

In his own words

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Abstract

This paper returns to two pieces of work I did some years ago with Wes Sharrock. The first was an empirical investigation into the work done by hardware and software engineers involved in various projects that were developing technology to be used in office environments. The second was to make visible that Garfinkel and Sacks' description of 'constructive analysis' applies just as much to the theoretical perspectives of 'post-modernism', 'constructionism', 'feminist theory' and other developments since they coined the phrase, as it did to the 'positivist' paradigm that was predominant at the time they were writing. I do this in order to illustrate Sharrock's abiding interest in three matters: natural language, grounding that interest in empirical investigations, and exploring the ramifications of that interest and the outcome of those investigations for both sociology and philosophy.

INTRODUCTION: IN MY WORDS¹

Wes Sharrock is known and respected on a global scale for his work within ethnomethodology and Wittgensteinian philosophy, but it would not do justice to his contribution to sociology and philosophy to sum up his interests in this way. This is because he has ranged across a wide territory of academic endeavours, and, as any examination of his CV will reveal, he has produced a staggering number of published papers and books, on a wide variety of topics, not to mention the many different academic audiences he has addressed in his conference and other public presentations. Further, as more than fifty PhD students he has supervised will testify, his ability to address their interests, first and foremost, has displayed his mastery of a wide range of theoretical and methodological positions across the human sciences and philosophy.² Consequently, to sum up Sharrock's research interests in a neat phrase would inevitably court disagreements. Despite this difficulty, though, it is possible to see that Sharrock has, in his published work, frequently returned

¹ I am indebted to Mike Lynch and Paul Smith for their comments on, and editorial corrections of an earlier version of this paper.

² This formulation developed in a discussion of Sharrock's work with Bob Anderson for which I am grateful.

to three general matters: natural language, grounding that interest in empirical investigations, and exploring the ramifications of that interest and the outcome of those investigation for both sociology and philosophy. I have been fortunate enough to have worked with Sharrock on projects that have involved all three of these interests and I want to return to work that we did together in order to illustrate his thinking on these matters and how they have influenced my own way of approaching them.

In the 1990s we became concerned with the fact that it might seem that ethnomethodology's time had passed, because sociology was struggling less than it had done with so-called 'positivist' ambitions which were prevalent, and which had been a stalking horse for Garfinkel in the early days of ethnomethodology.³ At the times we were living in then, sociology seemed more occupied with what was current in European philosophy, literary theory, post-modernism, constructionism and feminist theory (some of these developments acknowledging ethnomethodology as a resource), than it was with the 'positivist' ambitions that were the sociological context within which ethnomethodology first developed. We, however, understood Garfinkel and Sacks' summary of the sociological enterprise as 'constructive analysis' to encompass much more than 'positivism', and we wanted to show that, for ethnomethodology, the developments in sociology that emerged in the last quarter of the 20th Century displayed the same order of remedial practices that could be located in the sociology that was current when ethnomethodology first emerged, even though those developments would seem, on the face of them, to be markedly different to 'positivist' ways. We wrote two chapters of a book, tentatively entitled *Re-Working Ethnomethodology* that was intended to work through these matters, one of which laid the the argumentative foundation that sociology is a 'natural language exercise'. For various reasons we never completed this project.

At the same time we were developing these ideas, we were also publishing articles that drew on our empirical studies of the work of hardware and software engineers involved in the development of technology for a leading manufacturer of office equipment, and in the early 2000s we began a book, the working title of which was *Engineering Investigations*, which was intended to bring these studies together in a sustained examination of the work of engineering, positioning our ethnomethodological interest in studies of work with respect to sociology's interest in work, and with respect to science and technology studies. Again, we wrote two chapters of the book, and again, for various reasons did not progress further. However, both of these book projects were marbled through with the interests

³ Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) argue that sociology, as a whole, is an exercise in remedying the essential indexicality of natural language, substituting the indexical expressions of everyday reasoning with objective expressions, derived from disciplinary analytic apparatuses, something they refer to as 'constructive analysis'. The majority of examples they provide are drawn from 'positivist' positions.

that Sharrock has returned to throughout his research career: engaging in empirical studies, a concern with natural language, and examining the consequences for doing sociology and philosophy entailed by both.

