The Science of Qualitative Research

Second Edition

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Constitution as Ontological

Consider that immortal ordinary society evidently, just in any actual case, is easily done and easily recognized with uniquely adequate competence, vulgar competence, by one and all – and, for all that, by one and all it is intractably hard to describe procedurally. Procedurally described, just in any actual case, it is elusive.

Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8

In this chapter, I want to change your ontology! We saw in the last chapter how Husserl, Schutz, Berger and Luckmann, Gergen, and Searle tried to study the kind of constitution that Kant had identified, in which individual perception and reason together form representations of an external reality. We discovered how their ontological dualism prevented them from doing more than study the experience of “reality” while, paradoxically, trying to bracket all claims about what actually is real. This chapter follows a different path, one that explores the conditions for the capacity to form subjective representations. I begin with Georg Hegel’s response to Kant, then continue with Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Harold Garfinkel, and finally Bruno Latour. Their work amounts to a different kind of phenomenology, one that explores a nondualist ontology, a “radical realism.” Here constitution is viewed not as a matter of forming concepts or representations but as the forming of objects and subjects, an ontological rather than epistemological process. The focus shifts from conceptual knowledge, studied with a detached, theoretical attitude, to practical, embodied know-how, studied in an involved way. Know-how provides a way to see the world. By the end of the chapter, I hope to have convinced you to see people and objects as inextricably one with their forms of life, and to see reason and thinking as cultural, historical, and grounded in practical know-how.

The analyses in the last chapter started from the assumption that we are naturally creatures with minds, inner spaces in which representations are formed, and asked how these representations are structured and under what circumstances they are valid.

Yet these human and social sciences – in both their experimental and qualitative forms – have been unable to escape from a persistent anxiety that
makes evident the problems in Kant's anthropology. If Kant were correct that individual subjectivity is active – that each person creates their own subjective model of the world – how could this be reconciled with the view that science deals with the “objectivity” of things in the world: physical things (the natural sciences), organic things (biological sciences), or human things (the human sciences)? Since the Enlightenment, the new human sciences – sociology, anthropology, and psychology – have busied themselves studying people's representations. They have mirrored the work of the biological and physical sciences – whereas those studied objective reality, the new sciences studied, in large part, subjective reality. They didn't stop to ask whether representation was the whole story or where the capacity for representation came from.

However, “mind” and “world” have been located in two separate realms, once we assume that humans are naturally and fundamentally individuals, each with a mind that forms representations, then skepticism about the world, about other minds, and about the validity of knowledge and the basis for ethics becomes unavoidable.

What More?

Kant’s analysis provided plenty of work for those who followed, and wanted to improve, his work. It should now be obvious that we cannot solve the epistemological and ethical problems that troubled Kant within the representational model of man. We need a different model: a different ontology. The more fundamental question that must be asked is: How is mind possible? How is it that we become people who can represent the world in an inner space? We must explore “what more” there is to human beings above and beyond the capacity to form mental representations.

The work of the people who have raised this question has been the basis for a completely different exploration of constitution. They have turned Kant’s analysis upside down and explored the possibility that some more basic way that humans are involved in the world constitutes both that world and the human capacity for representation. Like the people in the previous chapter, they have explored the relationship between mind and world, between representation and represented, but with very different conclusions (see Box 8.1).

**THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF GEIST: GEORGH GELE**

In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of “other,” at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic Science of Spirit. And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself.

(Hegel, 1807/1977, p. 57)
The story begins with the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). At first, Hegel intended merely to develop Kant’s philosophy, but he came to see that it had profound difficulties. Kant’s view that the mind constitutes an individual’s experience of an objective world by providing the transcendental concepts of space, time, causality, and object seemed to Hegel to effectively double both object and subject. The object was doubled into *noumenon* (thing-in-itself) and *phenomenon* (appearance), while the subject was divided into an empirical subjectivity and a transcendental ego. Kant himself was satisfied that he had shown how subject and object are linked at the level of experience, though they appear to be distinct. But at the level of reflection, subjectivity (the transcendental ego) and objectivity (the thing-in-itself) were still completely separate in Kant’s account. Kant’s
box 8.2. Durkheim’s Project Continued

Garfinkel can be seen as continuing the project that Émile Durkheim began (see Box 8.1). To Durkheim, Kant’s “emphasis on the individual and individual perception of natural forces” made the epistemological problem appear unsolvable. Durkheim sought to replace the individualist approach of traditional philosophy with an approach solidly embedded in enacted social practice” (Rawls, 1996, p. 431). This approach “treats concrete social processes as natural processes whose function is to make general categories of thought available to their human participants” (p. 433). Approached this way, sociology would be able to solve the problem that philosophy had failed to solve. “In rejecting the individual as a starting point, the way is opened for Durkheim to explain the origin of the necessary basic concepts in terms of concrete social processes, something that had never been tried before” (Rawls, 1996, p. 433; see Rawls, 1998).

Garfinkel has continued this project, seeing social practices as the origin not just of a sense of social order but of order itself. Unlike Durkheim, Garfinkel has focused on ordinary everyday practices rather than institutionalized ritual practices, which are much less common today than in Durkheim’s time. But Garfinkel’s interest is the same: understanding social practices as the place where order is achieved. Order includes “achieved phenomena of logic, meaning, method, reason, rational action, truth, evidence, science, Kant’s basic categories, or Hume’s, or the primordials of anyone else” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 11). All these, he insists, have their “origins, sources, destinations, locus, and settings” (p. 11) in ordinary interaction.

Many sociologists believe that social interaction cannot possibly produce categories that have the necessity that Kant considered crucial. It is usually assumed that if reason and knowledge have a social basis, this means they will inevitably be relative. For most social scientists, “social consensus, structure, or shared practices, they argue, lead persons to believe certain things or think in certain ways. Because persons share the same beliefs, they act in ways that reinforce those beliefs. The resulting consensus creates the appearance of a valid relation between thought and reality where there can in fact be none” (Rawls, 1996, p. 474).

But Durkheim believed that sociology can explain how genuinely valid knowledge arises from participation in social practices. He emphasized “the essential role played by social processes in creating the human faculty of reason” (Rawls, 1998, p. 900). He proposed that it is only by participating in ritual social practices that individuals develop the capacity to form valid representations of the world, including the fundamental categories Kant had emphasized: time, space, object, and causality. The origin of these is
analysis seemed to imply that we are truly and fully human only when we accept this separation from natural and social reality and that this is how we best exercise our capacity for reason.

In Hegel’s view, Kant also failed to bridge the gap between knowledge (the realm of science) and action (the realm of politics, morality, and religion) (Solomon, 1983, pp. 77ff). For example, the notion of the world-in-itself permitted Kant to conceive of God as standing outside space and time but still as a necessary figure in human faith and morality. To Hegel, this ended up separating components whose relationship Kant had been trying to explain.

Hegel’s genius was not to try to eliminate these tensions and contradictions but to interpret them as aspects of an evolving unity. They became opposing sides in his famous dialectic of thesis, antithesis, synthesis (though Hegel himself never used these terms). The resulting philosophy has had a profound impact on many schools of thought, including existentialism, Marx’s historical materialism, and psychoanalysis. Hegel’s writing is notoriously difficult, and there are many different interpretations of his ideas (e.g., Rockmore, 1997; Solomon, 1983; Taylor, 1975). Here I will give only a brief summary of two of his central proposals: that human reason is a cultural and historical phenomenon and that consciousness follows a path towards more complex and adequate ways of knowing both self and world. These proposals open up a fresh way of thinking of humans in which the mind is reconceptualized as the way we are involved in the world.

Reason Has a History

Hegel proposed that Kant had not been sufficiently critical of his own critique. Kant’s error, said Hegel, lay in his appeal to a rationality that lay outside human practice on a transcendental plane. Kant had failed to explain how he could adopt his own critical position. He had claimed that reason provides the conditions for the possibility of experience but had failed to explore the conditions for the possibility of reason. Hegel’s response was to put reason – and the reasoner (the philosopher, the thinker) – back in their proper place in
the tide of human affairs; that is to say, in history. Reason, Hegel argued, also has a history. Any investigation of the conditions for knowledge must start from a position within this historical process of coming to know.

One simple way to put this is that what we call reason – whether it is logic, mathematics, or the differential calculus – has been figured out over time. It only seems timeless and eternal once it is complete. Mind itself, for Hegel, is not part of a universal, timeless human nature but has developed over history and will continue to develop. The human mind is worldly and secular, not transcendental or spiritual.

Similarly, Hegel proposed that Kant had failed to grasp the concrete character of moral problems and dilemmas. He shared Kant’s view that to be moral we must be rational and make free choices, but he believed that individual ethical choice cannot be separated from social contexts. Self-conscious moral action, Hegel proposed, is based on social practices and institutions. He developed a concrete ethics in which he described the ethical ideals of his particular society. The morality that Kant had argued was universal was in reality a middle-class, Western morality. If values become universal, Hegel argued, it will only be because communities expand and become international.

Hegel insisted that any attempt to base knowledge or morality on the individual will inevitably fail. Such ethical and epistemological theories are possible only because we are members of a community, but because they start from the individual they will be formal and empty. Analyses such as Kant’s presuppose a background of social practices that they fail to examine or question. They assume that the individual is merely an isolated atom, outside society and culture, and only reinforce the “alienation” (Entfremdung) of the individual in modern society. Hegel argued that knowledge is always the product of participation in an organized, ethical community, and the basis of morality is to be found in the “reason” of this community. This organized community life, what he called Sittlichkeit, is the practices and customs each of us is born into. “Sittlichkeit is morality as established custom, not a set of principles. [It] is shared activity, shared interests, shared pleasures” (Solomon, 1983, p. 534). In modern society, Hegel suggested, these practices are the basis for individualism and a modern bourgeois morality that divides public life from private life and personal values from community values, and pits each individual’s interests against those of other people (p. 491).

Consciousness Follows a Path

Hegel sought a way of both recognizing and resolving the opposition and conflict between subjectivity and objectivity and (what amounted to the same thing) the opposition between idealist and empiricist theories of knowledge. He suggested that there is “subjectivity at the level of objectivity” (Hyppolite,
1946/1974, p. 83). What does this mean? Hegel, just like Husserl, saw consciousness as intentional:

When we experience, say, a table within consciousness, we understand our perception to refer to a table beyond consciousness, in the same way phenomenologists such as Brentano and Husserl use the concept of intentionality as the property of consciousness to be directed towards something. In the process of knowing, the distinction between what appears and what is, is overcome. At the limit, when we fully know, knowing becomes truth. (Rockmore, 1997, p. 30)

Husserl appreciated that when we experience a table, we understand that we perceive a real table that is partly beyond our present experience. It has, for example, a hidden side. But Hegel saw also that experience grows and changes, and he proposed that, in the process of knowing, the distinction between the table as we experience it and the table as it is can be overcome. Our experience can become increasingly adequate to the object. Achieving this adequacy requires being able to distinguish between the object experienced and how we experience it, and this in turn requires self-knowledge and self-consciousness.

So Hegel acknowledged things-in-themselves, but unlike Kant he argued that we can come to know them. Such knowledge is “scientific” knowledge (though science for Hegel was part of philosophy). Whereas Kant had offered an analysis only of how things appear, Hegel argued that we can know how things are. The distinction between “our view of the object within consciousness” and “the object of that view within consciousness” is a distinction that we can become consciously aware of. Whereas Kant had discounted any claim about things-in-themselves as “speculative metaphysics,” Hegel maintained that such claims can be rational and grounded:

Kant illustrates the effort, widespread in modern philosophy, to know an independent external object through an analysis of the relation between the knowing subject and its object. Yet there is no way to grasp the relation of whatever appears within consciousness to an independent external reality. Hegel’s solution is to replace this relation through a very different relation between a subject and an object that falls entirely within consciousness. Knowledge is not a process of bringing our view of the object into correspondence with an independent external object, but rather a process of bringing our view of the object within consciousness into correspondence with the object of that view within consciousness. (Rockmore, 1997, pp. 28–29)

This difference between Hegel and Kant with respect to our ability to know things-in-themselves is important because, as we have seen, many contemporary constructivists believe they must avoid saying anything specific about reality. Hegel offered a constructivism in which ontology plays a central role.
He offered an ontology in which knowledge is constituted but in which the knowing subject and the known object are constituted, too. Whereas Kant had taken for granted the existence of the individual subject who represents the world, Hegel studied both the conditions of experience and the conditions for the possibility of the subject who experiences.

As Husserl would do, Hegel called his approach “phenomenology.” The term reflected his view that philosophy should examine knowing as it actually occurs and study consciousness as it actually exists. His *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) was the study of how consciousness or mind appears to itself. The title has been translated both as *Phenomenology of Mind* and *Phenomenology of Spirit*; the German word Geist can mean mind, spirit, or even ghost. Hegel’s working title was *Science of the Experience of Consciousness*. Whatever the translation, Geist should be understood as both subject and object, a unified subject/object. For at least one modern commentator, Hegel’s “concept of spirit is roughly a view of people in the sociocultural context as the real subject of knowledge” (Rockmore, 1997, p. 4).

