Data: Who Needs It?
Describing Normal Environments—Examples and Methods

Imagine an anthropologist from the Starship Enterprise. To him, of course, sociologists would be one of the groups whose business it was to construct belief systems about their culture. In Weberian fashion, one of the interesting questions about us would be how we go about legitimising these beliefs. We do it by recourse to certain artefacts, by the production and display of 'THE DATA.' We interact with our fellows in various ways; we take notes, make counts, examine documents, ride in police cars, make films and tapes, hang around and 'keep our eyes open,' ————. We take the products of these actions and organise them, tabulate them, punch cards, tear off print out, graph, summarise, transcribe, code, symbolise, ————. Finally, THE DATA appears in (usually) written form, in standardised notation systems as special parts of a text with its own unique formatting labels and explanations. Various kinds of such artefacts are brought to mind with titles like 'tables,' 'path diagrams,' 'regression graphs,' 'transcripts,' 'vignettes,' 'exemplary stories,' 'pictures,' 'excerpts,' and so on. Such objects, in such texts, as read and understood by sociologists, are capable of partially legitimating beliefs. These objects constitute highly stylised descriptions of the *particulars* of our social world—of who voted for who, what was seen, what was said, how many were born, how much money was made, ————. Such particulars, as depicted, serve as example, proof, evidence, case, origin, inspiration for, warrant of, ————, beliefs about the nature of social life in our society. As praxis data represents a mode of being in, and displaying, the world while you are doing your job; as artefacts they represent procedures of justification—examples, proofs, evidence, cases, origins, inspirations for, warrants of, ————, beliefs and belief systems.

Understandably, sociology as a professional group is interested in finding and imposing normative standards on the collection, display, and use of data. However, this area of praxis is a main source of continued controversy. For particular research, types of research, or research in general, consensus is simply not to be had on what constitutes legitimate data. In particular, individuals, groups, and types of sociology take principled stands on the legislative issues involved. Further, the stands are blatantly competitive; partisans do not see themselves as advocating different, but additive, procedures.

Many, if not most, of these ideological stands revolve around the distinction between the subjective and the objective in a simple, relatively unadorned form. There are behaviours, events, and other fact-like phenomena on the ground floor. There are individual 'persons' that inhabit the world. Then, there is, for each person, a stream of accompanying interpretations, beliefs, and perceptions of the fact-world running alongside on the second floor. Since we are all individual persons, sociologists are among those possessed of an individual subjectivity. Intersubjectivity results when the potentially distinct meaning structures of each of a group of individual persons turn out to be the same, become the same over time, or mesh in certain ways.

Using this standard style of thought there are two and a half ontological baskets from which to draw data, external facts, the experience of others, and the subjective interpretations of the researcher. The latter category might be regarded as a substantive basket but is usually treated as a technical nuisance. Then familiar, if not banal, ideologies are generated by preoccupation with one, or some combination, of these ontological categories.

For example, the bad guys, otherwise known as 'them,' understand their primary mandate to be the doing of science. From this, it tends to follow that data should in all cases be external facts or that, at least, the experience of others is only relevant and acceptable in particular research, while the last ontological category is never acceptable.

For the position that data should, in all cases, be external facts, I refer the reader to Émile Durkheim and *The Rules of Sociological Method*, with no further comment. However, for quite some time the admission of social psychology and its cousins has been both allowed and embraced. Thus, a slightly more moderate position is more common. Whatever else 'science' might turn out to be, it usually involves sharpening up a rather 'fuzzy' picture as to 'what's really going on out there.' The picture is fuzzy because laymen have their own practical ways of describing the particulars of the world they inhabit. But since they are not doing science, but are doing the laundry or similar practical tasks, their descriptive apparatus is not particularly designed for scientific service. Such apparatus displays inconsistency, vagueness, multiple meanings, and similar characteristics which contribute to a blurred and sketchy picture. In such cases, it is understood as one of sociology's services to the society to provide more accurate information. A familiar procedure is to take a lay concept such as crime or suicide and repair it or 'clean it up' by precise definition, development of operational measures, and similar devices. Such transformations render the concept capable of indexing scientific facts. Consequently, data collected with such repaired concepts can be presented to colleagues and the society at large as a clearer, more complete picture of a phenomenon than was hitherto available.

One is not, however, limited to the use of overhauled lay concepts. A second and prevailing preoccupation of those attempting science is the uncovering of empirical structures that have been hitherto hidden in some sense-laws, patterns, rules, principles—that have thus far been invisible.[1] Therefore, any data that presents a sharp picture and is helpful in finding these structures is, in principle, acceptable.