Our interest in the work of the engineers we studied was with how they ordered and organised their work as recognisably engineering being done within a commercial and organisational context. However, there was a concern being articulated in some quarters of sociology that the sort of technologists engaged on the projects we had been studying were contributing to ‘technological hegemony’. To our minds, though, this description illustrated the problems that can develop in sociology through the way in which it approaches natural language, and a problem that can surface when something is addressed from within the occasions of its doings, rather than being addressed at a distance through sociological rhetoric. Reflecting back on our engineering studies, and on our thoughts concerning the ubiquity of ethnomethodology for sociology, it now occurs to me that together they aptly illustrate the returning interests that Anderson and I discern in Sharrock’s work across the decades. Consequently, in order to make visible these interests and how Sharrock has approached them I want to return to our empirical studies of hardware and software projects, and our uncompleted works. However, I have a problem, which is that we undertook this work together, and consequently whatever I present here is as much, maybe even more, written by Sharrock as it is by me. In a strange way, however, this fulfils part of the brief authors in this collection were given by the editors which was to illustrate Sharrock’s ideas and how they have influenced their own work. But it also means that I do not claim sole authorship of this piece and thus it is as much Sharrock *‘In His Own Words’* as it is Sharrock in my words.

IN OUR WORDS

a) Studying engineers at work (from Engineering Investigations)

We have conducted a number of studies of hardware and software engineers involved in the development of technology to be deployed in office environments. Our interests have ranged across issues to do with how engineering is organised as project work; the organisational accountability of engineering work; how design is embedded in problem-solving; mundane practices in writing software, and how software development is ordered, amongst other matters. In so doing we have sociological company because the social organisation of technology development has become a particular topic of interest, not only with the emergence of *Social Studies of Technology* from *Social Studies of Science* but also by those sociologists interested in global themes. In the course of our studies. In order to understand how the engineers order and organise their work we have often asked them the question, ‘What are you doing?’. We have, however, been struck by the difference

between the ways in which the engineers and sociologists have answered this question.

It would seem a straightforward question. However, sociologists do not always ask questions in straightforward ways. If the question was asked straightforwardly, an equally straightforward answer, and one we in effect received when asking it, might be ‘doing engineering’. However, it would seem that within sociology at large this is unlikely to be considered an interesting answer; indeed, it may even be found to be evading or concealing more fundamental and important issues for society. In the sociological literature when the question is raised as to what the engineer is doing, it is not put in such a way as to be asking about what the engineer is doing when they do engineering; rather, it is to ask about the engineer’s role in society, the contributions which engineers, by doing their engineering work, make to the condition of the society in general: are they ‘heroes or villains’, in respect of improving people’s condition of life? The favourite answer appears to be: ‘they used to be thought of, and they used to think of themselves as, heroes who were making people’s lives less burdensome and giving them greater freedom through new technologies, but the time has come to reconsider that assessment and view them more as villains, guilty of increasing the enslavement of individuals to corporate organisation or to power itself.’

One of the sources for the current sociological attitude is Martin Heidegger who condemned modern technology because it renders human existence inauthentic (Heidegger 1977). This unhappy outcome has been taken up as part of the current sociological infatuation with post-modernism which views virtually all social relations as a species of power struggle. In this struggle, engineers are viewed as forcing technology and ways of doing things upon people who do not really want them, and of occupying a power position which they employ to restructure people’s lives for them, whether they want this or not. Even if engineers, and technologists in general, are not acting malignly on their own behalves, they can alternatively be viewed as the willing tools of powerful others, equipping them with enhanced control over the rest of society.

