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## *Cognitive activities without cognition? ethnomethodological investigations of selected 'cognitive' topics*



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**ABSTRACT** Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (ethno/CA) investigate many of the activities that are featured in the cognitive sciences. These include memory, learning, perception, and calculative activities. However, for ethno/CA such activities are not necessarily 'cognitive', and their investigation *as activities* does not necessarily require observation or speculation about what goes on within the mind or brain. This article briefly discusses three examples of nominal 'cognitive' activities: looking-for/seeing; failing to recall; and counting things and people. The discussion suggests how these examples can be understood and elucidated in a way that has little to do with any existing program in cognitive science. The modest aim of the article is not to persuade readers that ethno/CA can contribute to cognitive studies. Instead, I argue that ethno/CA offers a path not taken in cognitive science: a viable research program for investigating nominally 'cognitive' themes without trading in mentalistic notions of cognition.

**KEY WORDS:** *action, cognition, counting, ethnomethodology, forgetting, looking*

... there is no reason to look under the skull since nothing of interest is to be found there but brains. (Garfinkel, 1963: 190)

... don't worry about the brains that these persons couldn't have but which the objects seem to require. Our task is, in this sense, to build their brains. (Sacks, 1989: 200)

*Cognition* is a general category that collects an open-ended list of terms, often including memory (recall, recollection, remembering/forgetting), learning, perception, comprehension, calculation, linguistic ability and performance, and problem solving. Less often, and more elusively, it can be said to include consciousness, awareness, and understanding. Cognition and its subsidiary

terms are attributed to various processes, functions, faculties, abilities, and activities. Sometimes they are localized within the brain, or even ascribed to the brain as an acting agent, while at other times they are identified with the mind, or simply the person or organism. Generally, cognition includes 'higher' faculties or abilities of humans and some other animals. A clear trend and partially successful professional strategy in academic psychology, and increasingly in philosophy, is to identify the study of cognition with progress in the neurosciences.

I believe that everything I have said thus far should be obvious and uncontroversial. It also should be apparent that the cognitive sciences are doing rather well at present, and that proponents of cognitive psychology and philosophy often express supreme confidence that they are on the path of a genuine, cumulative, and productive natural science. They can point to technological breakthroughs in recent years that enable real-time visualization and localization of brain processes observed in living human subjects. Although the cognitive science movement's affiliation to the neurosciences does not mean that it has overcome persistent lines of criticism (Button et al., 1995; Bennett and Hacker, 2003), proponents can (and often do) point to such technical breakthroughs as evidence that their critics are stuck in the past and resistant to scientific progress. For those of us associated with ethnomethodology and conversation(al) analysis (ethno/CA), a decision to join the cognitivist movement might seem (to pardon the expression) a no-brainer: we can trade the sense of isolation that comes from being part of a small, scattered, fractious, and possibly declining field, for the sense of being part of a vibrant, robust, and forward-looking science of human behavior. Moreover, for many of us there may seem to be solid intellectual reasons for joining the movement, because, after all, we already study empirical phenomena such as speech production and recognition, recollection and forgetting, perceptual reports, and categorization. The fact that the cognitive sciences are now open to the ideas of 'distributed' and 'situated' cognition taking place in everyday settings should further encourage us to join the larger movement. However, for reasons that I shall elaborate in this brief article, I believe that ethnomethodology and CA offer an alternative empirical treatment of cognitive activities. I suspect that few proponents of the cognitive sciences are likely to find that alternative attractive, or even sensible, but I will argue for its integrity, empirical adequacy, and potential interest.

To begin, I will make a familiar argumentative move by noting that 'cognition' is a *word*, and that 'perception', 'learning' and the names for other subsidiary cognitive processes also are words. Of course, this does not mean that they are nothing but words or that these words refer to nothing real. Instead, I only mean to say that proximally, and unavoidably, they *are* words. As C. Wright Mills (1940), Kenneth Burke (1969 [1950]), and Peter Winch (1958) have done with words associated with *motivation* and *motives*, I will recommend that we examine how 'cognitive' words are used in various situations of conduct. However, I am less interested in elucidating verbal *attributions* or *references* to

cognition, or examining situated uses of, cognitive *vocabularies* ('remembering', 'learning' and the like), than in treating pragmatic *actions* or *performances* that evidently involve perception, recognition, recollection, and so forth, as researchable phenomena. Borrowing a notational convention from Garfinkel and Sacks (1970), we can bracket these activities in order to remind ourselves that *mentioning* (or glossing) them leaves their identifying details unspecified, and that an effort to specify their details may transform our initial sense of what *doing* [enacting, performing an instance of] the bracketed activity involves, *as an activity*. I will briefly discuss some examples, and will point to many others in the ethno/CA literature.