Hegel proposed that there is a reflexive capacity to consciousness: an immediate, noncognitive relation of the self to itself. Consciousness always relates to an object and at the same time distinguishes itself from that object: this apple is an object for me; it is a being for my awareness. Knowing is not a relationship to something outside consciousness but a relationship within consciousness.

If the distinction between subject and object emerges within consciousness, it follows that consciousness cannot be something within the subject (in the head, or made up of mental states). For Hegel, consciousness is a relationship between a subject (knowing and acting) and an object (known and acted on), a relationship that is always social and can only develop fully in specific kinds of social practices and institutions. Hegel insisted, moreover, that to recognize this one cannot find a position outside the natural attitude, such as Husserl’s transcendental attitude. We can describe consciousness only from within our natural, everyday experience. And because this experience develops, there is no single fixed and unchanging natural attitude; each of us progresses through a series of attitudes. Hegel believed that he was standing at the end of the process of the development of consciousness, able to look back and describe it.

The *Phenomenology of Mind*, then, offered “an exposition of how knowledge makes its appearance” (Hegel, 1807/1997, p. 49). It was a description (phenomenological) of the way human beings come to know, of “the path of the natural consciousness which presses forward to true knowledge.” It described how “the series of configurations which consciousness goes through along this road is, in reality, the detailed history of the education [Bildung] of consciousness itself to the standpoint of Science” (p. 50, emphasis original), even though at times it seems “a highway of despair” (p. 135): “Hegel’s phenomenological self-reflection surmounts dogmatism by reflectively
reconstructing the self-formative process (Bildungsprozess) of mind (Geist)” (McCarthy, 1978, p. 79).

The historical unfolding of human consciousness is expressed in reason. Hegel described this unfolding as a dialectical process in which understanding moves from certainty to uncertainty and contradiction and then on to certainty again. Limited kinds of understanding are progressively incorporated into a whole. The first kind is “sense-certainty”: immediate sensuous experience of the here and now. This becomes what Hegel calls perception, then understanding. This is followed by self-consciousness and then consciousness of others. Next comes consciousness of society as an objective reality, and finally consciousness of how society is produced through human activity. Natural consciousness passes through this series of stages or phases, of natural skepticism, doubt, and despair, and finally becomes self-critical consciousness. First, we take things to be just the way they appear to be. Then, we come to experience a distinction between things as they appear and things as they are. We eventually become conscious of the way our own consciousness has been shaped by our biography and by our own society – we come to see society as an objective reality. Then we become conscious of the way society itself is a product of human activity. And finally we become aware of ourselves as a manifestation of something grander and know that individual consciousness is not self-sufficient or complete. “For Hegel, the highest form of knowledge turns out to be self-knowledge, or knowing oneself in otherness and otherness as oneself” (Rockmore, 1997, p. 188): “Beginning with the natural consciousness of the everyday life world in which we already find ourselves, phenomenological reflection traces its own genesis through the successive stages of the manifestation of consciousness” (McCarthy, 1978, p. 79).

Knowing is first “in-itself,” then “for-itself,” and finally “in-and-for-itself.” An object is first (for sense-certainty) mere being, then (for perception) a concrete thing, then (for understanding) a force – always seemingly in-itself. Then, with self-consciousness, this in-itself turns out to be a mode in which the object is for me: the “I” is a connecting of the object’s in-itself and for me. That is to say, the appearance/reality distinction presumes an “I” to and for whom reality appears. Self-consciousness has a double object.

In Hegel’s view, there is both a direction, a teleology, to this process and an end to it. Knowing is a “dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself, both on its knowledge and on its object” (Hegel, 1807/1967, p. 55). Knowing is not a single event but a process extended over time. Hegel was “an epistemological optimist” (Rockmore, 1997). He saw consciousness developing from a state of immediacy towards a knowing that is aware of itself and finally to a knowledge that is “absolute.” Hegel maintained that the dialectic would proceed to a point where “the partiality of perspectives can be progressively overcome” (Held, 1980, p. 177). In Hegel’s account, this “absolute knowledge” is the final working out, the final development, of Geist.
As Hegel viewed it, this dialectic is both the way history unfolds and the process of individual thinking. It is both because these two – history and thought – are not distinct. Remember that both the human mind and Geist itself are found in nature and in history. Hegel called the “governing principle” of thought “determinate negation.” It is a “continuous criticism and reconstruction of the knowledge of subject and object as their relation to one another” (Held, 1980, p. 176). It “consists precisely in surmounting old forms of consciousness and in incorporating these moments into a new reflective attitude” (p. 176). Understood this way, Hegel’s phenomenology itself is an exercise in thinking: it is a critical reflection that explores the conditions of its own possibility – the historical and cultural process by which it has come about. It is reasoning that doesn’t take itself for granted, reflection that asks how reflection can be possible. This is the approach, the method, necessary to trace the development of Geist.

A New Model of Human Being

At the heart of Hegel’s Phenomenology is a powerful historical narrative that weaves together cultural history and individual development. Darwin would not publish On the Origin of Species for another 50 years, but today we can add evolution to a picture in which humans have evolved from simpler life-forms that developed from insensate matter. We are substance that became first self-reproducing, then sentient, then conscious, then self-conscious, then conscious of the concrete conditions of its own consciousness. Hegel imagined this evolutionary journey as ultimately culminating in a consciousness that can know this process of its own formation and self-formation and overcome the apparent distinction between itself as subject and the world as object by transforming the world to make it rational.

Ontological Hermeneutics: Martin Heidegger

World is not something subsequent which we calculate as a result from the sum of all beings. The world comes not afterward but beforehand, in the strict sense of the word. Beforehand: that which is unveiled and understood already in advance in every existent Dasein before any apprehending of this or that being. . . . We are able to come up against intraworldly beings solely because, as existing beings, we are always already in a world.

(Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 165)

Hegel’s grand system was not the final word. The philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) objected to what he called Hegel’s “onto-theo-egology” (Heidegger, 1980/1988): his treatment of time as basically spatial. This might seem a strange thing to say, given Hegel’s emphasis on history. But Heidegger’s point was that the historical movement of Hegel’s
phenomenology comes to an end in timelessness, in the totality of a final system in which no change will be necessary so none will be possible. “Hegelian time lacks what is truly proper to time: contingency, freedom, exposure to the future” (Caputo, 1987, p. 18). In Hegel’s account: “[t]he eternal logical structure of Geist is always the same. Appreciating the ceaseless activity of Geist is essential for understanding history, the rise and fall of political and social institutions, the development of the stages of consciousness. However, from the perspective of logic, of Geist as Nous or Reason, Geist displays an eternal, necessary, rational structure” (Bernstein, 1971, p. 22).

Heidegger set out to “appropriate” and “radicalize” Hegel (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 178). He argued that both philosophy and science have forgotten the world in which we live. This sounds like Husserl and Schutz, but Heidegger considered this world to be where human beings are rather than something around us. For Heidegger, the world is the “ground” for all the entities – whether people or objects – encountered within it. Heidegger set out to clarify what it is to be human on the basis of this insight. Human being is not a mind or a self but “being-in-the-world,” a unitary structure of our complete involvement in the totality of a form of life.

Being Is an Issue for Human Beings

Heidegger began with the observation that it is only for humans that “being is an issue.” Only people ask the questions, “What is that?” and “Who am I?” It is somehow fundamental to human being – to the human way of being – that we try to understand (verstehen) and interpret the kinds of entities that we deal with every day. It is often said that with Heidegger hermeneutics became ontological. That is to say, he proposed that interpretation is not simply a special way of dealing with texts but something intrinsically human. To be human is to understand and interpret, so interpretation is not a special method but a fundamental aspect of human being. Understanding is a matter of grasping an entity as a certain kind of being and at the same time to have a grasp of what it is to be human. (We saw in Chapter 4 how Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, drew on this idea that interpretation is grounded in understanding.)

Heidegger seems to have been a thoroughly unpleasant person. He betrayed his mentor, Edmund Husserl, breaking off contact when Husserl was excluded from the university by the Nazi Party, and he betrayed his wife by having an affair with his student Hannah Arendt. He not only sympathized with the Nazi regime but also refused to repudiate either the regime or his own actions after the Second World War. This raises the question of whether a person’s work, whether it be philosophy or any other activity, should be judged in terms of how they live. In Heidegger’s case, the answer is surely yes. Heidegger’s philosophy was a philosophy of existence – it was precisely a
philosophical exploration of how to live. When its author failed so conspicuously, we must consider his philosophy with critical care.

Yet Heidegger was attempting something interesting and difficult, rethinking one of the central questions of philosophy. That he failed should perhaps not cause surprise, though certainly regret. He proposed that philosophy had consistently misunderstood what it is for something to be. It had focused on beings – individual entities – instead of being, just assuming that being has only two possibilities, “matter” and “mind.” Heidegger proposed instead that actually there are many different ways for both people and things to be, ways that are made possible by history and culture.

A Phenomenology Focused on Ontology

Heidegger’s conceptions of phenomenology and of the constitutive relationship in human beings were very different from those of his teacher Husserl. In Being and Time (1927), Heidegger raised what he called “the question of the meaning of being.” This sounds like some kind of existentialist question, but for Heidegger it meant: What makes being possible? What makes it possible for a thing – or a person – to be? Heidegger’s answer was that things and people become what they are only against a ground, a taken-for-granted background, of cultural and historical practices. For Heidegger, a phenomenological analysis means the investigation of what underlies all particular entities and allows them to show up as entities.

Heidegger drew a distinction between existence and being. He was a realist: he didn’t believe that if all humans died the universe would stop existing. But when he insisted that being is an issue only to humans, he meant that if there were no humans around, entities would have no being. The being of an entity is made possible by the human practices in which it circulates. A dollar, for instance, is constituted by specific economic practices that occur only in certain societies and developed at a particular historical juncture. Outside such contexts, no piece of paper with printing on it would be a dollar. This is an ontological claim, not an epistemological claim. We may in addition know things about this dollar and say things about it. But these beliefs and assertions are not what make it a dollar: an individual may know nothing about it, yet it is still what it is.

There is no way to grasp what something is outside of a human context. If all humans were to die, the cup in front of me would still exist, but it wouldn’t be anything. It wouldn’t be a cup because being a cup is a matter of involvement in practices like drinking, and with no humans there would be no such practices. And it wouldn’t even be a piece of “matter” because being matter is also based on involvement in the practices of a culture of scientists. We have learned from Kuhn that the understanding of matter changed dramatically when the paradigm of Newtonian physics
was replaced by the paradigm of Einsteinian physics. As Kuhn pointed out, different scientific paradigms understand differently the being of the entities they deal with. It is tempting to think that there is a neutral description of things outside particular cultural practices, perhaps in terms of atoms, quarks, or some fundamental particles. But this doesn’t make sense; there is no “view from nowhere” because “being” is what is an issue for humans. Humans care about what something is. No humans, no concern. No concern, no way to be.

Clearly, this is not idealism, either transcendental or naïve. It is not the view that the world that we take to be real is “actually” just ideas in our minds. Heidegger’s view was that what is real is what our public cultural practices define as real. Each culture defines specific ways to be; for example, in U.S. culture there is “a market” and “commodities,” and “consumers” and “voters.” So it is clear that, far from avoiding or bracketing all ontological claims, Heidegger’s phenomenology focused on ontological matters and undertook an ontological analysis of them.

For Heidegger, the grasp humans have of the entities around us (and of ourselves) comes not from contemplation and intellectual conceptualizations, as Kant and Husserl thought, but from practical activity. For Husserl, the slogan “to the things themselves!” meant adopting the disinterested attitude of transcendental subjectivity. For Heidegger, it meant “pick up the cup!” It is in our everyday practical activity that we have the most direct access to things, and understand what they are. We experience the world not by thinking about it but in practical engagement, in concrete activities such as hammering. Human beings are in the world in the sense not of spatial inclusion but of practical involvement. We are involved; we care. For this reason, Heidegger said that human being – the human way of being – is Dasein (German, literally “being there”). Dasein is “being-in-the-world,” fundamentally one with a world defined by public practices. Heidegger offered “an understanding of the agent as engaged, as embedded in a culture, a form of life, a ‘world’ of involvements, ultimately to understand the agent as embodied” (Taylor, 1993, p. 318).