Engineers have also been seen to be the bearers of a discredited ideology or worldview. It is argued that they are one of the last bastions of a hubristic ‘rationalistic’ outlook which supposed that all things were to be comprehended and controlled through the application of reason, particularly through logico-mathematical symbolisation. It is argued, however, that this project for the ‘Expansion of Reason’, is no more than the seemingly reputable representative of a much more disreputable social process of ‘rationalisation’, wherein all activities and relationships are transformed into calculative transactions, devoid of meanings, with human beings treated in a way previously reserved for the components in mechanical systems.

So, how do we consider the different answers to the question ‘What are you doing?’, which is the engineers’ answer in terms of the description of the technical

work they are involved in, and the sociologists' answer in terms of the role they are playing in society. Something is common to both, however, as both descriptions are done in *natural language*. The engineer does not answer in mathematical symbols; instead, the answer is understandable to any natural language user, though there may be some technical terms that need explanation. Likewise for the sociological answer, which is also understandable to any natural language user, though there there may be some technical terms that need explanation. We might say that on the one hand we have a member's account and on the other hand a professional sociological account.

b) Sociology as a natural language exercise (from Re-Working Ethnomethodology)

'Member' is an early idea in ethnomethodology that caused some confusion. It was assimilated into the body of sociological thought by equating it with sociological models of a person such as Weber's 'actor', or by assuming that it was a synonym for 'belonging', as in 'a member of society'. The concept of 'member' has, however, far more radical consequences for the practice of sociology than is conveyed by either of these common interpretations. The reason for this is that it is implicated in two issues that have a bearing on the way in which sociologists have gone about describing social matters (such as what engineers are doing): first that sociology is inescapably a natural language exercise and, following on from this, second, as a natural language exercise it embodies common sense knowledge of social structure.

Garfinkel and Sacks articulate the idea of 'member' as a mastery of natural language, which they understand thus:

We offer the observation that persons, because of the fact that they are heard to be speaking a natural language, *somehow* are heard to be engaged in the objective production and objective display of common-sense knowledge of everyday activities as observable and reportable phenomena. We ask what is it about natural language that permits speakers and auditors to hear, and in other ways witness, the objective production and objective display of common-sense knowledge, and of practical circumstances, practical actions, and practical sociological reasoning as well. What is it about natural language that make these phenomena observable-reportable, that is, *account-able* phenomena? For speakers and auditors, the practices of natural language somehow exhibit these phenomena in the particulars of speaking, and *that* these phenomena are exhibited is thereby itself made exhibitable in further description, remark, questions, and in other ways for the telling. (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970: 342)

In this excerpt, Garfinkel and Sacks are underscoring the fact that in speaking a natural language persons display their common-sense knowledge of social structure and that by extension it follows that this is the case whether or not it is a sociologist or a lay person doing sociological description. Specifically, in another study, Sacks (1963) reflected upon the fact that not only do persons conduct much of their social lives in natural language but that sociological descriptions of those lives is itself conducted in natural language. Sacks invoked Durkheim's *Suicide* to make the point that this often means that sociologists and the people whose actions they account for have the same interests in the natural language categories they both employ in their descriptions. Thus *as* a natural language category, suicide leads to a number of practical problems such as explaining a particular suicide or variations in the rate of suicide. This is because in using the natural language category 'suicide', common-sense knowledge of suicide in society is displayed, whether or not it is a professional or a lay sociologist using the term.

Thus arguments that assert the dependence of sociology on common-sense may be viewed as meaning that they present a *principled* objection to sociology. They may be viewed as saying that sociologists cannot criticise 'common sense' because it is *incorrigible*. Does this mean, it may be wondered, that sociologists have to accept that 'common sense' never makes mistakes, for then, of course, they could not criticise it?