These two preoccupations combine to give a position that may be summarised with the maxim that data is always to be facts. If the need arises they can be *facts* about the perception and interpretations of others. What are categorically excluded are the interpretations of the individual researcher. Those are not data. The notion of 'fact' is really a gloss for a series of technical constraints on the procedures for describing phenomena.

A second constraint is one on content. In a recent book on medicine Freidson characterised the professions as groups

[1] The observation of the chronic concern with the 'hidden' in sociology came from Roland Wulbert.

with autonomous control over the nature of their technical praxis.[2] In particular, for medicine, the patient was hardly to participate in the decision making about his own treatment. If one takes the stand that 'what's going on around here is science,' a similar prescription tends to follow for sociology. As mentioned, the latter group is in the business of producing authoritative descriptions of the layman's world. Then, here, as in medicine, laymen have no business participating in the decision making as to what these descriptions of their world are to be. Their business is to 'sit still and be measured,' so to speak, to answer the questions, push the buttons, or otherwise provide us with what we need so that we can describe them in ways that we, and our methodologists, determine. Any of their characteristics or actions which inhibit this function become nuisances. There are a variety of technical names for such nuisances, such as, response bias, intervening variables, non-response error, and so on. The categorical imperative, the answer to, 'What's going on out there?' becomes, 'What's going on out there is whatever we, the well-trained professionals, say is going on out there.' Given my value-laden description, this general position sounds all very undemocratic and elitist, does it not?

Therefore, another class of positions are of the form, 'What's going on out there is what they say is going on out there.' A general preoccupation with the subjective, as the interpretations of some collection of others, is advocated. It is claimed that, the point of view of the actor is important. But why is it important? There certainly is no logical reason why it is important each and every time research is done, if the goal is to be the doing of science. Indeed in some research, in demography, in occupational mobility, in other macroscopic areas, it is hard to imagine why it would be important or even practically feasible to consider. Thus, ideological argument for this second position, as contrasted to work practices, takes several forms. It can be justified metaphysically by arguments that the only 'real' social reality is the reality from within. It can be justified politically by arguing that these people have to live in the world you define for them: your description of their world will affect their lives in practical ways because of the political, social, and psychological consequences of research. It can be justified scientifically, by taking the really deep questions in sociology to be social psychological—how is communication possible; how do meaning systems mutually affect each other; what is the origin of values, etc.

Whatever the ideological orientation, a central theme is the rejection of the inbred elitism embedded in a concern for doing science. As mentioned, it was a virtual professional goal, to find out things that other people didn't know. Along with that there was the feeling that the description and analysis of the social world was a technical business which is best done by trained experts. These two combine in the principle that the sociologist knows better than the layman does what is in his world, what is not, and how to find out.

In contrast, advocates of the subjective wish to make the layman about his world. He lives there, he knows better than you what it contains, and he is capable of telling you if approached. Often the buttressing of this

[2] Freidson, Eliot. *The Profession of Medicine: A Study of the Sociology of Applied Knowledge*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1970.

proposition results in the replacement of science by 'access to meanings,' 'understanding,' or similar goals as the recommended preoccupation for sociology.

There is a major snag in this programme, which comes into view when one tries to translate the programme into work practices. By insisting that the social world consists of laymen's interpretations, or at least by requiring that valid data must always be congruent with the actor's point of view, a certain amount of democracy is introduced into the process of describing the world. However, there is a nasty problem with this broadminded approach. Minimally, the approach gives the subjects a veto power over one's data. However, the researcher reserves the right to take the vote. It is the expert again who decides what constitutes the actor's point of view and how to obtain it. These decisions vary widely and correspond to different methodological and metaphysical preferences in a similar way to decisions about what constitutes the social world. Some convert the actor's point of view into behavioural responses and proceed to obtain it by experiments complete with movies to watch, buttons to press, galvanic skin responses, and the rest of such apparatus. Some treat laymen as research assistants obtaining their point of view by variations on 'ask them.' Questionnaires and interviews seek information about their attitudes, decision methods, values or other theoretical phenomena of interest to the researcher. Replies are then treated as literal reports about the existence and nature of such phenomena. Still others attempt what Davis thinks of as a conscious conversion into the life-world of some group.[3] By virtue of participation and involvement, it is hoped the convert becomes a presumptive representative of the group. His or her own reflections will automatically approximate the group's consensual viewpoints. Here, there is no rational, evidential way to verify such a claim and data usually comes to narrative descriptions, exemplary protocols, and an appendix describing personal involvements, documents and other sources employed.