Heidegger insisted that “adequate treatment of the ontology of Dasein is the presupposition for posing the problem whose solution Kant takes as his task” (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 56). To understand how humans can know the world, we need first to examine our “basic constitution” (p. 59). Understanding begins with practical activity in the world. When we stand back and contemplate with detachment and objectivity, the result is a distorted view. Know-how, practical coping, is a concrete grasping in which things are what they are:

In Being and Time, Verstehen [understanding] is precisely that knowledge which informs Dasein’s most concrete involvement with the world.
Dasein knows what it is about without having explicit conceptual knowledge to fall back upon. *Verstehen* is the capacity to understand what is demanded by the situation in which Dasein finds itself, a concrete knowledge which gets worked out in the process of existence itself. It is the grasp which Dasein has of its own affairs but which cannot be reduced to formalized knowledge and rendered explicit in terms of rules. (Caputo, 1987, p. 109)

### Modes of Engagement

Heidegger offered an important analysis of understanding and interpretation (Table 8.1). He proposed that understanding is always situated in place and time: it has the quality that Heidegger called “thrown-projection,” with three

<table>
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<th>Kind of Knowledge</th>
<th>What Shows Up</th>
<th>Our Attitude</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Tools are transparent.</td>
<td>Concerned with a project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practical, tacit, and unreflective</td>
<td>The setting is an invisible background.</td>
<td>Situated in space and time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thrown-projection.</td>
<td>We lose ourselves in our activity.</td>
<td>Absorbed in routine activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unready-to-Hand Breakdown</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>An aspect of the tool stands out. (<em>The hammer is too heavy.</em>)</td>
<td>Deliberation: working out what to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A <em>true</em> interpretation points out</td>
<td>The setting becomes lit up.</td>
<td>Circumspection: looking around</td>
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<td>an aspect of the setting relevant to</td>
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<td>Present-at-Hand Detachment</td>
<td>Assertions about properties of</td>
<td>Objects seem to have isolable properties.</td>
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<td>objects</td>
<td>(<em>The hammer weighs 10 grams.</em>)</td>
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*Table 8.1. The Relationship Between Understanding and Interpretation*
aspects. First, humans understand the entities they deal with, and themselves, in terms of a “project,” a tacit practical task or undertaking. Second, understanding always involves projection on a context: the background cultural practices that provide what Heidegger called “the meaning of being.” And, third, each of us is thrown into a world we did not create or choose. This existential structure of “thrown-projection” shows that time is central to being human.

Interpretation develops from this situated understanding. Heidegger distinguished three “modes of engagement.” The first is the understanding we obtain in a practical activity, such as hammering. When this activity is going smoothly, when it is routine, we are absorbed in what we are doing, not at all reflective about our activity – we “lose ourselves” in it. If we are using the hammer to build a fence, for example, the tool will be transparent and we will be aware only of our effort to drive in a nail, to get a board in place, or even, if all this is going smoothly, simply to get the fence finished. If we are involved in a routine everyday conversation (buying a cup of coffee, perhaps), then the words, the turns and moves of the dialogue, are transparent and we will be aware only of the aim of the conversation: getting our coffee. In this first mode, Heidegger says that entities are “ready-to-hand” for us. In smooth activity, the world is an invisible background to what we are doing, taken for granted and unnoticed. Our understanding is tacit and unreflective, as much a matter of emotion (which Heidegger viewed as an aspect of being-in-the-world) as of thinking. In this mode, we encounter not objects but tools and equipment that have practical relevance for our projects.

But humans do, of course, have reflective and explicit ways of knowing the world and knowing themselves. Understanding can be “developed” as interpretation. Interpretation, according to Heidegger, is “the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 189). Interpretation is an explication, a making thematic, of what has been understood in practice. Activity never goes completely smoothly; there are always repairs to be made, in human conversations just as much as with tools. When there is a breakdown (or when something is missing, when there is a hitch of some kind, or when we make a mistake), various aspects of the world–person–tool relationship become apparent. The broken tool now is noticed, and an aspect of it now stands out. The marker for the whiteboard is “dried out”; the hammer is “too heavy”; the book we wanted to buy is “not cheap enough”; the lecture we are listening to is “too long.” In each case, the aspect that stands out depends on the context; it is defined by the activity or project we are engaged in. The hammer is too heavy for this particular nailing task; the lecture is too long for this sunny day in wintry Ann Arbor. In this second mode of engagement, entities become “unready-to-hand.” What they are becomes apparent. That is to say, their being is evident.
When there is a breakdown, we look around, surveying our circumstances, noticing the project or course of action we are engaged in, in order to start to work out alternatives and begin repair. Heidegger called this looking around “circumspection.” He called noticing one’s project “reflection”; working out alternatives is “deliberation.” The way the tool was grasped in practice now becomes evident as one possibility among many. The “equipmental totality” in which we are operating, and that has provided an invisible background for our activity, now becomes apparent. And the setting is now lit up, as we become aware of other tools that may be helpful.

Occasions of breakdown involve a shift from the first to the second mode of engagement with things and people, a shift from “participation” to “circumspection.” The relationship between those two modes can be seen as a hermeneutic circle: the way tools were grasped and understood in practice is now articulated and interpreted.

This means that interpretation is never free from presuppositions. It is never a detached, objective, or neutral observation of an object, event, or text. Interpretation is always based on what Heidegger called a “fore-structure” of interests and tacit assumptions, a fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-grasp (Table 8.2). I have already cited Heidegger’s criticism of those interpreters who claim to have no preconceptions and to report only what “emerges” from the text: “If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual Interpretation, one likes to appeal to what ‘stands there,’ then one finds that what ‘stands there’ in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undisputed assumption of the person who does the interpreting” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 192).

Every interpretation is organized in advance by the fore-structure. First, one has to have access to the phenomenon, not in isolation but in its involvement within a whole situation. Second, one has a perspective or point of view, a concern and interest, on the basis of which one encounters the phenomenon and understands it in practical activity. Third, one articulates this understanding, one interprets the phenomenon as something in particular, in terms of a system of concepts or at least preconceptions. Furthermore, this is a circular process: the hermeneutic circle involves

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<th>Table 8.2. The Fore-Structure of Interpretation</th>
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<td>Fore-having</td>
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adjusting and correcting one’s fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-grasp in order to articulate more clearly, completely, and convincingly.

A true interpretation is one that uncovers and points out some aspect of the current situation that has relevance to the practical task at hand. The claim that “this hammer is too heavy” can be perfectly true, though of course it will be a local truth, relevant only to a specific situation. Heidegger argues that all truth claims are of this kind. Truth cannot be viewed as a correspondence between a mental representation and a material object. Heidegger proposes instead that truth be conceived as “uncovering.”

A third mode of engagement is possible, one of detached contemplation. In this attitude, entities seem to be self-sufficient objects with specific, independent properties. We seem to be completely separate from objects like the hammer and to be a completely different kind of being. It seems that we know objects only by forming mental representations of them. But it is only in this mode that the apparently distinct realms of “the mental” and “the material” appear. This estranged kind of nonrelationship between subject and object can arise only on the basis of the more fundamental understanding characteristic of practical involvement.

Heidegger argued that the principal error made by philosophers since the ancient Greeks – including Descartes, Kant, and Husserl – had been to give priority to this third mode of engagement when in fact it is “privative” and derived from the two others. Descartes’s efforts to “rid myself of all opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation” (Descartes, 1637, 1641/2003, p. 66) and Husserl’s efforts to adopt a transcendental attitude avoiding everyday involvement and thus gaining access to “the things themselves” both illustrate this mistake. This way of knowing has been taken to be “objective,” but Heidegger argued that this is an illusion. Contemplation always takes for granted the cultural and historical practices that define both objects and the person contemplating them.

A Basic Relationality

Heidegger proposed that the cognitive processes that Kant described are constituted in and by this more fundamental level of human being, our engagement in and relatedness to the world. Kant’s reconstruction of knowledge and ethics took this practical involvement for granted:

When Kant talks about a relation of the thing to the cognitive faculty it now turns out that this way of speaking and the kind of inquiry that arises from it are full of confusion. The thing does not relate to a cognitive faculty interior to the subject; instead, the cognitive faculty itself and with it this subject are structured intentionally in their ontological constitution. (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 66)
Kant had ignored the fundamental involvement of humans in the world, involvement that is practical, emotional, and concerned. Intentionality – the way perception is always a relationship to something in the world – is fundamental to being human. Kant cheated: he “has to make use” of this basic relationality in his analysis of perception and knowledge “without expressly recognizing it as such” (p. 67).

Heidegger reminds us that humans are involved and caring. We are not detached observers of the world but are always embedded in a specific cultural and historical setting, and our understanding of ourselves and the entities we encounter is grounded in our practical activity in this setting. We have here an ontology that emphasizes a “contextualized” relationship between subject and object: both people and the various kinds of objects they deal with are always situated in a world that provides a background against which they can stand out. In Being and Time, Heidegger generally treated language as a tool, something ready-to-hand. But, in addition to this instrumental treatment of language, he also at times used a “constitutive” view of language as “not so much a tool on hand for our use as a medium in which man dwells” (Guignon, 1983, p. 118). “On the constitutive view, language generates and first makes possible our full-blown sense of the world” (p. 118). Heidegger would develop this notion of the constitutive power of language in his later writing. Ultimately, in Heidegger’s analysis, we will come to understand that we have no fixed nature, that we will die, and that in this sense we are “homeless” on this earth. Facing up to this existential challenge and finding the resoluteness to go on is what Heidegger viewed as coming to have an authentic relation to oneself. It is here, in his analysis of what he considered authentic existence, that we find the most troubling aspects of his philosophy. Here, he claimed, each human being must face the future as a matter of fate or destiny, live each moment with resolve, and seek to retrieve and hand down its heritage. But even if we do not accept Heidegger’s conclusions about how we ought to live, his analysis moved along the path towards a new nondualistic way of thinking about constitution.

APHENOMENOLOGYOF EMBODIMENT: MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 203)

The next step on this path was taken in the philosophical writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), who also focused attention on what Kant forgot. Merleau-Ponty noted how “Kant’s conclusion . . . was that I am a
consciousness which embraces and constitutes the world, and this reflective action caused him to overlook the phenomenon of the body and that of the thing” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 303). Merleau-Ponty focused on the embodied character of human action, perception, and knowledge. For most philosophers and social scientists, the body has been irrelevant (Fraser & Greco, 2005, p. 1). After all, the body is stuff, matter, and surely what is important to explore is mind? But Merleau-Ponty emphasized that our material embodiment makes us one with the world. He proposed that conceptual representation and thought are ways of perceiving, and perception is a way of being. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty conceived of phenomenology as an effort to study a level of experience of the world that is prior to that of explicit knowledge. And, like Heidegger, he viewed this level as that of practical activity, of an embodied subjectivity, the “body-subject.” By showing the dialectical relationship between the body-subject and the world, his phenomenology avoided the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity. And he offered a new conception of rationality; he argued that reason and meaning exist not in the head but in the world.

Forms of Behavior

Merleau-Ponty started to explore “the relations of consciousness and nature” in The Structure of Behaviour (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/1963, p. 3). Kant and his followers, as we have seen, considered the objective world as a mental construction: “an objective unity constituted vis-à-vis consciousness” (p. 4). Scientists tend to view consciousness as a natural phenomenon and look for its causes and effects. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology provided an approach to the problem that was “underneath” both positions (which he referred to as “intellectualism” and “objectivism”), allowing him to inspect their foundations. Like Hegel, he started “from below” (p. 4) by looking at contemporary research in psychology and physiology and showing that its findings contradict its implicit ontology. He began with the notion of behavior, “neither thing nor consciousness” (p. 127), which takes place within a natural world yet in some sense emerges from an organism. Merleau-Ponty distinguished three fundamental organizations or “forms” of behavior – the “syncretic,” the “a movable,” and the “symbolic” (p. 93). These are increasingly sophisticated in their capacity to generalize and transform the concrete situation into a typical situation (p. 125). Syncretic behavior is “imprisoned in the framework of its natural conditions” (p. 104). A toad will persist in its efforts to grab at a worm placed behind glass. At the a movable level, we see the emergence of signals: a chicken can learn simple distinctions, such as between dark and light corn. But the symbolic structures of behavior show flexibility and a “multiplicity of perspectives” (p. 122) that are absent from animal behavior. A chimpanzee “manifests a sort of adherence to the here and now, a short and heavy manner
of existing” (p. 126), but symbolic behavior is able to incorporate and restructure the simpler structures of behavior. This is a “third dialectic” (p. 184), in which, again following Hegel, Merleau-Ponty proposed that the freedom to change perspectives gives a new dimension to the structure of behavior and makes possible a new “existential order.” Culture emerges in the temporal gap between stimulus and response, and language transcends concrete facts. The human subject, conscious of nature, is the product of a dialectic that is part of nature.

Merleau-Ponty’s radical conclusion was that consciousness is not something intellectual but is practical and perceptual. He proposed that “The mental, we have said, is reducible to the structure of behavior” (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/1963, p. 221). Human action contains an intentionality prior to representation and a kind of understanding prior to cognition. We need to “define transcendental philosophy anew” because it turns out that the meaning that “springs forth” in things “is not yet a Kantian object; the intentional life which constitutes them is not yet a representation; and the ‘comprehension’ which gives access to them is not yet an intellection” (p. 224). Kant had reduced all our connection with the world to an intellectual, conceptual contact. He had appealed to a kind of reflection in which the thinking subject discovers that they are free. Merleau-Ponty insisted that this consciousness of self “is not given by right” but requires “elucidation” of one’s “concrete being” (p. 223). Kant had failed to penetrate to the profound truths of our embodied existence. His philosophy had claimed to “lay bare only what was implicit” but could it not better be said that it had merely entered “as into a lucid dream, not because it has clarified the existence of things and its own existence, but because it lives at the surface of itself and on the envelope of things?” (p. 223).

