

# *Ethnographies of Ordinary Moments*

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**Bachelor of Arts (Honours)**

## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Eric Whittle

## ABSTRACT

This exploration into social meanings packs along with it an assumption that social studies have yet to arrive at any ‘moment’ of potential in which they can confidently set about describing human behaviour in a way that makes the topic analytically familiar, and therefore warrants the analysis. Indeed, I take it for now that people’s actions are new and strange. There is a small band of the ‘self-disciplined’ who view the social landscapes around them with fresh eyes; the occasional philosopher, some of the historians, ethnomethodologists, and conversation analysts, plus a few of the anthropologists and ethnographers. But they are exceptions. The problem appears to be this: Because everyone, analyst *and* lay person, is a committed expert on social behaviour, very few have felt the need to attempt an agreement on the details; for example, the profoundly-social properties of the very language we all use to describe it. Practitioners of natural science are not simply observing reality but displaying also their astonishment, frustrations, equivocations, justifications, agreements, criticisms, occasional relief, and other tokens of it. If the early astronomers and chemists had an advantage, it was the lack of experts bending their ears.

Accumulating empirical descriptions of social events will not necessarily result in a progressive discipline, only the potential for a workable philosophy that leaves the landscape unchanged. After that, who knows? But the potential offers more towards a warrant than what currently stands as social science. In the following chapters, the reader will find descriptions of social objects that appear in a court of law, and in settings that involve what we like to gloss as humour, laughter, and play. The analytic logic of these descriptions stands before the action and knows how to do it (such logic is not a reference to something hidden behind or within). This type of understanding features in a growing canon of studies towards which the following project aspires.

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## INTRODUCTION

*First, mark the unremarkable*

There is a finely-woven descriptive/intuitive approach to the study of human interaction which, for half a century now, has been instrumental for a sociology located at the confluence of two streams of scholarship; one that flows through Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology (EM) and the other through conversation analysis (CA), an empirical project assembled by Harvey Sacks, Gail Jefferson, and others in the 1960s (see Coulter, 1990, for a collection of foundational analyses).<sup>1</sup> Individual practitioners often affiliate more readily with one stream or the other so that bloodletting over policy matters regularly features in the EMCA minutes. Collectively, analysts agree to view their topics with fresh eyes but while some studies are classed as naïve and having accomplished little, others appear to have stumbled at what Wittgenstein sees as one of philosophy's great difficulties: "to say no more than we know" (1972: 45).<sup>2</sup> The following might be said to show symptoms of both conditions.

The title for this thesis – *Ethnographies of Ordinary Moments* – is inspired by David Silverman's description of an approach by which any social analyst can remain alive to, and astounded by, the meanings of our "Innumerable Inscrutable Habits" (2007: 11-36). There are analytic rewards in making the effort to see the mundane as new and strange. As Silverman points out, one need not be put off by an apparent undercurrent of mysticism in the term *ethnographies* (derived from Greek via the French); simply put, they are writings (*graphies*) about folk (*ethno*). But while ethnographies presumably investigate what we like to gloss as 'culture', ethnographies-of-ordinary-moments embraces any study whose



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arguments are not built around transcendent conceptual structures (of, for example, race, class, gender, personality, motive, and emotion, among others) so elaborately assembled in formal philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, literary studies, and so on, including their ‘postmodern’ variants. Rather, ethnographies-of-ordinary-moments attempt to describe the intelligibility of a cohort of practices, according to the situated logic of its participating members; and at the same time, specifically ignore *a priori* ambitions and therefore *a priori* concepts to problematise or correct them.

This project is related (perhaps a poor cousin) to the important works of Eric Livingston, particularly his *Ethnographies of Reason* where he explores what he calls “reasoning in the wild” (2008: 19); the situated, practical reasoning required to be competent in daily activities such as playing chequers, doing jigsaws, doing origami, conducting psychological experiments, and computer programming. According to Livingston, none of these domains – including the latter – have logical ascendancy: “Rather than seeing formal reasoning and machine-based reasoning [people reasoning about computers] as clarifying reasoning *per se*, we can view them as forms of reasoning specific to the collectives that engage in them” (2008: 266).

### *Agreeing on the local details*

Clarity and doubt, one defiant and the other rarely satisfied, are twins born to plague one’s writing but the writer has little choice but to love and nurture them. Restless doubt brings into question the way that sociology, or indeed any discipline which demands explanations

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of the nature of human social behaviour, i.e., the nature of ‘intentions’, manages the controversies hounding its topics. There is room to argue the case, considered later in Chapter 6 using examples from the histories of bio-chemistry and physics (although any histories of knowledge would serve), that in spite of its resources and ambitions a discipline such as sociology still struggles to produce a warrant for assuming this class of topics in the first place. This statement does not in any way imply that the stock of writings from which the sociology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century draws its ideas is somehow irrelevant. *That* would be inconceivable and ignores the conditions for evolving knowledge; all such writings have their uses. But in the absence of any professional agreement in the field on how to topicalize actions of human beings, neither profound questions as to essences, nor the passion and honour that prompt the asking, are in themselves warrants. Rather, there are historical reasons to suggest that growth of inquiry depends much on “asking the right question at the right time” (Koestler, 1989: 260, footnote).<sup>3</sup> That is, in the tortuous histories of disciplines one finds intermittent periods in which disputes over descriptions and conceptualisation are more-or-less brought to terms so that it makes sense to continue investigations. But, for the analyst, these controversial details are not so much settled in preparation for the final task, the triumphant explanation of sheer nature. They *are* the task. These are clues as to the type of approach taken in what follows, and Chapter Six *Reflections* will provide further insight into the type of logic and self-discipline that might be required to view the social world afresh.

