Howard Schwartz: An Introduction

Alex Dennis and Wes Sharrock

Howard Schwartz wrote a number of key texts in the early – mid 1970s, the end of ethnomethodology's early fertile period of investigation. The background against which his papers should be understood, therefore, is one characterised by studies pushing at the boundaries of what was, and still is, taken as received wisdom about what can be achieved sociologically by undertaking empirical studies and engaging in conceptual debate. Pollner's papers on mundane reasoning (Pollner, 1974), versions (Pollner, 1975) and self-explicating settings (Pollner, 1979), attempts to develop Garfinkel's study policies in epistemologically uncharted territories, were vying for attention with the crystalline formality of late conversation analysis (Sacks et al, 1974; Schenkein, 1972; Jefferson, 1972), and the continuing critical engagement of ethnomethodologically-inspired writers with mainstream sociological problems (Smith, 1974). Such developments are much better known than Schwartz's, and have formed the basis for subsequent programmes of research and critical engagement in ways that little of Schwartz's own work has. The question that must be answered, therefore, is why reprint this stuff?

The somewhat obvious answer is that we like it. Furthermore, we are convinced that a constituency of readers will also like it. Much of this material has been circulating in badly-reproduced mimeograph form for over twenty years, available either as fading photocopies or Samizdat reproductions of obscure earlier publications. Some of these papers, 'Data: Who Needs It?' for example, were published in microfiche form in the journal Analytic Sociology. Others, like 'General Features', were published in a format that prevented them from being made available to much of their possible audience—this paper was only published in Jim Schenkein's German edited collection of ethnomethodological papers. Still others appeared in diluted form in Schwartz' essential co-authored guide to qualitative methodology (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). Nevertheless, those of us who read these works thought they were wonderful, and we have endeavoured to keep them in circulation. This issue of Ethnographic Studies, therefore, is aimed at two audiences: those who have already read some of these materials and want to read more, and those who have yet to discover them—and, we suspect, who will be as impressed as we were.

Schwartz's texts show the best aspects of the impetus behind good sociology at work: a desire to push at the edges of what is accepted wisdom, to probe into questions that perhaps would be better left untouched. In 'Data: Who Needs It?', for instance, Schwartz asks what the relationship between sociological argument and empirical 'findings' might be. The discussion touches on positivism, the subject-object distinction, the existence or otherwise of social 'systems', the relationships between knowledge and facticity, the nature of paranoia and the relationships between perception and reasoning. The conclusion reached, if understood in the spirit with which it is intended, makes far from comfortable reading - not merely for

constructive sociologists but for many ethno-methodologists operating in a realist epistemological mode.

This paper instantiates a theme running through most of Schwartz's work: an overriding preoccupation with methods of reasoning as fundamental to the sociological project. Making sense is central to Garfinkel's conception of the social order, and Schwartz's papers might be characterised as dwelling on the making of sense by members in all sorts of different situations. In these papers, we are shown how the insane make sense of their world—in formulations that have comparable analytic power to those of Lemert (1962) and Laing (1965)—and how their insanity is reflected back to them using ordinary conversational techniques to subvert their delusions. Unfortunately excluded from this collection are two key papers already published elsewhere, 'On Recognising Mistakes' (Schwartz, 1976) and 'The Life History of a Social Norm' (Schwartz, 1989). We have used these as teaching materials to address the so-called 'problem of versions' in the sociology of mental illness, and we would hope that this collection will equally serve to address such issues.

As with all Schwartz's work, however, how members make sense can never be separated from how professional sociologists make sense of that sense. Schwartz does not elide the difficult issues raised by Garfinkel's (1967) discussion of reflexivity as some late conversation analysts appear to do. Equally, he does not seek to render reflexivity as a 'methodological horror' (Woolgar, 1988) that might provide a warrant for all manner of strange methodological experiments. Instead, with apparent glee, he embraces the notion of reflexivity as central to sociological understanding, seeking to work out just what it might imply for conducting studies of a wide range of disparate situations and settings. Schwartz has maintained an interest in the radical nature of Garfinkel's non-constructive ethnomethodology throughout his career, avoiding the pitfalls of both positivism and relativism.

