explicating the topic of this paper; namely, I have opted for illustrating the concept of ethnomethodology by first providing examples, no matter how inadequate, of two social events in different settings. This way of treating a topic - going for examples to concepts - I think renders the task of illuminating your cases in point easy. Metaphorically speaking, it is putting the horse before the cart.

### **Ethnomethodology: definition and origins**

Ethnomethodology (EM) is an ethnographic approach to sociological inquiry introduced by American sociologist Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002). Regarding the origins in the development of EM, we can say that it was Harold Garfinkel that blazed the trail. He is indebted to Talcott Parson's 'Problem of Order', Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber; Aron Gurwitsch's Phenomenological Field Theory of Consciousness/Gestalt Psychology; the Transcendental Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl; Alfred Schultz's Phenomenology of the Natural Attitude; Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment; Martin Heidegger's Phenomenology of Being/Existential Phenomenology; and Ludwig Wittgenstein's investigations regarding ordinary language use (Heritage, 1984; Garfinkel, 2002).

Because of these contributing schools of thought it is no surprise to find out that there is nowhere in the ethnomethodological corpus a systematic theoretical statement. Instead, we find a multiplicity of theoretical references to

big names in sociological, phenomenological, anthropological and linguistic studies and so on. Here, the pivotal concept is that the objectivity of social facts becomes at the hands of Garfinkel a theoretical directive and the focus of ethnomethodological description. Indeed, ‘the objective reality of social facts’, respecified in EM, directs the researcher to account for organizational things in the world and their *in situ* methods of achievements by real individuals in actual social setting (Button, 1991) As such, EM, through its insistence on the concreteness of things, as opposed to the theoretical conceptual constructionism, brings to light complex mutually recognizable practices enacted by participants in social scenes. The sharing of research interests with other neighbouring disciplines provides EM with theoretical underpinnings in whole or part. Obviously, EM is not Durkheimian, although it shares interests of Durkheim; it is not a form of phenomenology, although it borrows from Husserl and Schutz’s studies of the life world [Lebenswelt]; it is not a form of Gestalt Theory, although it describes social orders as having Gestalt-like properties; and it is not a version of Wittgenstein’s Ordinary Language Analysis, although it makes use of Wittgenstein’s understanding of rule-use (Wikipedia, P. 3). Thus, EM ‘appropriates’ or ‘respecifies’ the theoretical ideas from its sister disciplines for its own ethnomethodological investigations (Gurwitsch, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967, 2002).

Regarding the question of methods, EM does not have a set of formal research methods/procedures. Ethnomethodologists have conducted their studies in a variety of ways in order to discover things that persons in a particular situation do and the methods they use whereby creating the patterned orderliness of life. In a nutshell, ‘ethnomethodology is not a methodology, but rather a study of methodology’ (Rawls, 2002:146). As such, its theoretical position is consonant with the philosophy of science (Lynch, 1985).

Having referred briefly to the definition and origins of EM, it is time we took up considering the relational aspects between it and some of the neighbouring disciplines.

### **Ethnomethodology and Traditional Sociology**

By now, ethnomethodology has come of age. A somewhat rebellious offspring of the social sciences, ethnomethodology, because of its broad

scope of inquiry in the individual's social behaviour during the past forty five years, has attained a world-wide recognition as an independent discipline and its influence ranges from anthropology and communication to cognitive science and linguistics. Today, an increasing number of works seek to take stock of the cumulative accomplishments which ethnomethodology has bequeathed to the social science (Heritage, 1984, 1987; Hilbert, 1992; Maynard and Clayman, 1991; Sharrock and Anderson, 1986; Wilson and Zimmerman, 1980).

There is an inherent relationship between ethomethodology and sociology, despite some core differences between these two disciplines. They are as follows:

- a. While traditional sociology offers an analysis of society in terms of factual character of the social order, ethnomethodology is concerned with the procedures [practices and methods] by which a particular social order is produced and shared.
- b. While Structural Functionalist Research Program (allied with traditional sociological studies) imposes pre-existing analytical schemata on the field of study, Symbolic Interactionist Program (imbued with ethnomethodological intention) avoids engaging with these types of taken-for-granted programmatic assumptions. Rather, the ethnomethodologist focuses on the methodic realization of social scenes taking place within the actual settings which are structured by the participants. For the ethomethodologist, social orders are identical with the practices and methods which members of a particular social group employ to produce and manage a particular setting of organized everyday affair. These characteristics - social order, practices and methods, activities, accounts and person's involvement in a particular setting - are essential features of the ethnomethodological perspectives that differentiate it from traditional sociological forms.