However, the arguments that we are considering about 'ordinary language' and 'common sense' are *not*, as they may be commonly viewed, *epistemological* in character. Rather they have a *descriptive* character. The notion of 'common sense', as we are examining it, is not intended to single out some set of propositions which are ubiquitously and invariably accepted. It is, rather, designed to point to a feature of the way in which the members of society treat one another. Within society persons expect, indeed *require* of one another, a manifest grasp of 'common sense'. Members of society quite simply require of each other a knowledge of, an ability to figure out for themselves, an indefinite multiplicity of matters, ones which are assigned the status 'obvious' for any *competent* member of the society. However, when we say that the 'members of society' require such a grasp, we intend to include 'professional sociologists' within the assertion and intend, further, that it must apply to them in the course of their conduct as professional sociologists, as much as it does in their 'off duty' lives. We further say that, though sociologists, supposedly operating in their professional capacities, and talking in the abstract, evince reservations about the validity of certain 'common sense' notions which are supposedly current in the society-at-large, this does not comprise an actual, systematic withdrawal from the 'common sense' understandings of the society at large. On the contrary, it involves, at best, a selective citation of dubious 'popular preconceptions' along with a continuing subscription to, and practical invocation and enforcement of, conceptions of the 'obvious'; conceptions which are assuredly shared with the members of society at large. Many sociologists, like Durkheim,

evinced scepticism about the adequacy of 'ordinary language' to talk about the real nature of things, and advocate the substitution of scientifically engendered technical terms for those of the ordinary language. However, our contention that sociology is *overwhelmingly* a 'natural language' pursuit remains patently true: there may be some 'jargon' in sociology, but sociology is written in English, French, German, or some other natural language, and not in 'sociologese' or exclusively in mathematical equations.

There are a number of ways in which attempts can and have been made to handle this problem.

i) The ideal of explicitness

The fact that sociologists, like other members of the society, *rely* upon this 'common sense knowledge of social structure', is only, however, a problem relative to the ideal of exhaustive explicitness. In this respect it might be imagined that a way around it could be devised which itself orients to the ideal of explicitness. If this 'common sense knowledge of social structures' is implicitly involved in sociological work, then the problem can, presumably, be overcome by the spelling out of this 'common sense knowledge' and by making it part of the 'official theory' rather than allowing it to continue in use as an 'unofficial' one.

However, there are some *prima facie* reasons for thinking that this solution will not work. Harold Garfinkel's 'experiments' which were concerned with the spelling out of 'taken for granted' presuppositions of our ordinary activities indicate that the attempt to make even the set of presuppositions associated with a brief episode of conversation fully explicit 'multiplies the features of the task' (Garfinkel 1967: 25ff.). That is, each elicitation itself requires further explication, as does that explication, and so on. The task simply expands without limit.

ii) Sociology as a rival to common-sense knowledge of social structure

However, the problem does not reside just at this level but is also implicated in thinking that 'common sense knowledge of social structures' is akin to the professional sociologist's theory and is therefore a putative rival to it. This way of thinking would lead us to try to spell out the theory, and then, like any other theory, we can assuredly test it, to see if it is correct or not. Unfortunately, matters are more complicated, than this.

In order to try to develop this point, we can first note that we have not invoked 'common sense knowledge of social structures' on the grounds of its *empirical soundness*. The point about 'common sense' is sociological, not epistemological, and it is that matters of 'common sense knowledge' are *socially sanctioned*. They are matters which are 'correct' in the sense that persons are entitled to employ them and are entitled to expect the support of others in so doing. That is, they are

‘correct’ in the sense of being *appropriately* deployed, *properly* invoked in the depiction *and the conduct* of the events in question, where relevant standards for correctness and appropriateness are not universal; or at least sociologists have no grounds for assuming that they are.

For example, sociological observations done within a particular setting, such as the work-a-day setting of a department store, whilst they may involve careful observation, careful note taking, careful analysis and the like, will not require that these activities are a precursor for deciding how, for example, to *classify* the people one has been observing. This is because, merely through participation in the work of the department store, a way of classifying the people is provided. There is the ready-to-hand division between ‘staff’ and ‘customers’ and it is in terms of these that the sociological observations will be cast in the first place. In writing down observations about the department store the sociologist is inevitably going to begin by writing such things as ‘a customer wanders up to the perfume counter and asks the sales assistant where the bedroom furnishings are to be found’ or ‘sales assistant holds customer’s coat whilst customer tries on jacket’, etc. Thus the sociologist does not have to observe a good many activities in the department store or to try out various ways of classifying people to see which is the best, perhaps concluding at the end of a patient exploration of this issue that ‘sales staff’ and ‘customer’ are the appropriate pairing. On the contrary, the sociologist *starts out* with these categories and invokes them to describe what is going on. It would be naive to do otherwise for, of course, the sociological observer knows, as *anyone* knows, that these are the categories which are made relevant by the organisation of the place, and which belong to the affairs of such a place as a department store.