Slackening the Threads

In Phenomenology of Perception (1945/1962), Merleau-Ponty explored this uniquely human kind of organization of behavior in more detail, in a dialogue with rationalism and empiricism and especially with Husserl. He argued – on the basis of detailed descriptions of everyday experience – that rationalists are wrong to maintain that we construct the world in thought. But the empiricist is equally wrong to believe that our knowledge of the world is simply a product of the data of our senses. Both approaches detach the conscious subject from the world. We have seen how Husserl, bracketing the natural attitude, retained the world only as thought. Merleau-Ponty tried instead to practice a phenomenology that “slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world” rather than undoing them entirely and that “reveals the world as strange and paradoxical” (p. xii). The metaphor doesn’t seem entirely apt – we are not “attached” to the world; we are in it and of it. But certainly for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a matter of learning to look closely at one’s
own existence within the world, and phenomenological analysis shows that we both create and are created by the world. He insisted that we “need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body” (p. 206). By disrupting our everyday absorption in the world, we find that the world is not something that one thinks but something one “lives through.” Perception is not so much an act of consciousness as an act of the whole body, the living body. For the human body, the world is a system of possibilities, a ground on which are constituted all forms of human knowing. Each of us is an “opening into the world” in which our perception is both general and anonymous, grasped by the “habitual body.” Things are what we can get a grip on, but our grip stems from the fact that our body, too, is a thing of the world. We can only grasp the world from within it. At the same time, the world always precedes, outlives, and in the end transcends every attempt on the part of human analysis to grasp and understand it fully.

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is the “primordial matrix” for the everyday world and also for science and philosophy. He argued that perception is a modality that is neither empirical nor rational. What we perceive is neither simply “present” nor “inferred” but the result of our body’s “polarization” of the world, the “correlate” of our body and its sensory systems. For example, the characteristics of time and space, which we normally assume are in the world itself and Kant argued are in the mind, emerge, Merleau-Ponty proposed, from our ways of existing in the world. We are certain that an object has a side that is hidden from us, and this hidden side is given in its own way, without being either directly present to the senses or inferred logically. An object “is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which is it given exhaustively” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 15). Perception is perspectival, open, and indeterminate: as we move, fresh perspectives open up and objects disclose themselves in new ways. We are an opening to the world, but each object, too, is in its own way both an opening and a way of hiding.

Reflection and cognition are possibilities for this human way of being-in-the-world. Thought is a taking up of what has been seen. Cognition never replaces perception; the two always work together. Ideas flow from a sublimation of perception, and all cognitive operations presuppose the body’s motion and its capacities for gesture and language. Cognition depends on the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 127). Thought is grounded in pre reflective activity and dependent on symbolic behavior. It both preserves and transforms perception, “distilling” its sense while reconstituting its “substance.” Cognition seeks to articulate the world thematically in linguistic structures but leaves much behind, especially our opaque and indeterminate bond with the world. The thinker “fixes” and “objectifies” life, but a part of existence always escapes. Whereas traditional philosophy insisted that perception is
fallible and thinking indubitable, Merleau-Ponty argued that the truths of thought are always dependent on the ways in which the real is evident in perception. Propositional truths are always based on situational truths (Mallin, 1979, p. 199). Our knowledge is always contingent, but this stems from the uncertainty and finitude of life and of the world itself and doesn’t mean that we experience merely “appearances.”

Visible and Invisible Intertwined

The title of *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968) refers to the way an object of perception is given both in the senses, as a partially grasped *particular*, and in the invisible realm of concepts, as an abstract *universal*. In this unfinished book, Merleau-Ponty explored how humans are “inherent” in the world in a way that cannot be reduced to essences or categories. He wanted to find a dimension that “offers us, all at once, pell-mell, both subject and object – both existence and essence – and, hence, gives philosophy resources to redefine them” (p. 130). He struggled to find a way to write about human being as a part of the world, as the “flesh of the world,” in a language that would completely break free from the subject–object dichotomy. The “flesh” is the element in which both my body and things themselves are given – an “element of being” like earth, air, fire, and water. To perceive is to be drawn into the tissue of being. When I touch something, my hand itself is touched – sensible things do not exist *within* space and time but *organize* space and time in a “dimensional sensuality.” An object is a field of forces, unified by a particular style. The recognition of its style, along with its variations, is the recognition of the universal in the particular.

Both rationalism and empiricism treat the world as completely opaque and consciousness as completely transparent, but Merleau-Ponty insisted that neither is the case. Perception, like existence, is a dialectical process in which a single existential fabric underlies both subject and object so that they are mutually complicit. In perceiving an object, we orient our bodies in the world, assuming a position before the tasks of the world. Body and world are “intertwined”; my body is “folded into” the sensible object. The world and people share a fundamental corporeality: “[T]he thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 178).

This same intertwining holds between the visible and the invisible, the seen and the thought, the sensible and the ideal, the concrete and the abstract. The body is touching and touched, but not at the same instant. There is a difference between the body and itself that offers an “infrastructure” for thought. The invisible – the thought, the conceptual – is not in some separate realm; it is the invisible *of* and *in* the visible. Thought is a transformation of
perception, “an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axis, its depth, its dimensions” (p. 152). Perception is primary, but the degree and manner of our openness to perceptual contact can be altered. Thinking and seeing are mutually transforming. Merleau-Ponty proposed that the thinking and seeing body-subject is where being becomes visible to itself.

Language plays a special role in this transformation of perception that is thinking. Merleau-Ponty rejected the conduit metaphor, the idea that language is an “envelope or clothing of thought” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 211). Language is not thought’s clothing but its body; language accomplishes or completes thought. “The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world” (p. 184). This is why we sometimes struggle to find the right words. Like Saussure, Merleau-Ponty viewed language as an abstraction from the primacy of speech, but he did not accept Saussure’s notion that language is a system of arbitrary conventions. “The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as a gesture contains its [meaning]. What I communicate with primarily is not ‘representations’ of thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the ‘world’ at which he directs his aim” (p. 213).

Language is a public cultural system that can level individuality to the impersonal “one.” And language reverses sublimation to provide perception with new structures that organize our dealings with the world: “Silent vision falls into speech, and in return, speech opens a field of the nameable and sayable . . . it metamorphizes the structures of the visible world and makes itself a gaze of the mind” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 178).

The Flesh of the World

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty rejected the assumption that the knowing subject is the center of knowledge or existence, and tried to create a language to communicate a fresh understanding of the mutual constitution of subject and object within what he called “the flesh.” His focus on embodied activity drew attention to the materiality of the conscious subject and the corporeality of objects and the world. We are of the world, not in some separate ontological realm. For Merleau-Ponty, as was the case with Heidegger, both subject and object emerge from a more primordial way of being in which the distinction between them does not yet exist. There is an “intentional life . . . which is not yet a representation” and a form of comprehension “which . . . is not yet an intellection” (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/1963, p. 224). My body has an intelligence and intentionality that does not require deliberate thought and decision: “In so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 440).
This “constitution,” this bodily know-how, is both used and ignored by science. Kant took it for granted and then ignored it: “[T]he numerical specifications of science retrace the outline of a constitution of the world which is already realized before shape and size come into being. Kant takes the results of this pre-scientific experience for granted, and is enabled to ignore them only because he makes use of them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, pp. 301–302). It follows that the task for investigation – and for Merleau-Ponty this would be a phenomenology – is the study of this neglected constitution.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY (EM): HAROLD GARFINKEL

EM is concerned with “What More,” in the world of familiar, ordinary activities, does immortal, ordinary society consist of as the locus and the setting of every topic of order, every topic of logic, of meaning, of method respecifiable and respecifiable as the most ordinary Durkheimian things in the world. (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 6)

Harold Garfinkel (b. 1917), Professor Emeritus of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, is responsible for another exploration of constitution, a form of sociology he named “ethnomethodology” (Garfinkel, 1967, 1996, 2002). The focus of this “eccentric, original phenomenology” (Manning, 2004, p. 279) is the ongoing work of social interaction in which people create and re-create social order. Ethnomethodology is not a method of inquiry; rather, the “ethnomethods” are the topic of inquiry. It is the study (logos) of the methods used by folks (ethnos) in their common-sense everyday activity. Garfinkel was dissatisfied with the tendency in sociology to view people as merely acting out predetermined social roles. Traditional sociology takes the member of society “to be a judgmental dope of a cultural and/or psychological sort” or a “‘cultural dope’” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 244) whose behavior is determined by preexisting norms or motivations, by the “stable structures” of “culture,” “society,” or “personality.” Such approaches fail to ask of the people “What is their game?” in the sense of Wittgenstein’s language games.

In contrast, ethnomethodology sees human activity as skilled, intelligent, and improvisatory. Like good jazz, social action is artfully made up on the spot from available resources rather than following prescribed rules. Garfinkel proposed that “persons discover, create, and sustain” the orderly character of society. Society is not an objective structure standing behind this activity but a product of “members’” skilled activity. Garfinkel said he wanted to solve the problem of the “moral order” of society, which “For Kant . . . was an awesome mystery” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 225). “A society’s members encounter and know the moral order as perceivedly normal courses of action – familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with
others and with others taken for granted” (p. 225). This common-sense world is the topic of sociology, yet sociologists rarely ask “how any such common-sense world is possible.” Its existence is either taken for granted or settled by theoretical mandate (see Box 8.2 on pp. 169–170).

Garfinkel called for the “rediscovery” of this moral order. His central argument was that “a concern for the nature, production, and recognition of reasonable, realistic, and analyzable actions is not the monopoly of philosophers and professional sociologists” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 250); members of a society are equally concerned with making recognizable social order. The task for the researcher is to treat as problematic “the actual methods whereby members of a society, doing sociology, lay or professional, make the social structures of everyday activities observable” (p. 250). These methods have been a resource for sociology; now they must become a topic. Garfinkel proposed that these methods are found not in the individual mind but in social practice. We see order whenever we look at traffic on the freeway, a jazz quartet, the science laboratory, or ordinary conversation. Rather than searching for its underlying causes (or motivations) or overlying concepts (or functions), we can and should study just what people do to create this order. The aim of ethnomethodology is to examine, discover, and describe this work and the methods used. Hidden causes and abstract functions are hypothetical and unobservable; more important, they are irrelevant to the practitioners themselves. They are part of the game of worldwide science, not the game(s) of everyday life. Ethnomethodology avoids appealing to hidden factors and instead conducts careful and detailed study of the methods and practices that provide “the routine grounds of everyday life.”

Garfinkel’s work has been called “as revolutionary as the work of Darwin, Einstein, or Crick and Watson. It has fundamentally changed the way that sociologists think about their discipline and about the way that they do their research” (Dingwall, 1988). But ethnomethodology has often been misunderstood. It has been accused of being “sociology without society” (Mayrl, 1973), a “microsociology” that fails to pay attention to the larger structures that make up a society, a method without substance, and as lacking all methodology. It has been accused of being conservative in its lack of attention to power structures, liberal in its focus on individual agency, and positivist in its attention to empirical detail. It has been characterized as inherently subjective and as lacking attention to experience. Even its supporters have misunderstood it, describing it, for example, as aiming “to elucidate the arena of commonsense experience and to ‘understand’ life-world situations as perceived by concrete social actors or participants” (Dallmayr & McCarthy, 1977, p. 222). It is true that Garfinkel’s 1964 paper was couched in terms of the beliefs, expectations, and attitudes of an individual actor – the sense that an actor makes. But since then he has made it clear that the emphasis in ethno-methodology is
not at all on how things are perceived but how they are produced and accomplished. Garfinkel “inverted the phenomenological primacy accorded to subjective experience in favor of studying public activities and common practices through which members achieve the apparent reality of those objects” (Maynard, 1986, p. 348). Ethnomethodology seeks “to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, seeks to learn about them as phenomena in their own right” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 240).

The basic premise is that this practical reasoning cannot “remain the unexamined medium of one’s discourse” (Sharrock, 2004) but must be studied. Like Schutz, Garfinkel has been interested in the mundane reality that Husserl believed should be bracketed. But like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Garfinkel emphasizes that this mundane reality is created in public practices, not in mental activity.

Society as a Product of Members’ Activity

The fundamental phenomenon that ethnomethodology aims to study, Garfinkel insists, is exactly what sociology has always set out to study, namely “the objective reality of social facts.” But this “fundamental phenomenon” of sociology must be seen not as given or natural but as a “practical achievement,” the result of “members’ work”:

For ethnomethodology the objective reality of social facts, in that and just how it is every society’s locally, endogenously produced, naturally organized, reflexively accountable, ongoing, practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely, members’ work, with no time out, and with no possibility of evasion, hiding out, passing, postponement, or buy-outs, is thereby sociology’s fundamental phenomenon. (Garfinkel, 1988, p. 103)

The objective reality of everyday life is a matter not of shared knowledge but of a “background texture of expectancies,” the “expectancies of everyday life as a morality” that is first of all the result of practical enterprise: “[E]veryday social life, he tells us, and social life on extraordinary days as well, is a practical enterprise and every man is a practitioner” (Swanson, 1968, p. 122). To understand social reality, then, what is needed is not formal analysis but a focus on the details of everyday practices, for “[t]he witnessably recurrent details of ordinary everyday practices constitute their own reality” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8).