Whatever the procedure(s), elitism remains. Now they get to decide about what constitutes their world but you decide what a decision of theirs will look like. Many find 'what the subject thinks is going on in his world' according-to-the-sociologists equally as pernicious as 'what's really going on in the subject's world' according-to-the-sociologist, if not more.

In particular, a long tradition in sociology is devoted to documenting the subjectivity of according-to-the-sociologist, whether he gathers objective or subjective data. Different types of data, different ways to 'measure' the same thing, lead to different results. What is found turns out to be consistent with the personal preferences, political affiliations, or social class of the finder. Radicals find elitists when they do research, conservatives find continuous status hierarchies, functionalists find stabilities in a group, conflict theorists find strains, etc., etc.

A reaction against this situation produces yet a third general position. Finally, subjectivities of the *researcher*, his opinions, beliefs, perceptions, interpretations, are

[3] Davis, Fred. 'The Martian and the Convert,' *American Sociological Association Meetings*, September, 1973.

admitted as valid data. Usually, there is an accompanying ideology that all data is of this kind, however codified or otherwise disguised. A feeling about sociology emerges where research is seen as a process which primarily informs on the life and world of the researcher, instead of the researched.

These three stances are only sketchy overviews of a variety of more specific ones. In fact, there is almost a syntax of stances; basic ones combined with quantifiers and connectives to give new ones. Most of them represent codified ways to deal with the subjective and objective, in the varieties of ways these categories come up as topics and as technical problems. For many reasons, among and between persons and groups, and on many levels, the subjective-objective distinction proves troublesome or productive of troubles, especially with regard to the researcher.

Where lies ethnomethodology within the issue about data? It lies in a very peculiar position.[4] As Garfinkel once put it, 'To the question "What are your methods of data collection?" there are only the most troublesome or troubled replies.'

In particular, an examination of his work reveals only the most peculiar uses of what would ordinarily be treated as data. In a certain sense, it seems that ethnomethodology has no standard methods by which data is collected. But in that case, how are theories justified? They are not justified, at least by the use of data.[5]

To explain this puzzle, we will outline what will, at first, look like an alternative method for collecting data. It will represent a systematic procedure to answer the question, 'How should I describe the world?' As a concession to 'talk,' we will understand ethnomethodology, for the present, to consist of what many non-practitioners take it to be: it is microscopic sociology; its topic is the world of everyday life; it is concerned with the actor's subjective point of view; it analyses the methods that individuals use to socially construct reality. Perhaps these conceptions can be the heroes of their own defeat, perhaps not.

In order to outline our method, it would be helpful to have a specific protocol, to use as an illustration (data?). For this purpose, a certain type of 'line' in an everyday setting will be described. The author and Garfinkel became interested in the varieties of 'lines' in everyday life as part of a study of formatting and queues.[6] It is to the description of one of these lines that we now turn.

The description of a 'line'

There is a room in a certain embassy in New York City which contains a desk,

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[4] I use the term 'ethnomethodology,' in this paper, to label the work of Harold Garfinkel and closely allied research.

[5] At this point in time the term 'ethnomethodology' is coming to take on a life of its own. The reader will, perhaps, only find the non-use of ordinary data, in ordinary ways, to be characteristic of ethnomethodology as defined in footnote 4, above.

[6] This paper will use summary statements from various studies of practical actions by the author and Harold Garfinkel. The statements are merely illustrations. The scope of the paper does not permit elucidating the details of the actual studies. The actions in question are indexed by 'lines,' 'following instructions in a car,' 'lost and found,' 'mistakes,' 'uses of instructions in learning technical skills,' and 'paranoid reasoning.'

behind which sits an employee, and a collection of chairs around the walls where varying numbers of persons sit throughout the day. Were an outside observer to look into this room at any given time, he would see little more than what was just reported. However, there is a social structure in that room that is not observable from the outside. There is a line in that room. However, it is a very special sort of line. This might be inferred by our outside observer if he remained in the room for some time. He would notice that the man at the desk had some business with one of the other persons who would come to the desk for that purpose (actually visa applications were being processed). When that person left the desk, and thereafter the embassy, at least, and at most, one person from those who were seated would subsequently approach the desk and begin a similar transaction with the employee. This would go on, pretty much without a hitch, throughout the course of the day as the population of the room changed by successive additions and subtractions from the persons who were seated.