iii) Treating common-sense as sociological theorising

With respect to these issues there is an inclination to talk of ‘common sense sociological theorising’ but we would prefer to talk about ‘common sense sociological *analysis*.’

Our reluctance to talk about ‘common sense sociological theorising’ stems from the fact that we suspect many sociologists have been misled by this expression. It is tempting to construe the notion of ‘common sense sociological theorising’ as meaning that members of society stand to their own activities and to each other in much the same relationship that a would-be ‘theoretical’ investigator would stand to their activities. Thus it might be construed that members of society and sociological investigators are primarily concerned to provide a good empirical theory of those activities. In this respect if the members of society were engaged in such theorising then it would be entirely reasonable to suppose that their theorising work might be poor, largely ineffective, substantially erroneous, and potentially improved upon. It is as though, for *both* those involved in carrying out activities and those observing them from a theoretical point of view, the activities

were undertaken, *and then* some theoretical speculation would be made about the best categories with which to differentiate the persons and their activities, in order to determine the general principles from which to derive the distribution of activities from those classifications. On this argument, people would be portrayed as going about their activities such as we see in, for example, department stores, as if, having observed themselves and each other going about those activities, they had concluded that ‘customer’ and ‘staff’ were empirically sound categories to capture that pattern of activities. Attendant to this portrayal there would, of course, be the possibility that a professional sociological theorist might now come along and discover that this pair of categories—‘staff’ and ‘customer’ were not all that empirically effective and that some technical, sociological, categories are more empirically accurate and discriminating.

However, the notions ‘customer’ and ‘staff’ are not theoretical notions by which the affairs of department stores may be covered. They are, of course, notions which are employed as *part of the organisation* of department stores: for example, there will be notices in store windows saying ‘Sales staff required’ or signs on doors saying ‘Staff only’ and ‘Customer complaints’. It is not as if the observable activities occurring within a department store are themselves properly understandable or describable *independently* of such categories, that we could first describe what people did in terms *other than* those of ‘sales staff’ and ‘customer’ and *then* determine whether these categories provided a good basis on which to re-describe those categories. For example, suppose that one person says to another, ‘Where can I find the perfume counter?’ and the other says ‘I’m sorry, I don’t work here’, what can we say about such an exchange? If we see it in a departmental store then we will, we suggest, *automatically*, entirely without thought or reflection, assume that the first speaker is a ‘customer’ who has presumed that the other person is a ‘sales assistant’ familiar with the store’s layout, and that in this they have been mistaken: the person so approached has understood the mistake and disaffiliates from the identification ‘sales staff’, telling their questioner that they are ‘just another customer’.⁴

Of course people make mistakes. It might be that our account of the events above were themselves inaccurate. It might be that the first speaker was not a ‘customer’ but was, for instance, someone coming for a job interview, and so on.

⁴ We are grateful to Mike Lynch for pointing out that: ‘It is commonplace in sociology, and has been for a long time, to deploy the notion of ‘role’ to handle actions accomplished under the rubric of commonsense categories. The theorizing is then done at a ‘higher’ or ‘more comprehensive’ level in a hierarchy, such that roles are properties of an organization, which, in turn, is a specification of a capitalist institution and so forth. It is not so much that members are made out to be theorists, but that their commonplace actions and relevant categories are subsumed under a theoretical hierarchy specified by the sociologist. Moreover, the ‘actor’ who enacts a ‘role’ is presented as being largely unaware of the theoretically postulated structure that organizes the role and the actions that fulfil it.’