Social facts have an objective reality that is achieved, in every society. This achievement is local, ongoing, and practical. It is the work of the members of a
Constitution as Ontological

society – “with no time out!” Garfinkel’s central insight is that “[t]he expectancies that make up the attitude of everyday life are constitutive of the institutionalized common understandings of the practical everyday organization and workings of society as it is seen ‘from within’” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 249). Modification of these expectations will “transform one perceived environment of real objects into another environment of real objects” (p. 249). Play, religious conversation, and scientific inquiry are such modifications, as is psychosis, brain injury, and neonate learning. In an interview, Garfinkel explained, “We have to talk about practices which, as vulgar competence, are necessary for the constitutive production of the everyday phenomena of social order” (Jules-Rosette, 1985).

Actual Events, Not Underlying Patterns

Garfinkel distinguishes ethnomethodology from “the worldwide social science movement,” with its “ubiquitous commitments to the policies and methods of formal analysis and general representational theorizing” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 5). Demographics, definition of variables, quantification, statistical analysis, causal explanation, and so on are “available to all administered societies, contemporary and historical” (p. 5). Without disputing the achievements of “formal analysis,” ethnomethodology “asks ‘What More?’” What more does this formal analysis depend on (p. 6)? Garfinkel’s answer is that “what more?” “has centrally (and perhaps entirely) to do with procedures” (p. 6). Procedures in the sense not of processes but of work, of labor, such as improvising jazz at the piano, typing thoughtful words, collaborating in the workplace: “procedural means labor of a certain incarnate methodological sort” (p. 10). Ethnomethodology is about the work of producing a phenomenon and “coming upon” the phenomenon in and through this work; it is a matter of describing how people produce and display, how they demonstrate, the local phenomena of order – “the unremarkable embodiedly ordered details of their ordinary lives together” (p. 11), the “commonplace, local, endogenous haecceities of daily life” (p. 7), where haecceities means “thisness.”

Garfinkel has no place for the techniques of formal analysis because it aims to reconstruct a hidden order that precedes or underlies society in the form of causal mechanisms or rational functions. Like Kant, it takes for granted the work of producing order, using this work itself as a resource but never stopping to consider it. It assumes that order can be accounted for only by adopting a transcendental perspective and using the objectifying techniques of statistical analysis. Garfinkel insists instead that an order is visible in the mundane details of everyday interaction, if only we will look. Ordinary society is easy to do, yet it is “strange,” “elusive,” and “intractably hard to describe.” How on earth is society “put together”? The answer to this question cannot be imagined but
must be “actually found out” in concrete, first-hand investigations of every specific occasion. The statistical and formal models built by formal analysis “lose the very phenomenon that they profess” (p. 7). Even though they are “exercising the privileges of the transcendental analyst and the universal observer” (p. 8), they still don’t show how society is made. Formal social science produces its own order, not the order of everyday practice. Ironically, their formal work itself becomes part – an “enacted detail” – of the way ordinary society is put together. These analysts, with their “generic representational theorizing,” plan and administer, and make signs that they then have to “interpret” because “the phenomena they so carefully describe are lost” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8).

Garfinkel is especially critical of what he calls “the documentary method of interpretation” (Garfinkel, 1967). Karl Mannheim and Alfred Schutz both used this phrase; for Garfinkel it is the common practice in formal analysis of seeing some everyday event of action or talk as evidence for an underlying, hidden organization: “treating an actual appearance as ‘the document of,’ as ‘pointing to,’ as ‘standing on behalf of’ a presupposed underlying pattern” (p. 78). What “appears” is treated as only a sign of the “real” phenomenon, which is accessible only through interpretation. This is clearly what Kant did; both sociologists and ordinary folks do it, too, and the process goes both ways: the underlying pattern gains credibility from the document, while the document is read in terms of the underlying pattern. Whether the underlying pattern is claimed to be culture, social structure, a value system, occupational categories, interactional functions, or roles and rules, it is assumed to be more real, more stable and enduring, than the actual events that are observed! The lay or professional sociologist appeals to “a correspondence of meaning” (p. 79) to “epitomize” the underlying, hidden pattern. Clearly this correspondence is “a product of the work of the investigator and reader as members of a community of cobeiievers” (p. 96), but it is treated as “what everybody knows.”

This doesn’t mean that ethnomethodology is indifferent to social structures. It has “a concern with structure,” but “as an achieved phenomenon of order” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 6). Nor is it “changing the subject” for sociology. Our “immortal, ordinary society” (here Garfinkel cites Durkheim) is the “locus” and “setting” of all our activities. It is here (and now) that any order, reason, logic, typicality, classification, and standardization are achieved. Whereas formal analysis finds no order in the circumstantial concrete details of everyday life, only in the products of its own “analyzing devices” and practices of objectification and analysis, ethnomethodology sees the basis of all order, both commonsense and scientific, in concrete everydayness. Garfinkel insists that “there is order in the most ordinary activities of everyday life in their full concreteness” (p. 7). In place of the “generic” descriptions that formal analysis provides, ethnomethodology
explores the “unexplicated specifics of details in structures, in recurrences, in
typicality.” Consequently: “Ethnomethodology’s fundamental phenomenon
and its standing technical preoccupation in its studies is to find, collect,
specify, and make instructably observable the local endogenous production
and natural accountability of immortal familiar society’s most ordinary organ-
izational things in the world, and provide for them both and simultaneously
as objects and procedurally, as alternative methodologies” (p. 6, emphasis
original).

Garfinkel insists that ethnomethodology is not critical of formal analysis
but “indifferent to (independent of)” it. But, as Manning (2004, p. 281) says,
“This is an artful ploy, for if this version of social life is accurate and valid, FA
cannot be.” The two are “incommensurably different and unavoidably
related.” The question of their relationship, as two different technologies, is
of central interest to ethnomethodology. It offers “alternates” to formal
analyses, “not alternatives.” Wherever a formal analysis has been conducted,
an ethnomethodological alternate will be “findable.”

If ethnomethodology is not formal analysis, Garfinkel also insists that
“[i]t is not an interpretive enterprise” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8). His point
here, too, is that what people do and say are not “representations” of
something else. “Enacted local practices are not ‘texts.’” They have no
inner or hidden “meaning” that the analyst must reconstruct. What an
element of such a practice is is a matter to members, a matter that they
will often negotiate. The analyst’s task is not to decide what an action
means, or even what it is, but to describe what it is taken to be in
members’ work. Attempts to explain social phenomena in terms of con-
sciousness, theory, and representation will always lose the phenomena
they are interested in: “The lessons are clear: In order to lose the pheno-
mena that the devices describe, give them over to the intentionalities of
consciousness. And in order to assure their loss in any actual case, do so
with the methods of generic representational theorizing” (p. 18).

Becoming a Member

Ethnomethodologists speak of “members” rather than people or subjects. The
notion of membership is central (ten Have, 2002), and many ethnomethodol-
ogists insist that “researchers themselves become the phenomenon” and that
one “must become a full-time member of the reality to be studied” (Mehan &
Wood, 1975, pp. 225, 227). Garfinkel has defined the “unique adequacy require-
ment”: “[F]or the analyst to recognize, or identify, or follow the development
of, or describe phenomena of order in local production of coherent detail the
analyst must be vulgarly competent in the local production and reflexively
natural accountability of the phenomenon of order he is ‘studying’”
(Garfinkel & Wieder, 1992, p. 182).
From this point of view, having “vulgar competence” is necessary to gain the “membership knowledge” that enables the researcher to recognize the relevant phenomena. “Vulgar” is used here in the old sense of “belonging to the people.” This knowledge is the “common sense” of membership, and to obtain it one needs “embodied presence as a competent participant in the field of action” (Pollner & Emerson, 2001, p. 127).

At first, Garfinkel proposed that EM required a “posture of indifference,” a refusal to judge the value or validity of members’ common sense. In this regard, the researcher clearly differs from those whose practical activity is being studied, who presumably hold their knowledge to be valid. But now Garfinkel emphasizes “hybrid” studies, “studies of work in which the analyst is uniquely and adequately competent to produce the phenomenon” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 13), such as Sudnow’s study (1974) of playing jazz piano. Garfinkel has gone so far as to suggest that the results of research should be presented not to other researchers but to members, using their vernacular. He has proposed that ethnomethodology is an “applied” kind of inquiry that offers its “expertise” in the form of a “remediation” for phenomena “whose local, endogenous production is troubled in ordered phenomenal details of structures” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8). Troubles are local, and their solutions will also be local, not abstract or general.

It should be clear that ethnomethodology doesn’t try to produce overarching theories or models. Garfinkel has suggested that the products of ethnomethodological studies have the form of “pedagogies” – methods and practices of teaching. Descriptions of how order is achieved can provide the basis for teaching how to achieve it. As Garfinkel puts it: “EM’s findings are described with the questions ‘What did we do? What did we learn? More to the point, what did we learn, but only in and as lived doings that we can teach? And how can we teach it?’” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 9).

Garfinkel explains, “In endlessly many disciplines, as local occasion demands, practitioners are required to read descriptive accounts alternately as instructions” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 19). This “praxeological reading” is done in practices “chained bodily and chiasmically to places, spaces, architectures, equipment, instruments, and timing” (p. 19). Diagrams, recipes, even freeway signs, are both instructions and descriptions of the work by which the instructions are to be applied. The instructions and instructions-in-use are related as “Lebenswelt pairs.” Descriptions are instructions in how to produce the order described.

These “pedagogies” are not abstract formalizations but “tutorial problems” that are “learned in settings in which teaching and learning being done in concert with others were locally and endogenously witnessable” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 9). Studies by ethnomethodologists of science, work, and professions have shown that “[t]he praxeological validity of instructed action is (i.e., ‘exists as,’ ‘is identical with,’ ‘is the same as’) the phenomenon” (p. 9, emphasis
Activities of which instruction is a part offer opportunities for ethnomethodology. Equally, ethnomethodology offers instruction to members.

Disrupting the Familiar

But ethnomethodology has used other ways to gain access to local phenomena. One strategy has been to employ “troublemakers” in the form of “Heideggerian uses” of inverting lenses, disability, and other kinds of breakdowns to overcome the transparency and reveal what is “relevant to the parties” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 12) among the details of “phenomenal fields.” In such investigations, the concern has been with “practices that are chiasmically chained embodiedly to the environment of ongoingly ordered phenomenal details” (p. 13). By arranging “breaches” and “making trouble,” the sociologist is able to “produce reflections through which the strangeness of an obstinately familiar world can be detected” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 227). With this strategy of defamiliarizing the ordinary, Garfinkel has drawn on both Schutz and Heidegger. The echoes of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty should be clear when Garfinkel writes of “reflexive body/world relations” and “the accomplished transparency and specifically unremarkable smoothness of concerted skills of ‘equipmentally affiliated’ shopwork and shoptalk” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 12).

Accounts and Reflexivity

Garfinkel emphasizes the reflexive character of practical activity. “Reflexivity refers to the simultaneously embedded and constitutive character of actions, talk and understanding” (Pollner & Emerson, 2001, p. 121). Action is “bound up with the capacity of human agents for self-reflection, for the rational ‘monitoring’ of their own conduct.” Members are continually monitoring their own actions and those of others and are able to provide “accounts” of these actions when called upon. Often this reflexivity is treated by social scientists as a nuisance, as Giddens noted. But ethnomethodology sees it as a central part of everyday life, another continuity between sociological activity and everyday activity.

For ethnomethodology, the location of action in place and time is of central significance. Formal models ignore something crucial, “the temporal ‘succession’ of here and now situations” (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 67–69). In Chapter 3, we mentioned Garfinkel’s interest in indexicality. Indexical expressions demonstrate their properties only in local settings. In context, they are able to achieve “coherent sense, reference, and correspondence to objects” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 18). They do this not as cognitive functions or “transcendentalized intentionalities of analytic consciousness” but as practical activities with “procedural relevance” to people, settings, equipment, architecture, and so on. The
exploration of these “rational properties of indexical expressions” is central to ethnomethodological inquiry. Occasionality, indexicality, “specific vagueness,” “retrospective-prospective sense,” and temporal sequencing of utterances are “sanctioned properties of common discourse” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 229). They are conditions people use to be understood and to understand others in conversation, conditions that are usually “seen but unnoticed.”

Garfinkel recommends that we notice that accounts are part of the actions that they make accountable. He has written that his “central recommendation is that the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members’ procedures for making these settings ‘accountable’” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 240). Accounting practices are not descriptions of a separate reality but are constitutive of the order they report. They are recommendations or instructions in how to see what is happening. Just as for Heidegger interpretations articulate the practical understanding of involved activity in order to inform that activity, for Garfinkel giving an account has an “incarnate character” (p. 240). It is in this respect that “knowledge” and “rationality” are themselves practical social accomplishments: people construct reality – not just moral order but all kinds of order – in and by means of their social interactions. At the same time, and as part of this work, they construct accounts that are taken as rational and objective by their fellow participants. Accounts are part of mundane reality, constructed and understood by people as they engage in concrete, practical tasks:

When Garfinkel refers to behavior as being accountable, the word can be understood in two senses. First, members can be (and are) responsible for their actions and are accountable to their interlocutors for utterances and actions which may appear to be without reason or rationale. Second, and more obliquely, Garfinkel is contending that all behavior is designed in ways to give an account of the action as an instance of something or the other. (Koschmann, Stahl, & Zemel, 2004)

This means that every account is indexical: it has intrinsic links to its setting. And this in turn leads to the important insight that ordinary language and its “ambiguity” cannot be replaced by a scientific language that is “more precise,” meaning less ambiguous or less context-bound.