### **Ethnomethodology and Phenomenology**

Ethnomethodology and phenomenology have a lot of research interests, but at a closer look, ethomethodology is not phenomenology and phenomenology is not ethnomethodology: Phenomenology was already a flourishing discipline when ethnomethodology made its debut for the first time in 1967. Garfinkel, influenced by the phenomenological teachings of Edmund Husserl, Alfred

Schutz, and Aaron Gurwitsch, proposed that the experiential reality of any social phenomenon rests upon certain common-sense method of reason. However, unlike his phenomenological predecessors, Garfinkel directed attention away from mentalistic processes toward forms of reasoning, embodied in ordinary social activities. Indeed, Garfinkel sought to ‘deconstruct’ orderly social phenomena to lay bare the constitutive methods of reasoning-in-action through which phenomena are produced, recognized and rendered accountable by social members (Button, 1991). To be specific, Garfinkel was not after the characterization of social phenomena; his analytic interest was focused on the underlying methods through which such phenomena are locally produced and rendered intelligible. The processes, rather than the accountable products, of social life is the primary topic of ethnomethodological investigation.

In contrast to deconstructive dimension, whereby the ethnomethodologist seeks to penetrate and decompose the objects and events of everyday life, the researcher in this school of thought retains the constructive dimension of the phenomena under study by interpreting it with regard to the context of which it forms a part. It is the context-dependency of meaning that aids the ethnomethodologist to come up with a mosaic of practices carried out by the members of a certain social community. More often than not, we are reminded that ethnomethodology has a ‘phenomenological sensibility’, and that ethnomethodologist sifts through phenomenological texts, recovers phenomenological concepts and findings relevant to their interest, and transposes these concepts and findings to topics in the study of social orders. On the other hand, the phenomenologist seizes upon ethnomethodological studies as examples of applied phenomenology. However, in ethnomethodological studies one can hardly find a reference to consciousness, intentionality, or phenomenological methodology which beget phenomenology. All the same, reading and understanding of phenomenological texts plays a significant role in the actual doing of ethnomethodological studies.

### **Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis**

Conversation analysis is a naturalistic approach to the study of spoken interaction that was developed by Harvey Sacks in collaboration with

Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (Haritage, 1984; Zimmerman 1988; Whalen 1992). Sacks was a student of Harold Garfinkel and was strongly influenced by his ethnomethodological ideas. While conversation analysis retains an interest in common-sense methods of reasoning and the structure of interaction itself, e. g. turn taking, activity sequencing, the relationship between vocal and non-vocal activities ..., ethnomethodological analysis arises in the avoidance of abstract, formalistic or ideal-typical characterization of interactional procedure. Instead, the latter approach focuses on the structures of talk produced by the interlocutors via practices which are sensitive to the particulars of situational circumstances.

The relationship between these two disciplines is a moot point as it seems that boundaries of research interest are not staked out. According to Rawls (2002), there are two essential distinctions between them:

1. In as much as the study of social orders is 'inexorably interwoven' with the constitutive features of talk about those social orders, ethnomethodology is interested in both conversational talk, and the role this talk plays in the constitution of that order, and in the essential embeddedness of talk in a specific social order.
2. On the other hand, if the study of conversational talk is divorced from its situated context, i. e. the study takes on the character of purely 'technical method' and regards conversational talk as a formal analytic enterprise on its own right, the study does not fall within the purview of ethnomethodology. Rawls (2002), having posited his view about the relationship between ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, declares that these two disciplines are independent forms of investigation, that these two types of study may overlap in terms of research interests and projects, and that each can profit from the understanding the other's investigational methods and findings.

It is important to bear in mind that the deconstructive impetus in ethnomethodology proceeds from the recognition that something is missing when academic analysis of social world takes the mundane intelligibility and intersubjectivity of that world for granted (Button, 1991). Such research tends to overlook what is the most fundamental level of social organization, i. e. the common sense practices which underlie the conduct of both social life and social inquiry. The rationale behind the ethnomethodological studies is that it

encourages investigators to notice things that are so commonplace that they do not seem to require description, things that are usually submerged within the ordinary 'give' of everyday life ( Button, 1991).