These would, however, be mere quibbles with respect to our point, which is not that ‘customer’ and ‘sales assistant’ are the *only* categories usable in departmental stores, but that categories of *the order of* ‘sales assistant’ etc. are irreducibly usable in characterising social activities. To offer alternative accounts to our description in terms of ‘sales assistant’ etc., one invokes alternative *possible* categories, such as ‘job interviewee’ but this, like its predecessor, is one which obtains its relevance from the fact we’re talking about a ‘departmental store’ and because such categories are ‘indigenous’ to the organisation of such places (not because they have been worked out by a sociological theorist).

We are not arguing about the correct use of the categories ‘customer’ and ‘sales staff’ in a particular case, but about their ubiquitous relevance, *just by virtue of it being a departmental store*. Indeed, if we did in a given instance make a mistake, the categories would still be relevant to the categorisation of the mistake made: if we said, for example, that we took the enquirer at the perfume counter for another customer, it would be easy to understand our mistake, it being quite ‘natural’ to suppose that another person is a customer, but it would be puzzling if we said that we had wrongly taken the inquirer to be an astronaut. The latter category has no ‘natural’ place in the organisation of department store affairs in the way that ‘customer’ does. Just to reinforce our point: if a person walks up to a cash till, punches open the drawer and takes out cash, it makes a massive difference to the nature of their activity as to whether they are classified as ‘sales staff’ or not, for if they occupy the position of ‘sales staff’ then they may well have the legitimate right to take cash from the till whereas someone classifiable only as ‘customer’ would have no such right, and the removal of the cash would be theft.⁵

The categories relevant to the description of people’s actions are ones which are socially provided and socially sanctioned. It is prescribed to us, as members of the society, that we shall monitor and report the activities in department stores in terms of the categories ‘sales staff’ and ‘customers’ and these categories have, *in that place*, an ‘omnirelevant’ character. It is not, either, that these categories are for the extrinsic purposes of an observer, ways of construing those activities, but their relevance is, of course, assured because those in department stores require of each other that they act *under the auspices* of these same categories, that people conduct themselves as (appropriately) ‘customer’ or ‘sales staff’, that they manage their transactions in terms of those categories. For example, in the case of our query, the inquirer is seen, by the one being asked the question, to be looking for a member of the sales staff.

Within the context of conducting everyday affairs, we would be very naive if we did not begin from recognition of the relevance of ‘sales staff’ and ‘customer’

⁵ Again we are grateful to Mike Lynch for pointing out that: ‘This does not mean, for example, that classification as ‘sales staff’ protects against charges of theft, but that it would be relevant to the ‘analysis’ of the action as a specific kind of theft particular to staff, such as unwarrentedly raiding the till of another staff member, embezzling, and so forth.’

categories to the organisational setting ‘department store’ and of their ubiquitous relevance in the organisation of activities within that place. If as adult, ‘wide awake’ members of our society we failed to appreciate the role of such categories in the mutual orientations of those carrying on the activities to these categories then we would, again, truly earn the characterisation ‘cultural dopes’. The points we have so far made are matters that *everyone* knows. Were we, in practical life, to behave as though these things were questionable then we would expect to be met with resistance by others, we would expect that they would assert the relevance of ‘sales staff’ and ‘customer’ in such a context over any disclaimers that we might make. Other members of the society would not accept our claims that we genuinely were not aware that ‘customer’ and ‘sales staff’ provided the category pairing relevant to observing, reporting and conducting affairs within a ‘departmental store’, would reject our claims of ignorance, however sincere they might seem. Were we to persist in such claims, then we have no doubt that others would eventually—were they prepared even to have anything to do with us—to question our competence, wonder if we were in our right minds, and so on.