It would be tempting at this point to say that ethno/CA investigates a specific domain of situated cognition or distributed cognitive activity. The problem with such a proposal is that we should not assume that situated practices of remembering, learning, following instructions, and so forth, are all specifications of a single domain of cognitive activities. Consider the specific situations, interactions among persons and things, and practical actions glossed, for example, by *doing* [recalling an event in the past at the witness stand in a trial court], *doing* [looking for and seeing a Cerulean Warbler], *doing* [observing an optical pulsar for the first time], *doing* [counting legal votes in a presidential election], *doing* [categorizing a member as 'mother'], or *doing* [recognizing that a question has been asked, but not answered]. Put another way, if we were to say that all of these practices involve 'cognition', it is not clear what that word tells us about the contingencies of their singular performance. In the remainder of this article, I will briefly discuss three themes – looking for/seeing, (not) remembering, and counting – the names of which are *homonyms* for words in the cognitive science glossary: perception, memory, and computation. Briefly, I shall suggest that the homonymic relation between the cognitive terms and ethnomethodological themes covers over radically different conceptualizations and empirical treatments.

### *Looking-for/seeing*

Harold Garfinkel occasionally mentioned in lectures that 'looking' is not necessarily something done with the eyes, and that 'looking's work' (Garfinkel, 2002: 240) involves a site-specific collective apprehension of what is, or may be, *accountably* visible. Coulter and Parsons (1991) provide an illuminating inventory of the immense variety of 'perceptual verbs' (for example, looking for, looking at, perusing, scrutinizing, ogling, etc.) that connote highly particular situations involving relevancies that range well beyond individually located visual or cognitive functions. For a much simpler, more restricted, and loosely reconstructed instance of 'looking' consider what I earlier glossed as *doing* [looking for and seeing a Cerulean Warbler]. A Cerulian Warbler is a relatively uncommon species of warbler, of interest to casual birdwatchers as well as professional ornithologists. Imagine, for the moment, what it would take to look

for and see such a thing in the field. The action of looking-for, and the achievement of seeing, a Cerulean Warbler, would have to involve details that are not 'cognitive' and any strictly defined or exclusive sense: consulting field guides and range maps; getting word-of-mouth advice from an expert about when and where to look; mastering the use of binoculars and field guides; traveling to and positioning oneself quietly at a 'good' locale at daybreak; waiting quietly and alertly; using a tape-recording of the male's territorial song to provoke another male to come out of hiding to repel the rival; hearing the signature song of an unseen Cerulean Warbler hidden in the foliage; trying to spot identifying features of a tiny bird high in the foliage against a backlit sky, and so on. The items on this list are themselves glosses, inviting further examination of just how they are performed.

Some of the actions I have mentioned (for example, consulting a range map or recognizing a bird song) could be of interest to cognitive scientists, but such interest would very likely be so particular, selective, and abstracted from any continuous performance that we would quickly lose sight of the phenomenon of *doing* [looking for and seeing a Cerulean Warbler]. Moreover, the cognitivist account would be unlikely to provide useable instructions for the relevant practices. And while it seems undeniable that the instructed action of *doing* (looking for and seeing a Cerulean Warbler) involves visual perception ('Did you see the Cerulean?' – 'Yes!'), an analysis of the anatomy, physiology, and psychology of visual perception may tell us very little about what *looking* and *seeing* involve in this instance. At the same time, [looking for and seeing a Cerulean Warbler] *does* involve actual, investigable practices of 'looking for' and 'seeing'. By undertaking an ethnography (Lynch and Law, 1999) or praxiology (Coulter and Parsons, 1991), one can specify, or respecify (Garfinkel, 1991), what 'looking for' and 'seeing' require in such an instance, though the findings are likely to be off the beaten track of cognitive science.

### *(Failing to) recall*

Like looking and seeing, the vernacular expressions associated with remembering and forgetting, and the observable practices in which those expressions become intelligible and accountable, have no clear relation to a central cognitive capacity (memory). And yet, these 'surface' actions exhibit distinctive logical, strategic, and interactional properties. The following sequence from the Iran-Contra hearings provides a perspicuous instance:

Nields: Did you suggest to the Attorney General that maybe the diversion memorandum and the fact that there was a diversion need not ever come out?

North: Again, I don't recall that specific conversation at all, but I'm not saying it didn't happen.

Nields: You don't deny it?

North: No.