This is yet another way in which “practical sociological reasoning” is placed by ethnomethodology on the same level as any other everyday practical activity. The scientist does not have a special status; sociological accounts are on a continuum with all the other kinds of accounts that are a continual accomplishment of everyday life. Giving accounts – accounting – is an endless process, too. There is no final point at which an exhaustive, objective accounting has been completed. Garfinkel rejects – or is indifferent to – attempts to translate the situated events of the social world into a neutral and objective
scientific terminology. There is no valid basis for the notion that a researcher can, or should, adopt the stance of an external observer of a social world. In the multiplicity of life-worlds, the life-world of professional sociology is just one among many, with no special claim to objective knowledge. On the contrary, “knowledge” and “rationality” themselves are always practical social accomplishments.

A New Model of Language

Ethnomethodology pays attention to language as a dynamic, social phenomenon and to speech not as an inert vehicle – the expression of inner meanings – but as fundamental to the constitution of social life. Social reality is “talked into being” (Heritage, 1984, p. 290). Words are viewed as indexes, not as symbols or representations – or not necessarily these. Garfinkel (1967) pointed to the multiple ways in which language is used. Language “is conceived, not simply as a set of symbols or signs, as a mode of representing things, but as a ‘medium of practical activity,’ a mode of doing things.” Ordinary language and its “ambiguity” cannot be ignored or replaced by a scientific language that is “more precise.” “[T]o study a form of life involves grasping lay modes of talk which express that form of life” (Giddens, 1977, pp. 167–169).

We saw in Chapter 3 that Garfinkel rejects the typical model of language in research. This model amounts to a theory of signs: it assumes that language works by linking words and things through concepts. The word “tree” and the object tree are linked by a concept made up of features: trunk, leaves, and so on. It assumes that these features require no interpretation and that the concepts are the common property of all of us who speak a language, a shared background knowledge. This model skips over what has been said and tries to elaborate a “meaning” that is assumed to lie “within” the words, their hidden content.

Garfinkel proposes a different model of language (see Table 8.3), in which understanding what someone says is seen not as a matter of reconstructing the inner meaning of their words but of recognizing how they speak. Common understanding is something that must be achieved by the participants in a conversation, and there is no single way to do this. People speak in countless ways, and multiple sign functions can be accomplished by speaking – “marking, labeling, symbolizing … analogies, anagrams, indicating … imitating …” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 258) – and many more. Understanding what someone says is a matter of recognizing which of these was done, the method of their speaking. Explaining what was talked about is a matter of describing this method, how they spoke jokingly, and so on. This description will provide instructions on how to see what was said, how to recognize what was done by the speaker. But these instructions can never be fully spelled out and will never be complete in themselves. They remain “organized artful practices” that we must study. The
job of the researcher is not to explain what talk means but to describe how people can come to agree on what they mean (and can lose that agreement).

Embodied Know-How

Ethnomethodology places emphasis on embodied know-how. “It is Garfinkel’s position that the knowledge of the practices he is trying to introduce is not a conceptual or cognitive knowledge but, rather, an embodied knowledge that comes only from engaging in practices in concerted co-presence with others” (Rawls, 2006, p. 5). The distinction between embodied and cognitive knowledge is crucial, and approaches which reduce the detail of social life to concepts, typifications, or models lose the phenomena altogether. They end up focusing on the self as a carrier of concepts, instead of the situations

### Table 8.3. Garfinkel’s Model of Languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognizing That Someone Was Speaking</th>
<th>Recognizing How They Were Speaking</th>
<th>Explaining What Was Talked About</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The words spoken by a specific person in specific circumstances</td>
<td>A method of speaking</td>
<td>An explanation of what was talked about consists of describing how someone was speaking. How they talked jokingly, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., metaphorically, euphemistically, jokingly)</td>
<td></td>
<td>This description will provide instructions in how to see what was said. But these instructions can never be complete or transparent by themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are multiple ways of speaking.</td>
<td>The methods people use to achieve understanding are not formal procedures but “organizational phenomena.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are a multitude of sign functions: marking, labeling, analogies, anagrams, simulating.</td>
<td>They are “organized artful practices.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common understanding must be achieved by participants. People are always “recognizing, using, and producing the orderly ways of cultural settings from ‘within’ those settings.”</td>
<td>These are topics for ethnomethodology.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on Garfinkel (1967).*
in which they are given meaning. Learning to see differently socio-
logically means learning to see social orders in their details as they
are achieved in real time by persons through the enactment of these
details, instead of through conceptual glosses on those details after
the fact. (Rawls, 2006, p. 6)

A contrast can be drawn between Garfinkel and sociologist Erving Goffman
(1922–1982) that directly parallels the distinction I have made between onto-
logical and epistemological constitution. Goffman conceived of interaction as
dramaturgical, like a theatrical performance. He proposed that people engage
in “impression management” and the “presentation of self.” Rawls notes that

For Goffman the world of action was essentially messy and lacking order.
It was the actor’s job to create the appearance of order – a thin veneer of
consensus. For Garfinkel, by contrast, the world of embodied practice –
created and lived in by groups of actors working in cooperation with one
another – was ordered in and through their efforts and had coherence
and meaning only in and through – or as – recognizable orders of
practice. . . . To view things otherwise was to allow conceptual reduction
to hide the achieved coherence of events: to render social order invisible,
as Garfinkel would repeatedly say. (Rawls, 2006, p. 4)

In short, ethnomethodology undertakes “studies of shared enacted practices”
using “a detailed qualitative approach” (Rawls, 1997, p. 5). Traditional social
science has followed Kant in assuming that individuals have only cognitive
knowledge and that researchers also must work principally with this kind of
knowledge, conducting investigations with an attitude that is entirely theore-
tical. Ethnomethodology moves in a different direction, for “Garfinkel argues
that the theoretical attitude is responsible for many of the problems with
social research” (p. 4). Ethnomethodology focuses on constitution – on the
problem, the apparent mystery, at least to Kant and Kantians, of the orderly
character of society. It asks, “What more?” It is the study of the work that
people do to produce epistemological and moral order. The promise of these
investigations “is that they might shift the gestalt of theoretical perception
such that we could be enabled to ask new questions about the world” (p. 6).
Garfinkel has said that what ethnomethodological investigations can do is
make evident a “territory of new organizational phenomena.”

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) — Half Garfinkel and Half Greimas:
Bruno Latour

Social theory does not have to be confused with Kantism. (Latour, 2005,
p. 109)

I want to consider one more account of constitution as an ontological rather
than epistemological phenomenon. We saw in Chapter 7 that treating
construction or constitution as something that occurs in representations, in consciousness (individual or collective), or in language, leads to the conclusion that what is constructed is only an appearance, not truly real. Bruno Latour is one person who has strongly opposed this interpretation of construction. He insists that in his own work the term does not have these connotations, and that in general it should be thought of quite differently:

In plain English, to say something is constructed means that it’s not a mystery that has popped out of nowhere, or that it has a more humble but also more visible and more interesting origin. (Latour, 2005, p. 88).

It is, after all, in a construction site that we can see people engaged in the concrete and practical work of making things: “films, skyscrapers, facts, political meetings, initiation rituals, haute couture, cooking” (p. 89). Visiting such a site provides the opportunity to see “the skills and knacks of practitioners” and “also provides a rare glimpse of what it is for a thing to emerge out of inexistence by adding to any existing entity its time dimension” (p. 89). One can see immediately that “things could be different” and “that they could still fail.”

None of this is to say that these things are not real, or that changing them would be easy. People have come to assume that to describe something as constructed is to say that it is not real, not true, that it is invented, made up. On the contrary, Latour points out that to say that something is constructed has always been associated with an appreciation of its robustness, quality, style, durability, worth, etc. So much so that no one would bother to say that a skyscraper, a nuclear plant, a sculpture, or an automobile is ‘constructed.’ This is too obvious to be pointed out. (Latour, 2005, p. 89)

**Constructed** (or in our terms, **constituted**) should be generally considered to be a synonym for **real**. Equally, to say something is “artificial” is not to deny that it is real and objective. We saw in Chapter 1 that Latour and Woolgar insisted, in their study of laboratory life (Latour & Woolgar, 1979/1986), that “to be contrived and to be objective went together” (Latour, 2005, p. 90). “Facts were facts – meaning exact – because they were fabricated.” The important question was whether they were constructed badly or well.

Latour is equally critical of the phrase “social construction” when it is used in a kind of inquiry which tries to “replace what this reality is made of with some other stuff, the social in which it is ‘really’ built” (p. 91). The study of construction must be the study of the ways in which humans and non-humans are “fused together” in the real work of practical activity. What is necessary is to use the word “social” not “to replace one kind of stuff by
another” but to explore “the associations that have rendered some state of affairs solid and durable” (p. 93).

**Beyond Society as Fixed and Enduring**

In his book *Reassembling the Social*, Latour points out that we often think of the social world as an established and enduring society, with a stable hierarchical structure and clearly identifiable social groups, within which individual people act in transparent ways, on the basis of their beliefs and desires. When we investigate a phenomenon, such as a scientific discovery, we try to explain it by identifying the “influence” of “factors” that originate in this society.

Latour argues, however, that this durable, defined society cannot explain anything; on the contrary, it needs to be explained. Any and every social “structure” or “reality” is the result of continual, never-ending work, in which the structure is assembled and maintained. What he offers in this book is a method of studying this work.

In this sense, social reality is “flat”: there is no preexisting vertical hierarchy. There is nothing “macro” or “global” that contextualizes things that are “micro” or “local.” What looks at first like a purely local face-to-face interaction turns out to be filled with elements that come from somewhere else: the materials that make the location; the words that are spoken; even the participants themselves. All of these have a history; all have been brought to the local interaction from somewhere else.

But doesn’t this suggest that we have to study the “broader social context” that provides the “frame” for the local interaction? No, it means we have to follow the paths and traces that lead to other “local” sites. There is no way to arrive at the “context”; one simply finds oneself in another “local” setting. This is a path of translation or delegation, involving a chain of actors, with transportations from site to site. By following paths and traces, we avoid the impossible task of trying to “jump” from the micro to the macro that is “inside.” We have to treat the landscape as flat, and map its pathways.

Latour says that “It would be fairly accurate to describe ANT as being half Garfinkel and half Greimas: it has simply combined two of the most interesting intellectual movements on both sides of the Atlantic” (p. 54). We can see here the first half: Garfinkel has taught us (earlier in this chapter) how every kind of order is *produced* in interactions among participants. As Latour puts it, “social, for ANT, is the name of a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes” (p. 65); “We have to be able to consider both the formidable inertia of social structures and the incredible fluidity that maintains their existence: the latter is the real milieu that allows the former to circulate” (p. 246).
Latour’s principal recommendation, then, is that we stop using the term “social” (or “society,” or “culture,” or “social structure,” or “social dimension,” or “social context”) to refer to some stuff that is assumed to be a real, stable substance, or ingredient, or domain, which is then hypothesized to have a causal impact on something else; usually the “something else” is what we are trying to explain.

Latour confesses that he learned a lesson from the ways scientists reacted to Laboratory Life: “their furor at what sociologists were so clearly missing in trying to explain their work was for me a crucial sign” (p. 100). They were interpreting Latour and Woolgar’s work as an attempt to substitute social things for hard, scientific things, so that, in their view, the phenomenon that was the focus of their research had vanished.

The lesson was that “giving an explanation should not be confused with substituting a phenomenon for a social one” (p. 102). We need to abandon the view that social scientific research is a matter of replacing what people say and do with an explanation in terms of structures and forces that are invisible to them (and to us!) In fact, to explain is a “very practical world-building enterprise that consists in connecting entities with other entities, that is, in tracing a network” (p. 103).

**Tracing Networks**

In place of this attempt to explain in terms of an underlying or overarching social reality, Latour offers an alternative kind of inquiry in which “social” is not some glue that could fix everything including what the other glues cannot fix; it is what is glued together by many other types of connectors” (p. 5, emphasis original). It is “a movement between non-social elements” (p. 159, emphasis original). When we do indeed have something “social,” this is the result, the product, of the work of assembling many associations or linkages.

The general form of this proposal will be familiar from our exploration of Laboratory Life in Chapter 1. There we saw that Latour and Woolgar described the work of biological scientists as arranging a series of transformations among different types of inscriptions, so as to seek to preserve sufficient correspondences to establish a fact about an object.

In the terms of Reassembling the Social, the scientists in the Salk Institute laboratory were assembling a “network,” and the methodology that Latour proposes in this book is called (with some reservations and regrets) “actor-network-theory” (ANT). The phrase refers to the proposal that the task for the researcher is to trace a network and to identify the actors who were hard at work establishing it and maintaining it. The task is:

‘to follow the actors themselves’, that is try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to
make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish. (Latour, 2005, p. 12)

Latour suggests that the researcher should move like an ant, following step by step the linkages from one part of an assemblage to the next, never able to see the whole. He draws a parallel to the distinction between classical and relativistic physics (recall Chapter 1). Classical physics works fine where things are moving slowly; relativistic physics is needed when frames of reference are in rapid relative motion. In a similar way, the study of networks is needed “as soon as things accelerate, innovations proliferate, and entities are multiplied” (p. 12). Society as it has been typically viewed is like the aether, a substance that was thought to permeate the universe and permit the passage of light and gravity.