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### *Synopses of chapters 1-6 and conclusion*

Chapter 1 *Notes on Guilt* goes to work on the commonsense notion of incrimination in the courtroom; analysing, while attempting to minimise circular descriptions, how a particular class of incrimination is done – i.e., it attempts to maintain the study topic rather than allowing the topic to simply become a generic resource for further speculative descriptions. The study is necessarily empirical. Data from the proceedings of a case in the District Court of Western Australia plays a crucial role. The analysis is restricted to only a few sentences extracted from two days of official recordings, and the focus is deliberate. In order for the writing not to be overwhelmed by the volume of details around the social objects that ceaselessly unfold before us, one is prompted to economise with the data. Nonetheless, it is enough to highlight a developing investigative logic by which a discipline like sociology might resolve potential inconsistencies in its explanations of human behaviour.

Chapter 2 *Notes on Reported Speech* is in effect an extension of Chapter 1, exploring another feature of the same data. It takes into account what is being done when someone (in this case, a state prosecutor) reports his or her version of past talk, that is, when someone perhaps utters, “I said...” or, “he said...” or, “Marie said...”, and then reiterates the supposed words. The conversation analyst must be cautious with the apparent authenticity of reported speech, even when it appears as evidence in the highly regulated environment of a courtroom. Things are not as they seem.

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Chapter 3 *Notes on Humour* is the first of a series of chapters that investigate a concept commonly glossed as ‘humour’. When one lays out the popular metaphysical explanations of humour alongside everyday understandings of the local setting in which something “funny” is deemed to have occurred, one finds little if anything to correlate them. But because these routine understandings are an indispensable mechanism by which we interact, they are, sociologically at least, well-worth investigating; they are not trivial. A joke or a round of jokes, for example, is a routine object that can have important consequences for the roles played out in the scene into which it is introduced.

Chapter 4 *Notes on Laughter* explores the mistaken assumption that a convenient, generic conception of laughter can be simply fused into studies on humour. A conversation analytic approach can cut through the vagueness. Conversation analysis has a long tradition of investigations into expressions of laughter, and from it, one finds no support for the perception that laughter is simply some kind of uncontrollable physiological response to humorous events around us. On the other hand, there is evidence among the details to suggest that the sequential arrangement of laugh tokens in a conversation is a practical method of arranging (for now) the roles and relationships of those persons who are present on the scene.

Chapter 5 *Notes on Play* also reviews a common assumption; one that correlates humour with play. This chapter includes analyses of what is often construed as play behaviour in both human and non-human animal environments. If one observes and describes the

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sequenced programmes of play rather than relentlessly perpetuating a discussion around transcendent motives or instincts that might cause it – i.e., one emphasises *how*, empirically, play is done rather than *why* – then what emerges are descriptions of social objects, otherwise passed over, that have particular relevance as accounts of *members-of-an-environment-emerging-here-and-now*. There is room to suggest that these objects might be of primary interest to sociologists. While speculations on, say, emotions, predispositions, or genetic influences are not necessarily ruled out, they are set-aside for an indefinite period.

Chapter 6 *Reflections* departs from the style of analysis set out in the previous five chapters. Instead, it becomes an historical exercise. With the use of empirical material from historical documents, there is an attempt to analyse how a discipline is grounded over time. This chapter suggests that sociology is a *piecemeal* discipline underpinned by qualitative descriptions of its topics, and located well-within the domain of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Two case studies illustrate the argument that even well-established disciplines (in this case, biochemistry and quantum mechanics) whose warrants can be found in quantitative methods, have qualitative underpinnings that are not simply relegated. There is an emphasis on the later work of Wittgenstein. Also, there is discussion which includes the writings of Schutz and Garfinkel, and includes Lena Jayyusi's approach to moral order.

The conclusion suggests that a sociologist intending to view his or her topic afresh might do better than to naïvely assume language-games that have been formulated for other

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disciplines, because their rules are potentially limiting for sociological analyses which are not explaining reality but attempting to describe the situated social tokens by which reality is acknowledged.<sup>5</sup> An example taken here is the easy expropriation of cognitive-psychological concepts for the explanation of members' interactions. The conclusion also includes some notes on the ethnomethodological conception of membership, and addresses the peremptory "so what?" question sometimes put to studies of ordinary moments.

## TRANSCRIPT SYMBOLS

<i>Symbols</i>	<i>Definition</i>
[ ]	Brackets indicate overlapping utterances.
=	Equal marks indicate contiguous utterances, or continuation of the same utterance to the next line.
(.)	Period within parentheses indicates micro pause.
(2.0)	Number within parentheses indicates pause of length in approximate seconds.
ye:s	Colon indicates stretching of sound it follows.
.	Period indicates falling intonation.
yes,	Comma indicates relatively constant intonation.
yes?	Question mark indicates upward intonation.
yes!	Exclamation mark indicates animated tone.
yes-	Single dash indicates abrupt sound cutoff.
<u>yes</u>	Underlining indicates emphasis.
YES	Capital letters indicate increased volume.
°yes°	Degree marks indicate decreased volume of materials between.
hhh	h indicates audible aspiration, possibly laughter.
•hhh	Raised, preceding period indicates inbreath audible aspiration, possibly laughter.
ye(hh)s	h within parentheses indicate within-speech aspiration, possibly laughter.
((cough))	Items within double parentheses indicate some sound or feature of the talk which is not easily transcribable, e.g. “((in falsetto)).”
(yes)	Parentheses indicate transcriber doubt about hearing of passage.

## TRANSCRIPT SYMBOLS

- ↑yes      Upward arrow indicates rising intonation of sound it precedes.
- ↓yes      Downward arrow indicates falling intonation of sound it precedes.
- £yes£     Pound signs indicate “smile voice” delivery of materials in between.

(Glenn, 2003: xi-xii)