It is crucial that we make clear, at this point, the sense in which we are insisting upon the *indispensability* of these ‘pre-theoretical’ categories to the sociological theorist. Sociology is dominated by the concern for ‘explanation’ and so arguments are usually quickly scanned for their relevance to explanation, and arguments such as those we have just given will, in such a circumstance, be understood to be arguing that such categories must be used in the explanation of conduct, and therefore as denying that sociological theorists can coin their own categories for use in explanation. This is not, however, the burden of our actual argument, which is that categories of the order of ‘customer’ and ‘sales staff’ are indispensable to sociological theorists by virtue of the fact that their use is essential to the identification of whatever phenomena they might purport to explain: those categories are essential to providing sociologists with phenomena for their theories to talk about.

Insofar as sociologists propose to study ‘social action’, which, on an overwhelming scale is what, nowadays, they propose to do, then the above arguments have an important application. It is in terms of the ‘common sense understandings’ *internal* to a social setting, and to the categories which are part of that common sense, that the identity of social actions is decided, what someone is actually doing, or whatever action they are performing. *Whatever* sociologists may subsequently go on to say about them, however, they may find, in terms of their analytical and investigative needs, that they need to *reclassify* people’s actions. Nevertheless, the fact remains that *the actions* they are reclassifying are ones which are not, themselves, to be identified in terms of the sociological theorist’s terminology but which are unavoidably identified in terms of categories *indigenous* to the social setting itself.

The classical situation in sociology is that arguments of the hue we are presenting here are roundly denounced by many sociologists⁶ who, at the same time, confirm the correctness of their arguments by their own practices. Thus, the suggestion that such ‘common sense categories’ are irreducibly indispensable to sociological work are denounced as imposing unacceptable limitations on the objectives and possibilities of sociological theorists whilst, of course, those same sociologists contentedly continue to talk about, for instance ‘management/worker’ relations, or about ‘teacher/pupil transactions’ or ‘relations within the family, or between husband and wife’ and so on and so forth. Whatever, *sociologically* speaking, they might wish to say about it, formulations of their phenomena will necessarily involve the invocation of *socially prescribed* categories.

c) The status of sociological descriptions of engineering (from Engineering Investigations)

One approach, to inquiring into the question of what the work of engineers amounts to is, thus, to *re-describe* what they do when they are engaged in engineering in terms of a characterisation of their social roles as engineers. Why do we say *re-describe*? Because whatever else sociologists say of members of society, members of society (as noted in the extract above) have ways of saying what they do, and these ways of speaking and what sociologists have to say are not necessarily the same. Thus, in asking a particular engineer ‘what are you doing?’ we never have received, indeed we would have been astounded if we had received (and indeed readers would have been equally astounded if we reported that we had), the following sort of reply: ‘contributing to the comprehensive rationalisation of life’.⁷ Rather than answering the questions in the terms offered by sociology, the engineers would often answer the question *from within the course of their work*, which meant that they would answer it in terms of details of their current work activities: ‘I have a meeting with the operating system module team this morning and since I’ve never worked with this system before I thought I’d better mug up on it’; ‘there’s a problem with the recovery cycle and I’m going to cause a jam so I can watch what happens’; ‘Derrick can’t get access to my directory so

⁶ An early example of such denunciations in the history of ethnomethodology is Goldthorpe (1973). A more recent one is Maynard and Clayman (2018).

⁷ We are indebted to Paul Smith for pointing out the similarity to the argument made by Lynch: ‘Even when a cultural analyst supposes that the relevant theoretical reduction is ‘inscribed’ in the field of practice as the result of pervasive metaphysical beliefs, a familiar burden remains – namely, to demonstrate that the ‘myth’ in question indeed operates in the situation described. ... [T]he history of social theory should give us little confidence that social theories of practice will solve the familiar equivocalities associated with imputing ideological ‘beliefs’ to actors in concrete situations when the actors do not explicitly express or acknowledge them.’ Teachers, for example, do not say, “Yes, I happen to believe that meaning can be fully encoded in language forms” (Lynch 1995: 595).

we're trying to find out why'; 'I'm trying to figure out how the other modules can interface with my faults module'. Granting, just for the sake of argument that they were indeed agents of power or bearers of worldviews then, at least in terms of our experiences, they could only be so in some *unwitting* fashion. That is, it was not as if they embarked upon their careers with this ambition in mind, or in the course of their careers discovered that they could do this. Even if we granted this and agreed that the engineers were unwittingly contributing to a world-encompassing project of the virtually endless rationalisation of life, it also was not likely that if asked what they were doing in the midst of doing their work they would give that reply.