The institution of law, for example, does not have an “inner” logic that is influenced by “external” social forces or factors. Rather, its practitioners have the capacity to arrange various kinds of networks, and overall to “draw connections between a case and a general rule” (p. 7). Latour insists that nothing exists “behind” the assembled networks and the activities of assembling them. Furthermore, these networks are not composed of some particular “social” kind of substance (such as relationships, or interactions, or roles); they are made of heterogeneous elements.

I will discuss in Chapter 16 some of the specific recommendations that Latour makes for the practice of research in *Assembling the Social*. Here I will explore his reasons for these recommendations, and his overall account of how social reality is constituted. We have seen that he suggests that we should abandon the assumption that any phenomenon we study is surrounded by a “context,” a “structure,” a “society,” a “culture” in terms of which we can explain it. Next, Latour wants us to question the assumptions we have about the kinds of entity that can explain a phenomenon. Groups? Individual agents? Nation states? Cultures? Social scientists often simply take these entities for granted. Latour’s advice is that we need to become “uncertain” about them. For example, if we allow ourselves to become uncertain about groups – socioeconomic classes, white males, urban housewives – we will discover that they have to be formed, and they later have to be dismantled.

The best way to conduct research is to let the actors define and order their situation, and to pay attention to the work in which they do this. “It is as if we were saying to the actors: ‘We won’t try to discipline you, to make you fit into our categories; we will let you deploy your own worlds, and only later will we ask you to explain how you came about settling them’” (p. 23). In particular, the researcher should pay attention to what is controversial, should “feed off controversies” as the actors who are working to assemble a network search for order of one kind or another. Connections become traceable when the researcher follows the work that is done to stabilize these controversies.
As Latour later wrote, “The notion of network can now be made a little more specific: it designates a series of associations revealed thanks to a trial – consisting in the surprises of the ethnographic investigation – that makes it possible to understand through what series of small discontinuities it is appropriate to pass in order to obtain a certain continuity of action” (Latour, 2013, p. 33).

Recall my complaints about the analysis of interviews in qualitative research, in Chapter 3? I complained that the words of interviewees are replaced by the words of researchers. Here are Latour’s own words:

We have to resist the idea that there exists somewhere a dictionary where all the variegated words of the actors can be translated into the few words of the social vocabulary. Will we have the courage not to substitute an unknown expression for a well-known one? Here lies the most morally, politically, and scientifically relevant difference between the two sociologies. (Latour, 2005, p. 48, emphasis original)

A researcher should not think that their goal is to invent or adopt a meta-language into which what people say and do can be translated. What ANT offers is not a meta-language, but merely an “infra-language” of networks and actors.

This tendency to translate people’s words and actions into a theoretical terminology that is compatible with the researcher’s own ontological assumptions reflects the long-standing efforts in the social sciences (which we examined in Chapter 1) to try to avoid metaphysics (that is to say, ontology) and to cut off all links with philosophy. This has been, in Latour’s opinion, a disaster, because a central task of social scientific research is “to explore the actors’ own metaphysics” (Latour, 2005, p. 51).

This exploration will include discovering the entities with which people have everyday concerns. Latour points out that “a policy aimed at artificially withdrawing from the world most of the entities to be taken into account cannot claim to lead to emancipation” (p. 49). That is, nothing is gained by telling people that the entities they experience in their everyday world do not in fact exist. Actors redefine the elements of the world with their own “metaphysical innovations,” innovations that most social scientists are poorly prepared to recognize, let alone describe. Our job, as researchers, is not to presuppose what the world is “really made of,” and then judge that the people who we say we want to understand are deluded and mistaken about this reality.

As we have already seen now on several occasions, social scientists have generally assumed that all humans live in the same solid, material world, but have various ways of interpreting that world. We must abandon that assumption, Latour insists, “raise again the question of what the real world is really like,” and avoid turning “back to Kant’s idealism” (p. 117):
The danger cannot be exaggerated when we consider that the open-mindedness shown, for instance, by anthropologists about the ‘other’ cosmo- 
lologies is often due to their certainty that those representations have no serious relation to the solid world of matters of fact. (Latour, 2005, p. 117)

For ANT, this kind of certainty is unacceptable, and the open-mindedness that it permits is false. We have to abandon the distinction between a single material reality and multiple interpretations and representations. We have to become open to the possibility of multiple ontologies, multiple realities, within which people are heatedly debating what their world is really like, because “The common world has still to be collected and composed” (p. 118).

In Chapter 9 we will see a form of this proposal in anthropological ethnography.

In fact, it is not enough to simply accept a multiplicity of realities – we need to recognize and appreciate the work that people are constantly doing to assemble and reassemble the world(s) in which they live. Their work is hardly helped if we see our role as telling them what they “are really doing”:

Law, science, religion, economies, psyches, moralities, politics, and organizations might all have their own modes of existence, their own circulations. The plurality of inhabited worlds might be a farfetched hypothesis but the plurality of regimes of existence in our own world, well that’s a datum. Is there any reason why sociology should keep ignoring it? (Latour, 2005, pp. 240–241)

In Chapter 10 we will consider in some detail how this kind of work can be studied, as well as Latour’s later exploration of the plurality of modes of existence.

From Actors to Agencies

Who is doing this work of assemblage? The answer to this question might seem obvious, but here too we need to become uncertain. “An actor,” Latour proposes, is not necessarily a person; it “is what is made to act by many others” (p. 46, emphasis original). “Action is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated” (p. 46). It is not that people don’t know what they are doing because their consciousness is false, or that they do know what they are doing because they are rational agents. It is that people, like researchers, are unsure of what they are doing. There is always controversy about who did what to whom, and the task of the researcher is not to resolve this debate, it is to trace it.

Action is never transparent, it is always taken up and shared by others, a knot of “many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (p. 44). In particular, in order to act, people continually turn to the various powers and modes of existence of objects, of non-human
agencies. Although they are multiple and various, the agencies that people appeal to and argue about show some general characteristics. This is the half of ANT that is Greimas: agencies are like the “actants” in a narrative; they are components of an account, they are opposed to competing agencies, they engage in trials which leave traces, they are propelled by a theory of action. The “figuration” of agency gives it flesh, just as in a work of fiction: “the diversity of the worlds of fiction invented on paper allow enquirers to gain as much pliability and range as those they have to study in the real world” (p. 55).

Things, quasi-objects, and attachments are the real center of the social world, not the agent, person, member, or participant – nor is it society or its avatars. Is this not a better way, to use another of Kant’s expressions, of rendering sociology able at last to ‘walk onto the sure path of science’? (Latour, 2005, p. 238)

An actor, for Latour, is “any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference” (p. 71). Defined in this way, mundane implements are crucial agencies. Objects do most of the work in our everyday lives, yet they usually get none of the credit. Try writing a book without a computer. Or without a typewriter. Or without pen and paper. These implements, for ANT, are participants in the course of action, in various and multiple ways. “In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action’, things might authorize, allow, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (p. 72).

ANT adopts a principle of “symmetry” that has been misunderstood. It is not that people and things are equal; it is that we should not assume in advance that people and things are different. We should not assume in advance that social things and material things. We should not assume in advance an asymmetry, as most social scientists have done, between what is “objective” and what is “subjective” (and we have seen that qualitative researchers are guilty of this).

In the same way, we should not draw a rigid line between matters of fact (nature) and matters of concern (society). Geology is concerned about rocks; metallurgy is concerned about steel; biogenetics is concerned about genes; and computer science is concerned about silicon chips. We are not dealing here with “matter” on the one hand and “meaning” on the other, but with the various ways that materials are taken up and woven into human practices and concerns. Latour insists that

we will make sure that when agencies are introduced they are never presented simply as matters of fact but always as matters of concern, with their mode of fabrication and their stabilizing mechanisms clearly visible. (Latour, 2005, p. 120)
We have to identify the “production sites” where knowledge of so-called “structural features” is assembled. These “local sites that manufacture global structures” (p. 176) are able to modify the topography of the social world. Some places are more connected than others; they are “centers of calculation” – *oligoptica*, with sturdy but narrow views – that house the resources necessary to collect and collate documents, inscriptions, and materials so as to construct the “macro”: or at least, a *story* about the macro, for remember that

There exists no place that can be said to be ‘non-local’. If something is to be ‘delocalized’, it means that it is being sent from one place to some *other* place, not from one place to *no* place. (Latour, 2005, p. 179, emphasis original)

Furthermore, the participants themselves are busy determining, modifying, and shifting scale and scope. This work of contextualizing also needs to be studied, as it contributes to the assembling of connections. People have techniques for producing “panoramas” that picture everything, yet see nothing. The global is itself located and localized within assembled circuits.

Yet the local has no concrete existence either. Local sites are themselves generated, dispatched, and redistributed. The ingredients of a “local” interaction arrive from other sites, from which they must be transported, by mobilizing agencies. A “local” place must be *made* local, must be made a *place*, by separating and distinguishing it from other places:

In effect, what has been designated by the term ‘local interaction’ is the assemblage of all the *other* local interactions distributed elsewhere in time and space, which have been brought to bear on the scene through the relays of various non-human actors. (Latour, 2005, p. 194, emphasis original)

In any seemingly local, face-to-face interaction, there are always a host of participants – people and non-human agencies – that contribute even though they don’t seem to be present.

**An Actor Is Not an Interiority**

It might seem that Latour’s focus on multiple agencies, both human and non-human, leaves out the important element of subjectivity, the experiences of individuals with particular personalities. Anticipating this criticism, Latour’s somewhat startling proposal was that human actors are also assembled. After all, there are documents, cards, and certificates that declare who one is. People speak in clichés that can be repeated by others. They have tastes that they acquired from reading magazines. Someone’s accent can be traced to where they spent their childhood. Social media indicate who one’s “friends” are, and what one “likes.” In the supermarket one is a consumer, aided by labels, bar codes, prices, and advertisements.
One’s emotions have been shaped and formed by the vehicles, techniques, and equipment of love, for example. These competences and characteristics are not “in” the person, they are the person, in a process of “subjectivation” (p. 213).

One can suppose, then, that any human actor is composed of what Latour, in reference to the small, downloadable software packages that extend the capacity of a computer program, called “plug-ins,” assembled competencies that make up a “person.” “To be an ‘actor’ is now at last a fully artificial and fully traceable gathering” (p. 208). And by “outside” here, we don’t mean some kind of structural determinism. On the contrary, plug-ins are resources that increase one’s competence and complexity. They are mediators that link one agent to another. So that we act not independently or autonomously, but through one another, through our “attachments.” The person, too, can be usefully viewed as a network: “[a]ttachments are first, actors are second . . . .

As to emancipation, it does not mean ‘freed from bonds’ but well-attached” (pp. 217–218).

Writing to Reassemble the Social

We saw in Chapter 1 that in Laboratory Life Latour emphasized the central role of writing, both in his own research and in the research of the scientists whom he was observing. This emphasis continues in Reassembling The Social; indeed, in Latour’s view it is in writing that the researcher reassembles the work of assembly that has been traced and studied.

Latour’s suggestion here is the provocative one that we need to remain uncertain about our own research. We need “to bring into the foreground the very making of reports” (p. 122). In a key respect, to trace social connections is to write accounts. Written accounts are themselves mediators, links in an assemblage, that can be both “artificial and accurate: all the more accurate because they are artificial” (p. 124, emphasis added). An account is a text, written under various pressures, about things we have not completely understood, for an audience we barely know, that will generally be read by only a few people. Writing is not a transparent medium that provides direct access to the phenomenon that is described: it is not “some windowpane” (p. 122). It is opaque, resistant, mutable, tropic.

When we write a report we attempt to “reassemble” the social, in the sense that the materiality of a report serves to extend the connections that have been explored. A good text achieves something: it “traces a network” (p. 128, original emphasis). This point is worth citing in full:

A good ANT account is a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something and don’t just sit there. Instead of simply transporting effects without transforming them, each of the points in the text may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of
a new translation. As soon as actors are treated not as intermediaries but as mediators, they render the movement of the social visible to the reader. Thus, through many textual inventions, the social may become again a circulating entity that is no longer composed of the stale assemblage of what passed earlier as being part of society. A text, in our definition of social science, is thus a test on how many actors the writer is able to treat as mediators and how far he or she is able to achieve the social. (Latour, 2005, pp. 128–129, emphasis original)

A powerful account is not one that makes sweeping generalizations and universal claims – it is one that grasps, traces, and narrates the details and specificities of a particular assemblage. It is one that offers a network, that gives an account of the flows of translations. “Network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described” (p. 131). The good account traces an actor-network by adding its own trace to the traces left by the work of assembly and connection. Its proof is in the reading: as the proof of the pudding is in the eating. “The whole question is to see whether the event of the social can be extended all the way to the event of the reading through the medium of the text. This is the price to pay for objectivity, or rather ‘objectfullness’ to be achieved” (p. 133). In short, the researcher’s account “plays its role of assembling the social” (p. 135); it “adds its performative action to all the others.” The author has collected together the participants in the action so that they can be assembled. The resulting text “might be able to solve for some particular audience the question of which common world they pertain to” (p. 139).