The particular line involved served as the solution to the problem, 'who goes next,' for the visa processing. Since the reader is a westerner, he may have already surmised the general structure of the line. Order in the line is determined by order of entry into the room, in a certain way. The processing of visa applications, and the entry of the employee into the room, occurs at ten o'clock. However, the embassy itself opens at nine. Persons who enquire about obtaining visas are told of this situation, and that they may come at any time before or during the hours of the application service. Let us describe the structure of the line by starting with the most simple case in a semi-theoretical fashion. These assumptions will be operative:

1. All those who enter the room are visa applicants with the exception of the employee.
2. Entries into the room occur singly and successively.
3. The population within the room at any given time, throughout the day, remains 'small' (although the meaning of 'small' will await further discussion, we can take it that, say, twenty or more people is not 'small').
4. Under the previous assumption, number each applicant in the room, at some point in time 1, 2, 3, ————, N, depending on where each is in the 'line.' Then we will use the term 'cohort' for any subset of this collection, consisting of persons 1, 2, 3, ————, R or N, $N-1$, $N-2$, ————, R, where $1 \leq R \leq N$.

In this situation, at any time, the population within the room, excluding the employee, forms a single linear order. However, the knowledge of this structure is systematically distributed in such a fashion that no one person can know the entire entire structure with the exception of the first and second in line, for a given cohort. Consider an arbitrary person who is n^{th} in line. Upon entering the room, knowledge of the cohort ahead of him becomes available as the current population sitting down and/or the one at the desk. He does not, however, know the order of these persons within the line with the exception of the person at the desk. In particular, he does not know who is 'ahead of him.' At the point where the $N-2$ person in line approaches the desk, information becomes available to the nth person as to the identity of the person 'ahead of him,' *i.e.* as to who the $N-1$ person is.

In particular, for a given cohort (excluding the one at the desk) only the first and second person know who is first and second. Clearly, the nth person has the order of the line behind him, in principle, available. He can note the entry and the order of entry of each person who will be behind him. However, it is not clear that he will do this since such information is not necessary in order to know 'when it is his turn,' and this is the primary problem the line is designed to solve. On the individual level, concern with the problem, 'when will it be my turn,' is the practical motive for orientating to the presence of a line, at all, and/or gathering information about its structure. So, there is no strong practical reason for concern with those behind you. However, knowing 'when it is my turn' for the nth person requires that after he takes his seat, he monitors the flow of the $N - 1$ people in front of him to and from the desk. This successively makes the order of these people, within the line, available to him. Thus, one's personal, practical concern with the activity going on in the room, and thus with the line, automatically provides you with a reason to obtain certain additional information about the line's structure, which becomes available over time. Given all that has thus far been said, it is probable that no single person knows the entire structure of the line, although the first and second person of a cohort might, in principle, be able to know this. In particular, the employee, upon entering, does not know anything about the line's structure, except for an assumption, perhaps, of its presence.

Of course, we have considerably oversimplified the contingencies in order to find a place to start. Actually, the previous assumptions turn out to be viable at this embassy, as there were seldom more than four or five persons in the room at a given time and entries did seem to be successive and limited to applicants, throughout the course of the day. The obvious further complications are simultaneous entries, large numbers of people in the room, and entries by other sorts of persons—persons accompanying applicants, persons without knowledge of this structure, persons with other business. Next negotiated permutations of the order by 'people in a hurry,' the effect of the 'lunch break,' and similar elaborations could be considered.

Merely the presence of too many people will create the possibility of ambiguity for 'who goes next.' A given person may not be able to keep track of the identity of the cohort ahead of him without additional mnemonic devices. One such mnemonic device does, in fact, seem to be operative. Entering persons will seat themselves in parts of the room that mark off the cohort before them geometrically. Naturally, the success of such a device, or its subversion in actual practice, will depend on many contingencies. Will new persons enter and seat themselves in the geometric space that marks off the cohort? What sort of geometric spaces will be available (imagine the people before you are all seated along one wall and all the chairs of this wall and all the chairs of this wall are taken up by them, etc.)? What sort of attention and memory will be used by the original person to sort out people over time, and will intervening events enhance or subvert such attention, ——?

However, take the most simple case of ambiguity: the two-person problem. At least one of two persons at some point is ignorant of whether he is next. This can exhibit itself by simultaneous tries for the desk or by no person rising after a current applicant has got

through. Take the case of simultaneous tries for the desk. One person may know that he is next. Then, the other's rising can cue the first to tell the second, 'I am next,' or some variant. Thus, there is an automatic repair mechanism which unambiguously selects one person to tell a specific other, just the information about the nature of the line which is needed, at a certain point, to restore linear order. In this, and other ways, an individual's ignorance about the line's structure, which needs to be corrected, will lead him to behaviours that automatically get the necessary information back to him. Clearly, simultaneous tries for the desk or no tries, are sites where lack of information or misinformation about the line gets corrected via interaction. It may be the only time the persons in the room interact at all!