Insofar as methods of reasoning are central to Schwartz's project, it is no surprise that his work is directed towards, and informed by, practitioners in both the ethnomethodological and conversation analytic traditions. Schwartz not only saw the connection between the two, but also—perhaps with the benefit of hindsight—wrote many of his most suggestive papers about, and from within, the gaps appearing between them in the 1970s. 'On Recognising Mistakes' (Schwartz, 1976), for instance, is as much about mechanistic treatments of the conversation analytic treatment of utterances as moves in a turn taking system as it is about psychiatric interventions in group psychotherapy sessions. How the psychological might relate to the social, the subject to the object in some formulations, is a key problematic running through many of these papers, and the way in which this is treated bears a strong resemblance to, amongst other things, Sacks' (1963; 1967) early considerations of similar problems. Equally, in common with Goffman, Schwartz's interest in theoretical problems drives his studies: topics are chosen not (just) because they are inherently interesting but because they can be used to illuminate and clarify thorny issues lying close to the heart of the sociological problematic.

Schwartz' willingness to deal in such dangerous currency is compounded by his 'shameless

promiscuity' in another taboo area for ethnomethodological and ethnographic work: the realm of the quantitative. Schwartz used ideas from mathematics and statistics both to drive theory and as examples in what remained qualitative studies. Rather than treat these as subjects for ethnographic examination (Cf. Livingston, 1986), however, they are woven into the general pattern of an argument in startling and sometimes downright shocking ways.

It might appear from this, however, that Schwartz's papers are of interest only in historical and aesthetic senses. This is not the case. The topics Schwartz dealt with in these papers are ones that have continued to haunt the ethnomethodological project in one form or another to the present day, and the distinctive ways Schwartz attacks these problems illuminates contemporary debates in the field.

Arguments about the unique adequacy requirement of method (Garfinkel and Wieder, 1992), for instance, are very usefully clarified by 'Data: Who Needs It?'. In this, Schwartz's discussion, under the heading 'The modes of description are unique to the activities of which they are a part', both prefigures Garfinkel's later formulations and serves to ground it in his earlier arguments. Unique adequacy as a principled requirement is problematic in all sorts of ways - as Livingston's work demonstrates - but it is difficult to see how it differs from Schwartz's observation that:

> Anticipating our argument, the vocabularies, procedures, and concerns (particularly the concerns with the objective and subjective) connected with sociological data can be conjectured to be quite esoteric to the circumstances under which sociological work is done. The very presence of uniform procedures and concerns may be part of that esoteric-ness. In an expanded sense, it would seem that the sociology of music could not possibly be similar to the sociology of law or chemistry. They could not, for the same general reasons that one would find it strange to take concern for the existence and detection of lines into any set of circumstances within which one wanted to know 'what's going on.

A second feature of Schwartz' work that demonstrates its contemporary relevance is the manner in which it constitutes a particular use of philosophical arguments and concepts to sociological ends. As Winch (1990) points out, there is a great deal of confusion in sociology concerning the distinction between empirical and conceptual problems. The latter constitute much of what appear to be empirical questions, and are generally the deeper and more disciplinarily powerful issues. While Winch advocates the (anti-)philosophy of Wittgenstein as a resource for clarifying these issues, however, Schwartz's philosophical commitments are - in the Garfinkelian tradition - mainly phenomen-ological. His paper 'Phenomenological Reductionism' is perhaps the most obvious example of this tendency. What is interesting, however, is not the fact that Schwartz uses philosophical school x rather than philosophical school y. What is interesting is the way in which philosophy is invoked and used. Paralleling Sharrock and Anderson's (1986) comments about the role of philosophy in ethno-methodological studies, Schwartz's interest is not in being faithful to a particular tradition but rather to seeing what resources can be brought to bear to deal with a task at hand. Hence his comment that:

phenomenology has no common perspective. Thus, such a perspective as will be displayed stands as an approximate construct for illustrative purposes only. Furthermore, my own style of writing is so assertive in character that a reader will almost inevitably start assessing the truth of propositions, the validity of critiques, the political consequences of ideological positions, etc. This is trouble. For one construes phenomenology as an epistemological theory or a tool of philosophical scepticism only at the risk of grave misunderstanding. More properly, it is a way of looking at things. With this in mind, my discussion should be read as a giant metaphor, whose sole aim is approximate illustration.

The ways in which this 'way of looking at things' can be used for sociological ends is illustrated most strikingly in 'General Features'.