Nields: You don't deny suggesting to the Attorney General of the United States that he just figure out a way of keeping this diversion document secret?

North: I don't deny that I said it. I'm not saying I remember it either. (Lynch and Bogen, 1996: 195; North, 1987: 33)

This transcript is from the 1987 Joint US House–Senate Hearings on the Iran-Contra Hearings. The dialogue is organized in the manner of a cross-examination in which a witness is being asked to recall some significant details from the past. John Nields, counsel for the majority party on the investigating committee (at the time, the Democratic Party) is interrogating North about a document that authorized a 'diversion' of proceeds from secret arms sales to Iran to aid the 'Contra' forces attacking the socialist regime in Nicaragua. North has already admitted that copies of the document (including a possible signed original) were shredded prior to the investigation, but he has been vague about whether any of the destroyed copies were signed by President Reagan. With an unsigned draft-copy in hand, Nields pursues a question with accusatory implications. He refers to prior testimony and suggests that North invited the Attorney General to collude with him to suppress evidence. North neither confirms nor denies what Nields suggests, and he explicates this equivocal implication with remarkable forthrightness.

A vernacular characterization of what North is doing is that he is 'failing to recall' what Nields asks him to confirm. There are at least two ways to understand what this means: one is that he is failing to recall the event in question, and the other is that he is *saying* that he does not recall that event. The first understanding of 'failing to recall' locates 'recall' with the surface grammar of what the witness testifies. It is a description of his performance, and it bears logical implications (it neither confirms nor denies the occurrence of the event in question [Coulter, 1985; Lynch and Bogen, 2005]). It would, of course, be nice to know what actually transpired, and it also would be nice to know what North actually remembered while he testified. In the absence of such knowledge, all we have is the performance. However, the non-recollection, as performed in the context of a lengthy interrogation in which the parties are surrounded by stacks of documents, does not necessarily block all insight into what the witness *can* recall. To understand why this is so, we need to pick up on a normative sense of the word 'can'. The issue is not *directly* a matter of mental or neurological capacity to recall, though members do make judgments about capacity (for example, President Reagan's failures to recall were more widely tolerated than, say, Admiral John Poindexter's – Poindexter was reputed to have a 'photographic' memory). Other things may be more salient: the importance of the event at the time; whether the witness or others in attendance kept records of it; and the witness's *responsibility* for the information.

Although questions about what North remembers or fails to recall are explicitly featured, the exchange makes perspicuous a *logic* that is orthogonal to questions about the actual operations of memory. This logic has to do with the

evidentiary classification of North's answers to Neilds' questions. Is he confirming or denying the terms of an accusation, or is he doing neither? Caught on the horns of a dilemma (to confirm the terms of the accusation or to deny them and risk contradiction with evidence on record), North dissociates his own past from his present recollection. But would a witness *normally* forget an incident like that? It is conceivable that findings from cognitive science could bear on such a normative question, but the question is highly particular and eminently ordinary. Answering the question does not require facts from neurology and psychology, though they could be informative; instead, it requires knowledge about the salience of events for persons in specific membership categories, and a conception of normal organizational practices such as record-keeping and reporting requirements.

One might say that the parties are engaged in a reflexive colloquy on the evidentiary import of the pragmatic utterances in and through which they compose that self-same colloquy: 'You don't deny it?' . . . 'I don't deny that I said it. I'm not saying I remember it either.' *This is what 'not remembering' means in this context: neither confirming nor denying.* But that is not the end of it: given the salience of the incident (highlighted by Neilds's expressions and postures of incredulity), would a denial not be expected, and if none is forthcoming, does this not amount to an admission? Will North's allies on the committee accept such a (non)response as evidence that the event might not have happened? We could say that this is an example of ethno-cognition – a lay inquiry into the normal operations of memory – but that would miss the point of what North and Neilds are doing. While our excerpt from North's testimony provides poor evidence of any underlying mental or neurological processes, it does provide a remarkably clear (albeit contested) case of what 'failure to recall' means in a recurrent type of interrogative situation (cf. Neisser, 1981; Edwards and Potter, 1992).