Consider the case where no person starts for the desk. In the two-person problem, this should not occur unless both do not know whether they are next. This provides for a 'noticed absence;' the lack of someone leaving their chair for the desk becomes recognised as a positive event. With our present example, everyone else knows that they are not next. In such a situation, the employee may react to the noticed absence by a variant on 'who's next.' This can result in isolating the two parties in question, and a third (even the employee if he noticed) telling them what their order is.

Still speaking of the two-person problem where both do not know if they are next, social psychology says that there exist personal styles relevant to the situation. An introvert might wait to see if anyone rises. If nobody does, he rises. With such a decision rule, he will probably lose his turn even if he did, in fact, enter before the other person. The extrovert, presumably, will rise and see if he is challenged. In this situation the supposed extrovert would go to the desk, unchallenged, and then leave the room. Using his decision procedure the introvert would then find no one rising and he would go to the desk (incidentally there is some truth to this decision rule as a way people, in fact, watch each other's movements in such situations). Therefore, if we take the line and its strict order as a 'real' social structure (the analogy to social facts is strictly *intended*) we have a simulated situation in which laymen can be 'wrong' or have 'misinformation' about the world in which they live. The extrovert will, no doubt, take the absence of a challenge to indicate that it is 'his turn.' If he does, he will be 'wrong.' The introvert, in his turn, will take the extrovert's rising as the rising of the 'one before him,' in which case he will be wrong. All of the people in the cohort behind these two, *i.e.*, all persons now in the room except the two in question and the employee, were not present when these two entered. Therefore, they will take the order of rising to the desk as an indicator of the order of the risers within the line. They will be wrong. *Voila*, mass delusion! The only person who might know 'the truth' would be the employee, who could have observed the order of entry of the two in question. Unless he intervenes when the extrovert rises, he will have no further reason to 'let his information out.' For, strict linear order will ensue after this along with the rising order corresponding to the legitimate order. The most glorious thing about this whole possibility is that it has to be a mere theoretical simulation. For this series of events cannot happen within that room. If the situation is as described, everyone in the room, with the possible exception of the

employee, merely sees persons going to the desk in their natural order. To them, nothing at all has happened!

At this point, enough has been said to convince the reader that a dissertation could be written on the analysis of this line. But for our purposes, we need not go further into the mathematical, linguistic, and phenomenological complications. Thus far, I have been talking about the line as if it were some sort of 'system,' have I not? It is *not* a system; it is anything but a system. However, it has all the properties to enable us to treat it as a classical social fact or normative structure. What we will do is exploit that fact. I will trade on the reader's ability to imagine this line as some sort of social system in the world. Construed in this way, the line will be used as 'data' as a protocol by reference to which theories and procedures are to be exemplified.

We now wish to use this phenomenon, and others, to state a series of principles which may be regarded as maxims of middle range theory.[7] For this purpose understand the term 'description' to be any way that something might be discovered, noticed, seen, detected, recognised, uncovered, verified, or otherwise made visible in the world. We will leave it vague like that so it can turn out to mean whatever will be good for it to mean. Also, we will treat descriptions as if they were objects, so that we may speak of their having properties.

[7] With one exception these maxims are my adaptations of observations of Garfinkel. In fact, the entire paper is so sprinkled with by-products of correspondence, interaction, and other associations with Garfinkel that he is a virtual co-author. Of course the author takes responsibility for the uses to which observations were put.

Descriptions are thematic parts of everyday practical activities

A large assortment of everyday practical activities can easily be construed, game theoretically, as normative systems with their own distinctive organising principles. Games like 'lost and found,' 'repair,' 'shopping,' 'following directions,' 'getting a phone number,' 'doing nothing,' bring such actions to mind. In many cases a *practical* part of such activities consists of conducting enquiries about the world. Among the actions involved in conducting most repairs are those directed to discovering 'what is wrong,' 'is it working,' 'are the plugs dirty,' 'why is it sticking,' etc. When something is lost, in the course of looking for it, one finds oneself enquiring into 'where was I last,' 'when did I see it,' 'the places it could be,' 'what must have happened,' etc.