A third feature of Schwartz's work that is of contemporary interest is the extent to which he strives to deal with both the specificities of the topic of investigation on the one hand and the need to address generalised theoretical problems on the other. The need to balance the two requirements, to produce studies that are faithful to the phenomena under investigation while simultaneously addressing core sociological problematics, is often neglected. This can result in either a loose, impressionistic characterisation of 'the actor's point of view', detached from mainstream analytic concerns (Bittner, 1973), or in a creeping formalism, detachment and 'objectivity' as analysts come to treat their topics of enquiry as mere vehicles for demonstrating the ubiquity of particular social structural norms (see, for instance, Lynch's (1993) comments about the professionalism of some contemporary conversation analysis). Schwartz's awareness of the temptations and pitfalls of both approaches is evident in many of these papers, and his unique analytical style can be understood as an attempt to avoid both. The formality of the 'Life History of a Social Norm' paper (Schwartz, 1989) - which Schwartz subsequently came to consider inappropriate - was the result of the paper having been rewritten a number of times. Similarly to Sacks' 'Simplest Systematics' (Sacks et al, 1974), a close reading of the different pre-publication versions gives a unique insight into how these problems manifest themselves and have to be worked out carefully through constant reformulation and redrafting.

Finally, and to recommend a paper not included in this collection, the sheer delicacy with which Schwartz addresses conceptual and disciplinary issues (often hidden behind layers of humour and bravado) is exemplified in 'On Recognising Mistakes' (Schwartz, 1976). As well as being an exemplary account of mistake-correction, using group psycho-therapy as a perspicuous example of an institutional format for its operation, this paper is perhaps the earliest contribution to what would later become a more conceptually-organised critique of con-versation analysis from a Garfinkelian perspective. While members' work is shown to rest on the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, the distinction between the two is neither denied nor formulated as a principled conceptual matter - the 'reality' (or otherwise) of the matter is treated with exemplary ethnomethodological indifference. As with much of the work presented here, philosophical issues are treated as matters that can be addressed empirically, thus effecting a profound

transformation in how we conceive of the discipline of sociology.

The papers in this collection are the original drafts with four exceptions. ‘Data: Who Needs It?’, ‘General Features’, ‘The Psychotherapy of Automobile Repair’ and ‘Understanding Misunderstanding’ have all been revised in the last year, mostly in relatively minor ways to make the arguments more accessible. We thank Howard for his efforts in this regard, and for his support in enabling the publication of these papers.

Bibliography

Bittner, E. (1973). Objectivity and realism in sociology. In G. Psathas (ed.), Phenomenological Sociology: Issues and Applications. New York, NY: John Wiley.

Garfinkel, H. (1967). Studies in Ethno-methodology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Garfinkel, H., and Wieder, D.L. (1992). Two incommensurable, asymmetrically alternate technologies of social analysis. In G. Watson and R.M. Seiler (eds), Text in Context: Contributions to Ethnomethodology. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Jefferson, G. (1972). Side sequences. In D. Sudnow (ed.), Studies in Social Interaction. New York, NY: Free Press.

Laing, R.D. (1965). The Divided Self. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Lemert, E.M. (1962). Paranoia and the dynamics of exclusion. Sociometry, 25(1): 2 – 20.

Livingston, E. (1986). The Ethnomethodological Foundations of Mathematics. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Lynch, M. (1993). Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action: Ethnomethodology and Social Studies of Science. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pollner, M. (1974). Mundane reasoning. Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 4(1): 35 – 54.

Pollner, M. (1975). ‘The very coinage of your brain’: the anatomy of reality disjunctures. Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 5(4): 411 – 430.

Pollner, M. (1979). Explicative transactions: making and managing meaning in traffic court. In G. Psathas (ed.), Everyday Language: Studies in Ethnomethodology. New York, NY: Irvington.

Sacks, H. (1963). Sociological description. In J. Coulter (ed.), Ethnomethodological Sociology. Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990.

Sacks, H. (1967). The search for help: no one to turn to. In E.S. Shneiderman (ed.), Essays in Self-Destruction. New York, NY: Jason Aronson.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E.A., and Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organisation of turn taking for conversation. Language, 50(4): 696 – 735.

Schenkein, J. (1972). Towards an analysis of natural conversation and the sense of heheh. Semiotica, 6(3 – 4): 344 – 377.

Schwartz, H. (1976). On recognizing mistakes: a case of practical reasoning in psychotherapy. Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 6(1): 55 – 73.

Schwartz, H. (1989). The life history of a social norm. In D.T. Helm, W.T. Anderson, A.J. Meehan and A.W. Rawls (eds), The Interactional Order: New Directions in the Study of Social Order. New York, NY: Irvington.

Schwartz, H., and Jacobs, J. (1979). Qualitative Sociology: A Method

to the Madness. New York, NY: Free Press.

Sharrock, W.W., and Anderson, R.J. (1986). The Ethnomethodologists. Chichester: Ellis Horwood.

Smith, D.E. (1974). Theorising as ideology. In R. Turner (ed.), Ethnomethodology: Selected Readings. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Winch, P. (1990). The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy (second edition). London: Routledge.