### **Ethnomethodology and Sociocultural Theory**

By considering ethnomethodology in the light of Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT), we wise up to the fact that practices and methods involved in social order, the concerns of ethnomethodological studies, have some causal factors deeply rooted in the history and culture of the social world.

The most important concept in SCT is that the human mind is mediated by both physical and symbolic/psychological artifacts (number, figure, chart, art, music, language ...) throughout history. In opposition to the orthodox view – man is born with a *tabula rasa* (the human mind at birth is with no ideas and thoughts in it), Vygotsky is committed to the view that the development of mind is contingent upon the tools and activities to change the circumstances under which man lives, and that human beings use symbolic signs to regulate their relationships with others and themselves as well (Lantolf, 2006). These physical and psychological artifacts are modified as they are passed from one generation to another in a bid to meet the needs of the social world in which members of the community live. According to Vygotsky (1978, 1981), the only approach to the study of higher mental abilities (voluntary attention, concept formation, logical thinking, problem solving ...), which separate the sentient man from higher primates, is historical because we inherit cultural artifacts from our ancestors. He proposed four genetic domains for the proper study of higher mental functions: phylogenetic domain, sociocultural domain, ontogenetic domain, and microgenetic domain. The genetic method represents an attempt to investigate the formation of mental functions mediated by sociocultural artifacts. Unlike the physical tools that are directed outward, psychological tools have a dual directionality, 'reversibility' in Vygotsky's term: they may be outwardly directed (e. g. social communication) or inwardly directed to regulate and control mental processes involved in memory work, attention, learning, ...).

While the physical tool serves as a means to cause changes in the object of its study, the sign, a means of psychological action, is directed towards

mastering the man himself. It is worth noting that vygotsky's approach to the study of mind is dialectic: biology plays an important role in our mental abilities; symbolic artifacts and cultural practices empower us to control our biological endowments. As such, in SCT the mind-body dualism is rejected – society shapes up man's mind; man, in return, constructs the society. In Vygotsky's bi-directionality, natural endowments form the foundation for thinking, and socioculturally organized activities transform elementary functions. Biological processes are responsible for phylogenetic changes; historical processes are responsible for cultural development of man's mind.

Keeping this synoptic account of SCT, I would like to point out one blinking point in the trend of sociocultural studies, hence sensitizing the reader to the fact that researchers in the studies of man's social life have kept moving from the general (Traditional Sociological studies) to the particular (phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnomethodology), and today the attention is shifted towards the deeper historical/cultural roots of the same social behaviour, seeking the causal factors for the emergence practices and methods enacted in a particular social setting. In fact, the trend has been away from macro approach to the study of a phenomenon to the micro approach. Researchers at one period of inquiry into the nature of an event have adopted a bird's eye view; later, unsatisfied with the whole-sight view, have tended to follow a worm's view in studying the case in point. Vygotsky and his colleagues – A. N. Leontiev and A. Luria were the first among the researchers, who sounded the bull-horn to call attention to the *causality* of man's social behaviour along the phylogenetic/historica and ontogenetic/cultural levels of development of man's social behaviour.

In the beginning of the part of this paper, in an effort to elucidate the research objective of ethomethodology, I gave some examples of verbal interactions produced by the local interactionists in two different settings of family life and business activity. The same types of verbal exchanges are of potential research interest in other related disciplines such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, applied linguistics and so on, each being concerned with a particular aspect of man's social activities in the kaleidoscope of scientific inquiry. It is a truism that in scientific investigation there is a need for both top-down/deductive and bottom-up/inductive approaches to the studies of scientific nature including man's social life. Like the practiced artist painting

a picture, the researcher has sometimes to distance himself from the object of the study in order to take the whole in one glance (bird's view), and sometimes in order to observe the very minor details, as the painting artist does it with the aid of a microscope, he gets much closer to the object of his study (worm's view). In the history of the development scientific inquiry, the researcher in the ethnomethodological studies is pursuing a close-up view of the practices and methods which members of social activities are engaged with unwittingly. And the advocates of sociocultural theory are after the causal factors of these practices and methods which constitute social orders in human communities.

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### **Biodata**

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