The social organisation of inner time

In particular, what a member of our embassy queue does, almost by definition, is 'wait to be served.' Part of doing this is making enquiries about time. That is, you find yourself noticing, and caring about, 'time,' independent of whether you have other appointments or a practical need to leave the queue early. However it is the queue itself, not the clock, that provides, for its members, various senses of 'time' and 'telling time' that create in their wake an entire dramatic panorama of temporal experiences. These include experiences of speed, acceleration, stagnation, time-related injustices, acts of kindness, delays, surprises, temporal catastrophes, points

in time and intervals of time, and so on.

For example, we previously discussed the need to identify the set of people ahead of you. New entrants also have reason to count the size of this set. Why? Because how many people are ahead of you provides a first rough estimate of 'how long it is going to take.'

Generally speaking, each transition from one person to another, at the service desk, provides 'points' in (line-related) time; the ordered sequence of events, i.e. the 'flow' of each service transaction creates senses of 'intervals' of time; and the speed at which those before you get served and leave the queue provide senses of speed, acceleration or slowdown.

The significance, indeed the observable existence, of time-related events depends on one's position in the queue. Therefore, the experienced unfoldment of time is partially shared by queue members, but potentially different for each individual. Paradoxically, the queue, as a social process, can create truly 'psychological' sequences of temporal experience. That is, each sequence may be unique to a specific individual in the line.

For some familiar, detailed examples of these experiences, refer to the Addendum at the end of this paper.

Enquiries like those above are 'part' of practical actions in a definitional sense. It is not that the activities cause the enquiries or that they are functional for the goals of such activities. In the first place, the enquiries and the activities are integrated in so many places and in so many ways that it is awkward, if not impossible, to separate them. Secondly, not conducting such enquiries or conducting different sorts of enquiries than are thematic to the practical action, frequently defines a *different* practical action. For instance, if in the midst of searching for a lost item, one starts to notice how he is 'reconstructing social reality,' one finds that he is no longer looking for his wallet but is, instead, engaged in sociology or other watching activity.

For our purposes, it is helpful to treat sociology in this manner. We said data were descriptions of the world. In particular, we said they were ways of being in, and displaying the world, *while you were doing your job*. There is now a specific way to understand this. Consider the concrete practical circumstances within which actual people do their sociology. Sociology tends to treat practical activities as types of sociological activities. We do the reverse and treat sociology, sociological work, as just another variety of practical action done in everyday settings. The descriptions, which are thematic parts of such activities, represent one, among many, practical ways to attend to daily surroundings and circumstances

The modes of description are unique to the activities of which they are a part

Clearly, various types of enquiry are connected with, and done during, practical activities. Almost a trivial statement is that the characteristics of these enquiries (or descriptions) are distinctive to the activities of which they are a part. Some are necessarily retrospective. Most mistakes and lost-and-found searches involve retrospective enquiry. You cannot set out to explicitly make a mistake or lose something. By definition, *i.e.*, in the

way one recognises what one is doing and what has happened, these must be the sort of things you 'find out' about only when it is too late. Some enquiries are single person enquiries done by 'me,' others are co-operative ventures. Mistakes and lost-and-found might have been the former. However, notice the organisation of searching that provides the possibility of co-operative searches by the loser and a collection of non-losers, where because of differential motives, time constraints, and knowledge, the kind of ensuing search will be related to the category of searcher.

Unlike lost-and-found, a distinctive mathematical feature of 'when is it my turn' is that the same algorithm is used by single persons to determine it, independent of which person, or on which occasion the determination is made. Further, in this set-up, a single person's order relations with other persons is determinable without having to know anything about the interrelations of the other persons. Other lines require knowledge of the other's order or of parts of it ('who is last'), as a precondition for finding out one's own place. In our line primary use is made of sight and spatial relations in finding social relations.

In fact, contrary to my recommendations, functionalists might have already suspected the fine fit between these ways of seeing and the circumstances under which seeing was done. There was a single, rectangular room with a single entrance. Chairs were situated, as usual, along two of the walls of the room, facing the entrance or facing ninety degrees away from it. Applicants enter and proceed to sit down. Thus, upon entering, one could scan the room completely for those ahead of you during the very course of entering and being seated, without additional actions needed for finding out who is inside the room. A single entrance provides a site for events, *i.e.*, entries, in an otherwise uneventful setting. Moreover, looking at someone 'come in' is one of the safer occasions for looking at a stranger in some detail in that it provides a safe public motive for the looking. When they are seated, and with other factors operating, looking at them can be another sort of activity: it can be an interaction, it can be girl watching and/or being fresh, and so forth. All seated persons are in a good position to unambiguously see entrants, and their sequential order. Finally, chairs and 'sitting' are devices which virtually eliminate locomotion and therefore spatial changes in the patterning of occupants, while socially organising those movements which do occur. For instance, persons will generally not leave chairs unless they find certain reasons for doing so—going to the desk, to the bathroom, getting a magazine to read, ———. Upon leaving a chair, they tend to return to the same one, thus re-establishing the spatial pattern, and they tend to re-seat themselves immediately upon the completion of the sorts of things that warranted getting up. The reader could easily imagine settings where the kind of noticing that goes on here would be difficult or impossible for technical reasons.