An “objective” account is not one that is cold, natural, detached, and disinterested, but one that is “warm, interested” and that operates in the “controversial building sites of matters of concern” (p. 125). An objective account welcomes “objectors”: actors should be given the opportunity to object to what has been written about them. Furthermore, to talk of research reports as “narratives” is not to suggest that issues of accuracy and truth have been set aside, or that an account is “merely” fiction. On the one hand, this would be to ignore the hard work that writers of fiction must do to be realistic. On the other hand, we are talking about accounts that grapple with the uncertainties of investigation, and so may fail.

In addition, an account that provides a description is offering an explanation. Latour insisted that

the opposition between description and explanation is another of these false dichotomies that should be put to rest. ... Here again, it is the attempt at imitating a false view of the natural sciences that bogs down the social ones: it is always felt that description is too particular, too idiosyncratic, too localized. But, contrary to the scholastic proverb, there is science only of the particular. (Latour, 2005, p. 137)
The Contributions of ANT

Looking back later on ANT, Latour summarized its contributions in these terms:

This theory played a critical role in dissolving overly narrow notions of institution, in making it possible to follow the liaisons between humans and nonhumans, and especially in transforming the notion of “the social” and SOCIETY into a general principle of free association, rather than being an ingredient distinct from the others. Thanks to this theory, society is no longer made of a particular material, the social – as opposed, for example, to the organic, the material, the economic, or the psychological; rather, it consists in a movement of connections that are ever more extensive and surprising in each case. (Latour, 2013, p. 64)

With ANT, Latour continued in a direction that was visible in Laboratory Life, exploring the ways that what seems stable – reality, and knowledge about reality – is in actually constructed, but extending this beyond science to other phenomena. He tried to correct misunderstanding of his previous work, insisting that to call something constructed does not mean that it is not real, or not true. ANT, he explained, “is a method, and mostly a negative one at that; it says nothing about the shape of what is being described with it” (Latour, 2005, p. 142). The method was principally that of describing and explaining construction by tracing the transformations that were arranged so as to assemble an order of one kind or another, with writing treated as a step in this process.

CONCLUSIONS

We have examined five explorations that reject the story about “constitution” that Kant told. Each proposes that there is more to human beings than was captured by Kant’s model. Kant emphasized individual mental representation, a rational synthesis of perceptual data, as the basis for valid knowledge and ethical action. The work in this chapter has emphasized practical understanding, embodied comportment with tools and equipment, our absorption in everyday social interaction, and our inescapable entanglement in the material world as the basis for epistemological and ethical order. For Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Garfinkel, and Latour, theoretical knowledge is made possible by a more fundamental relationship between humans and our world. Representing the world is secondary, and in some ways distorting. What is more fundamental is the practical involvement – historical, embodied, and social – that is prior to the subject–object distinction but remains invisible to the traditional human sciences.

For Hegel, Kant failed to see how tensions within experience can propel it forward to achieve a grasp of things-in-themselves and the underlying relation between subject and object.
For Heidegger, experience is grounded in, and derivative of, a practical involvement in the world in which subject and object have not become distinct. When practice is suspended for practical circumspection, understanding is articulated as interpretation. Only in the complete detachment of philosophical reflection does “representation” seem primary. The central characteristic of practical involvement is its temporality: human beings are “thrown” into the public, social world of human affairs, grasping it and understanding themselves in terms of its history and projecting their practical activities into its future. This social world provides the ground for human beings and the entities we encounter. It defines the possible ways entities can be.

For Merleau-Ponty, the bodily character of human involvement in the world is primary. Consciousness is embodied perception, not representation. Our world is not constructed in representational thought but constituted through being “lived through.” Bodily consciousness offers an infrastructure for thought; concepts are a way of seeing, a gaze of the mind, that is invited by the gestures of speech.

Garfinkel explored how the order of social reality is constituted in and through everyday social interactions. Rejecting formal programs of investigation, Garfinkel argued that we need to attend to the details of concerted activity, the work in which every kind of order is produced. Ethnomethodology shares with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty the view that this order is assembled through embodied practice rather than conceptualization; that formal analysis does not adequately characterize this work; and that investigation requires a radical attitude:

[It requires] firstly, the idea that the experienced social world is composed not of discrete “variables” of one sort or another but of gestalt contexts that are assembled in and through actors’ intrinsic ordering activities. This intrinsic ordering activity includes the lived way in which percipient bodies initially bring the world into being and only secondarily conceptualize it. Secondly, the ordering of the world does not occur through following rules or roles or other abstractly formulated proscriptions. Such proscriptions are themselves usable resources for “doing” nameable activities and providing for a visible, sensible social environment. Finally, the experience of an objective world, whether in everyday or scientific settings, depends upon practical adherence to a set of idealizations or presuppositions that require a radical investigative stance for proper inquiry. (Maynard & Clayman, 1991, p. 392)

Finally, Latour proposed that taken-for-granted reality is “assembled,” and he insisted that to say that something is “constructed” or “constituted” is in no way to suggest that it is not real. What is solid and enduring in our everyday lives has been made so by the hard and continuous work of assembling...
connections, between sites and between entities. The task of the researcher is to trace these associations, and reassemble the work of assembly.

The analyses in this chapter cut deeper than the studies of epistemic constitution in the previous chapter. For epistemic constructivists such as Husserl, Schutz, Berger and Luckmann, Gergen, and Searle, our representations constitute what we take to be reality, but reality “in itself” is unknowable. Our capacity for representation is not questioned but is taken to be natural. We can call the approach of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Garfinkel, and Latour an ontological constructivism because for them objects and subjects, not just ways of knowing, are formed in practical activity. This is a nondualistic “radical realism” (see Box 8.3).

Although this explicitly ontological approach to constitution (see Table 8.4) avoids the problems of the epistemic approach, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty can be accused of failing to be specific enough. They went too quickly (Deleuze, 1986/1988, p. 112). For Heidegger, human understanding is based on a general and universal time rather than on the specific times of a particular society. Merleau-Ponty’s focus is body conceived in general terms rather than the different kinds of bodies that are shaped in different circumstances (compare a weightlifter and a housewife). These analyses are empirical, but each rests on an abstraction, with the result that their efforts to overcome dualism and explain how humans can validly know our world lack concreteness. They value practical activity, but they don’t foster it. Garfinkel and Latour come closest to an exploration of the ‘methods’ that are specific to particular forms of life and to seeing that inquiry can only (but this is not a failing!) produce accounts that have practical, local relevance.

Language plays a central role in these new analyses, which see that its role is not simply representing the world. As Merleau-Ponty put it: “[S]peech opens a field of the nameable and sayable” (1964/1968, p. 178). Thinking isn’t a liberation from perception, from mere appearances, it is a transformation of perception, of visibility: “a metamorphosis of the flesh of the sensible into the flesh of language” (Carbone, 2004, p. 39). For Merleau-Ponty, thinking “shows by words”; concepts, generalities, and abstractions are transformations of the visible, not some separate realm. A concept is the style of a collection of things in general. Thought and reason can never completely possess the world intellectually, and no language ever rids itself of all sensory material.

Language is a multiplicity of sign-relations; how language is used is multiple, and we instruct each other in how to see what was said. Accounts are features of the settings – the places and moments – in which they are given. They, too, have to be “seen” in the right way. And the objects, regions, and times to which they refer depend on the speaker’s position as well as the hearer’s relation to the speaker. Language doesn’t describe the world from outside; it is implicated in the world, and it participates in the contingencies of the world. Language is not representation imposed on things from outside. What is
One of the most important and exciting aspects of the work described in this chapter, though one of the least understood, is how it avoids dualism. It adopts what has been called a “radical realism,” in which “there are not two worlds [mental and material] that must somehow be shown to be connected by the ingenuity of philosophers, but one: the subject is located in objective reality” (Bakhurst, 1991, pp. 115–116, emphasis original). Each human is part of the material world, albeit a rather special part. Our perception of this world is an opening to it, “an openness to reality itself” (p. 116).

In radical realism,

[t]he subject must be seen as having immediate or direct access to reality. None of this is to say, of course, that we have instant access to the truth. Our conception of the world can be, and often is, riddled with error. But we are able to be wrong about reality because our minds are capable of reaching right out to it. (Bakhurst, 1991, p. 116)

It would be better to say not that our minds “reach out” to reality but that mind, or better still consciousness, is always embedded and embodied in reality. To have a “conception” of the world is not to form a picture of it in the mind but to have an altered way of being embedded. To have a conception is to touch and see the world differently; recall Merleau-Ponty’s proposal that concepts are the invisible in the visible.

This means that subject and object are identical, at least initially, as are thinking and being. Kant tried to locate reality in the experience of the individual subject. Radical realism locates the experiencing subject in reality, as an embodied person among other people. Objective reality is the world we inhabit.

One might ask if this is not reducing the world to the material universe. Does it not ignore culture: the fact that there are somehow multiple social worlds? That an object can have very different significance in different societies? The radical realist position does not ignore these objections, but its response to them is very different from Kant’s and from that of the vast majority of social scientists. The standard view is that individuals in different cultures form different concepts, so they live in different subjective worlds. For radical realism, in contrast, an object becomes something of significance by virtue of its incorporation into human practices. It is incorporation of objects, both fabricated and natural, into human practical activity that gives them the significance with which they show up as objects of a certain kind. As Heidegger said, being – what something is – is an issue only for humans. What something is – that this object in front of me is a cup, for example – is an anthropocentric fact, dependent on the continued existence of human-kind, but it is a fact independent of any individual mind.
For radical realism, there is nothing “between” object and subject – no level of mental representations or linguistic representations. It is a direct realism. The human subject is immersed in a single natural, material environment that contains things of shared public significance. In this ontology, thinking and being do not stand in a relation of correspondence (or non-correspondence when we think incorrectly) but in a relationship of identity. Of course, the immersion is practical before it is intellectual; we grasp things in the ongoing flow of activity.

In this radical realism, it is entirely reasonable to ask what an object – or the world as a whole – would be like in-itself. To pose such a question is to ask what difference our activity makes, to ask about the character and degree of influence of human activity on our planet, and in answering this question to learn about our place in nature. At the same time, radical realism suggests that what the sciences do is develop new kinds of social practices that continuously bring to light new ways for things to be. They do not – they cannot – study things as they are in-themselves.

Radical realism, then, rejects Kant’s dualism, his individualism, his transcendental idealism, and his universal rationality. It offers a view of humans as embodied, social beings who are immersed and involved in a material world, who constitute the orders of this world in ongoing practical and collaborative production and reproduction and consequently know the objects of the world directly, in terms that are defined by their public social practices. Thinking itself is an embodied, practical, and social activity in which objects of the social world reveal new aspects but still within their being as public objects. The individual, in this account, is not the owner of a private mental space, is not “a self-contained, self-sufficient, and ready-made subject of ‘inner states,’” but . . . a socially formed being, essentially dependent on his or her ancestors and peers” (Bakhurst, 1991, p. 215).

reasonable (effective, clear, consistent, objective, etc.) is what is accountable, and making circumstances accountable is something people do all the time.

I hope that by now you are questioning your assumptions about what kinds of things exist in the world. This chapter has thrown cold water on the commonsense assumption that humans form representations of the world around them. For Kant, the “concept” was the way an individual intellectually grasps the essence of perception, the abstract and general character of what is seen. Thinking was how we actively make what is “real” from what is passively given to us. This chapter has explored a very different view, that the world is a place of activity in which each of us is but one small part. The sensible world is
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<td><strong>Subjectivity</strong></td>
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rich, complex, and baroque, and any way of talking about it grasps just a part, is just one way of participating in it, one style of perception, one way of being. The term *concept* originally meant being hollow and therefore able to accept and contain something (think of *conception*), and thinking can be seen as an activity of creating space for a thing to be something (Carbone, 2004). Language discloses how things can be. More broadly, speech can change the world and change the people in it; language has an ontological power. When I speak, I produce an utterance in order to invoke a way of seeing the world, to pick out an entity in this sight, interpret that entity (e.g., make a claim about it), and act on other people, move them, and perhaps change them.

So although Garfinkel has recommended that researchers should talk primarily with members, it is clear that he, like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Latour, is offering a new kind of discourse to social scientists that enables us to see old things in fresh ways and see new things that had previously been invisible. Escaping dualism, in particular, is largely a matter of seeing in new ways, and this in turn is facilitated by using language in new ways. Metamorphosing one’s ontology involves changing how we talk and write— including how we talk and write about language.

The most important thing we have learned in this chapter is that constitution itself is visible. Embodied, practical, and concerted activity in the material world can be seen; it is not hidden away on some transcendental level of the mind. And if it can be seen, it can be studied. We can envision a form of qualitative inquiry that asks and answers questions that the “objective study of subjectivity” cannot frame, questions about the kind of subjects we become and the different subjects and objects of different places and times. But how, exactly? How can we best investigate the constitution—the ontological work—that has been pointed out in this chapter? What are needed are concrete and specific investigations of the actions of particular bodies, in specific times, as they interact together practically. Can ethnography—immersion in a way of life—do this, as Giddens, Taylor, and Geertz promised? In the following chapter, we will explore this issue.