The terms of their descriptions of their activities were the state-of-the-art terms that referenced some technical undertaking (such as those above), or the organisational terms of the company (filling in my PA), or the vernacular terms of their relationships with others (helping John out). It would characteristically require explanation from the sociologist as to what it meant to talk about a comprehensive rationalisation, for the engineer to see how this could apply to the case of his or her own work. In this sense, the things that sociologists describe individuals or groups, such as engineers, as doing, for example, contributing to the comprehensive rationalisation of social life, is something which is done in a 'secondary' way when they are doing some other, more 'primary' activity, whatever that is.

Why do we say that the sociologist's description is 'secondary' to the 'primary' description produced by members of society? The reason for so saying is that what members of society, engineers or others, unwittingly do, as described by sociologists, is, and must be, dependent upon the things that the engineers 'wittingly' do, as they would describe their own actions. It is just not possible to say of something that it is something else without first understanding and knowing what it is in the first place. Thus, for example, to say of engineers when they describe what they are doing as 'placing torroids on this steel carcass in order to drain off any static charge buildups' that they are contributing to a process of world domination by mutli-national conglomerates, is dependent upon the description and recognition of their activities in the terms of their own description that they provide in the first place. Without first being able to recognise what they are doing as an actual job of work as opposed to play-acting, whiling away an afternoon in the insane asylum, or whatever, the description of what they are doing when they do *just that* could not be provided. The description of the work activity, in its own terms, just has to precede the description of the work activity in terms of the sociological thesis. It is this primary description that fuels the sociologist's secondary description, and in this sense, then, an approach to the phenomena of what engineers' work amounts to that ask questions about, for instance, the social role of the engineer *re-describes* what engineers do.

CONCLUSION: BACK TO MY WORDS

It might be a surprise to many who are familiar with Wes Sharrock's work in philosophy, his eminence as a Wittgensteinian scholar, as a scourge of cognitivist theory, a clear expounder of sociology for students, or a keystone of ethnomethodology, that he has also spent countless weeks doing field work. His quest however, to ground sociology and philosophy in the everyday world of peoples' experiences and the language they use to describe that world, rather than within any current social theory or philosophical representation, has required a grounding in empirical investigation. In this piece, I have tried to demonstrate how his interest in empirical investigation and in natural language use, are interwoven with his concern for how sociology may be done. Thus, as we proceeded to write about the work of engineers, we inevitably had to read what others had written about engineering, and once again we were struck, as we had been for other studies we had undertaken together and separately, by the marked difference between the descriptions given by the participants of what they were doing and the sociological descriptions we had to read. This difference is brought into sharp contrast through empirical study and necessitates a need to clarify what this difference consists of; clarification that can come about through a consideration of the fact that all description is done in natural language. For Sharrock, the three interests have always gone hand in hand.

Reflecting on Sharrock's work over the decades it occurs to me that it may also be a surprise for some that these interests have been played out, not only for sociology and philosophy, but also for disciplines associated with *Design*, *Human Computer Interaction*, and *Computer Supported Co-operative Work*—but that is another part of the Sharrock story.⁸

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⁸ Sharrock was part of the Europe-wide EU funded FP3-ESPRIT 3 project: Computational Mechanisms of Interaction in Cooperative Work. The project brought computer scientists and social scientists across seven European universities together to develop Computer Supported Co-operative Work systems designed to work within real-world contexts. For examples of Sharrock's publications in areas of CSCW, Design, and HCI see Sharrock and Anderson (1994), Bowers et al (1995), Button and Sharrock (1996; 2009).

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