Our summary recommendation is that the properties of descriptions—of noticing, detecting, uncovering, finding, seeing, concluding—may be *extremely* peculiar to the circumstances in which they are done.

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.'

Descriptions are (often) 'about' the very activities that they are a part of

Distinguish, in the traditional manner, the activity of describing (the actual behaviours and actions), from the meaning of the description, and from the real thing it intends to describe. We will later see that this distinction is not viable, but for now, let it stand. Then, in a common sense way, the referents of some descriptions are always parts and aspects of the activity and circumstances of which they are a part. Concrete descriptions are chronically 'about' the activity and its circumstances.

As a first case, take an activity recently researched by Garfinkel (and to a slight extent the author): following directions in an automobile journey. As mentioned, the directions become an ideal type capable of generating descriptions of the journey. One might, here, imagine the 'real' journey to be the physical movement, or route, of the car through the streets. Presumably, this would be the real referent of the descriptions of the journey. Well, you can think that way as long as you are not at the wheel. If you are at the wheel, the journey consists of the meanings of the descriptions of the journey, not the actual physical movement of the car through the streets. For, minimally, you would not know what these physical movements were until you arrived. But the whole point of describing the journey (with the directions) is to figure out how to arrive. A retrospective, prospective, type analysis is needed capable of generating 'I missed my turn,' 'we are lost now,' 'here's the street now where's the house,' 'so far, no problems,' 'go back and look again,' ————, as the components of the journey.

This brings us to our embassy. Exactly what is the line in the embassy? There is no physical, spatial line. The line can be construed as consisting of precisely the particular meanings of the descriptions of the line throughout the day in the ways, times, places and by the persons who engage in such descriptions. Thus, the meaning and referent collapses and we understand the real referent, the social fact, as consisting of the meanings. Although still dealing heavily in summary labels, we now have a way to fuse the concrete events, objects and happenings that are 'there' for members of an everyday environment with the concrete occurrences of practical enquiry within such settings. It is clear from previous considerations that these practical enquiries (or descriptions) do not consist of streams of subjective awareness of single individuals. For instance, earlier commentary distinguished between aspects of the line's structure which were available and aspects actually seen or orientated to. Thus, we could ask of the line: what is known about it; when does it become known; why; who knows it; is it perceived, inferred or heard. Or we could ask what comes

to be shared knowledge about the line's structure, what turns out to be the facts and what the personal opinions of individuals, how do misunderstandings, ambiguities, aggressive people, someone *not* standing up from their seat—come to be visible phenomena within the setting. We could go on and on. The sort of things that are there and happen with respect to the line, turn in complex ways, on the concrete practical enquiries that are part of getting a visa. They are too rich to be anticipated by any social theory constructed independently of this social situation. But they are extremely systematic. In fact, it is their very systematic character that we are using to generate complex problems, possibilities, and actualities concerning the sorts of things that can be recognised within such circumstances. In particular, the situation is complex but far from unanalysable.

'Data' reproduces selected properties of the actions it is data of

This represents a rather awkward summary of a collection of heterogeneous observations. At this point the things that are 'there' for members of a normal environment have been understood as present in and through a set of practical enquiries. Such enquiries have certain properties. In many ways, one's own observations and demonstrations of what is 'there' in such a setting—one's own enquiries—turn out to have the same properties. The fit is nothing like one-to-one between your enquiries and the original ones, but is nevertheless important.

Imagine that we wished to do a study of the embassy in the traditional manner. It has been said that within the setting spatial relations were used to find social relations. If we treated the line as a normative structure and proceeded to observe its presence and operation we would use the same visual procedures to ascertain 'who came in first,' 'who went next,' and the rest. We would translate spatial relations into social relations. A written study might contain a rank order correlation coefficient. Formatting labels would tell colleagues how to read this number: 'degree of agreement between order of entry and order of service.'

Many of the ways of finding the line by applicants were procedures of the hermeneutic type. One uses vague knowledge about something's existence and structure in order to find concrete parts of that structure. It is not that the line's existence and structure is tacitly assumed. It is difficult to put the format into words but the procedure sort of involves 'finding-my-place-*in-the-linear-line-with-no-ties*,' or finding other specifics such as who is before me. It can be noticed that, in our proposed study, both our observing the line working in the setting, and our formatted data, without a text, use hermeneutic procedures. Our methods of finding and exhibiting the line reproduce this property.