### *Counting things and people*

When *counting* is viewed as a nominal family of ethnomethodological practices, our attention can be drawn to the contingent relations between *what* is counted and the procedures and competencies through which counting is achieved (Garfinkel, 1962). Consider, for example, variations on the theme of counting that are produced through roll calls, prisoner counts, election vote tallies, crowd size estimates, population surveys, financial accounts, diagnostic assays, and measurements of speed, size, duration, and so on. It is fair to say that the varieties of counting are countless. Some are more or less precise, mathematical, or scientific, while others are unremarkably ordinary. The competent use of the cardinal number series 1, 2, 3, 4 . . . is part of many of these practices, but a mastery of elementary arithmetic does not exhaust the relevant competencies. Some practices for measuring, estimating, assaying, and accounting require more advanced training in mathematics, statistics, or particular scientific methods, while others involve routines that are mastered alongside more

mundane situational, interactional, and occupational practices. So, for example, counting the number of inmates in a maximum security prison involves the assignment of numbers to bodies, but such assignment requires various checks against subterfuge, escape, and evasion. Counting and recounting votes (as became obvious during the 2000 US Presidential Election) involves a highly complex array of procedures for establishing and confirming eligibility, recording votes, reading ballots, and certifying numbers (Lynch, 2001). Counts of persons often conspire or collaborate with the 'objects' being counted. Countees display themselves to counters by posing, sounding off, or standing up to be counted. Even counts of mute objects such as chromosomes require the objects to 'behave' in accordance with the technical requirements of counting: to hold still, and to display integrity, identity, boundedness, and separation. As Aryn Martin (2004) documents in a study the history of discrepant human chromosome counts, a given number was accountably tied to a developing set of techniques for selecting and preparing specimen materials: stains and squash preparations to expose and separate visual constituents; classifications of characteristic shapes; and developing understandings of what chromosomes are and of how they function. A distinctive complex of instruments, embodied interventions, taxonomic and graphic arrays, coordinates, calibrations, and standards of precision comes into play in any particular case. How counting is performed is reflexively bound to what is counted, and both are situated within an immense variety of different social practices.

Ethnomethodological studies of counting, measuring, and more advanced mathematical practices expose and elucidate competencies that elude specification when construed as expressions of generic computational or mathematical procedures (Churchill, 1971; Livingston, 1986; Lynch, 1991; Sacks, 1988–89). Although the numbers produced through counting are amenable to general and stable modes of aggregation, storage, and analysis, just how the numbers are generated involves a highly specific, and sometimes contested, complex of object relations that establish the integrity and accountability of *what* is counted. Such relations – with their distinctive equipment, modes of practice, and organizational agendas – can be, and have been, described in a systematic way, but far from elucidating the nature of a cognitive domain, such descriptions point to an alternative universe of embodied practices situated in historical and cultural circumstances.

### *Conclusion*

Ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts investigate the concerted production of social and material practices. They are primarily interested in describing practices as they unfold. It might be said that their descriptions remain at the surface of practices – a surface that is thick with complicated actions and interactions – rather than delving into hidden mechanisms that lie 'behind' them. This may seem to imply preoccupation with *mere* surface features,



but when viewed in relation to the history and philosophy of social science a treatment of practices *as practices* – and not as the effects of an underlying mental or neurological substrate – begins to have more profound and critical conceptual implications (Ryle, 1949; Wittgenstein, 1953; Winch, 1958; Louch, 1966). Cognitive science, like many other social or psychological sciences, is predominantly interested in tracing manifest practices to a deeper substrate that is inaccessible from the vantage point of the acting individual or an ‘ordinary’ observer (an observer without specialized equipment and theoretical interest). Above all, cognitive scientists are interested in generalizations that can be localized with neurological structures. They dream of a natural science that will some day assume its place in the hierarchy of sciences. Although proponents of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis often express their own scientific aspirations, their aims differ markedly from those of cognitive science. In this brief article, I have not delved deeply into the critical conceptual implications of ethnomethodology for programs in cognitive science, but others have done so, to the point of calling into question the coherence and referentiality of the concept of cognition (see, for examples, Coulter, 1991; Button et al., 1995). For the purposes of the present article, it is only necessary to claim that ethnomethodology offers a coherent empirical approach to recalling, looking/seeing, counting, and so forth, that places these phenomena within the give-and-take of social activity, rather than tracing them to individual or distributed cognitive processes.

There have long been efforts to affiliate ethnomethodology with cognitivist programs of linguistics, psychology, and anthropology, and as noted earlier there may be good professional reasons for such efforts. There also are good reasons to resist the allure of cognitive science. I suggested in this article that ethnomethodology empirically investigates practices, and that such practices differ qualitatively from any real or imagined cognitive domain. They are describable and analyzable, but not in a way that traces back to an internal, individual center of mental agency; instead, they are collaboratively organized, and bound up with distinctive instruments and objects. To investigate practices *as practices* does not require skepticism about mind or denial of neurological discoveries; instead, it requires attention to relationships among persons and things that have an unclear relationship to the properties and functions of brains and minds.

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