On this point, the author and Garfinkel noticed that one cannot, in general, take still pictures of lines. For many lines, a series of pictures will not exhibit a line at all unless formatted. If told that these are pictures of a line, the pictures can be arranged in several serial orders or can be looked at in several ways with a given serial order, so that they exhibit several kinds of lines. When demonstrating to each other the thing these pictures were pictures of, we naturally formatted them for each other as 'pictures-of-

such-and-such-a-line.' Thus, exhibiting these structures by correlation coefficients or photos has the same hermeneutic properties that seeing them in daily settings does.

A wide range of earlier work on accounting practices resulted in a similar situation. Demonstrations that accounts possessed certain features such as vagueness, indexicality, reflexivity, were themselves vague, indexical, reflexive demonstrations. These characteristics had to be used to demonstrate their presence in the world as features of the accounting practices of others. We will, for our present purposes, not comment about problems of logical validity in such demonstrations. We will just take note of the historical occurrence of this situation.

There seemed to be an especially important property of enquiries to watch out for, in terms of reproducing it in one's own enquiries. Many aspects of structure, in many ways, can only be visible to a participant in the activity of which it is a part. In various senses of outside, outsiders will not have these phenomena available. We have some examples of this in the case of the line. A straightforward case is found in lost-and-found. It exhibits itself as the distinction between 'findables' and 'non-findables.' Various articles—keys, wallets, ——situated in various contexts can be recognised by non-losers as a thing that is lost. Other items, situated in other physical surroundings, can only be seen as lost by the loser and his co-workers. The lesson we take from all this is that, to find what is 'there' in a daily environment one needs to pay extremely delicate attention to the properties of the enquiries and descriptive activities endemic to the setting.

A method for describing everyday settings: a first proposal

Thus far, all that has been said has been fairly reasonable. If one tried hard enough, one might even be able to formulate the previous principles into an axiomatic theory. However, the reader might have noticed a steady progression from the reasonable to the bizarre, as the paper proceeded. Things will get even worse. Our original problem was deciding how to describe the social world. If one employs what was called the non-practitioner's version of ethnomethodology, then the previous maxims suggest a straightforward alternate way to produce data. Ethnomethodology studies everyday settings; it is interested in the actor's point of view in these settings; it seeks to analyse the methods members use to construct their social reality. Then to describe 'what's really going on' as seen from within, find a setting such that:

1. The setting is organised around some practical activity(ies) with a systematic social structure.
2. A thematic part of that activity is a certain kind of describing or enquiry.
3. The descriptions or enquiries in (2) have the practical activity and its circumstances as their referent and/or meaning.

In such settings, a natural way to proceed is to first find the modes of description involved. Find the sorts of meaning structures these methods of description make visible from within. Then *use* the necessary properties of these modes of description to construct one's own descriptions and demonstrations of 'what's going on' in such settings.

Several consequences readily flow from such a method. First, the procedures of the analyst radically depend on the peculiarities of the procedures of the participants. There could be nothing like a standard set of ways to get data. In particular whether data in the ordinary sense will be possible at all will itself be dependent on the organisation of the situation being studied.

Instead of individuals or groups, the social situation is taken as the unit of analysis. It is construed as self-organising in terms of actions and self-explicating in terms of meanings. However these two are so integrated that both are studied simultaneously. The organisation of the situation can make it possible for objectivities and subjectivities to become visible within the setting as one variety of phenomena. Thus, features of fact and meaning, usually found as assumptions in research, can be treated as phenomena.

If a first problem is placing oneself in the presence of the phenomena then a preoccupation with practical reasoning becomes understandable.[8] It would not constitute just another substantive topic. Just finding the sorts of things that can be 'there' within a situation, not to mention figuring out how to exhibit them, presents many problems. Many structures are only available in and through specific modes of enquiry. Mere acquaintance with such enquiries can be immensely helpful in imagining the kinds of things that may go on in a normal environment. We saw this in some detail in the case of the embassy line. However, these structures have the irksome property that they are literally unimaginable independently of actions like the ones just described. But, once described, they become recognisable as things that anyone would know about, given a moment's thought.

It is apparent that the proposal outlined will not work as a way to describe any everyday setting. The concepts and procedures are natural in some cases, but extremely artificial in others. One of these concepts is that of 'method' of description. Thus far, I have traded on the ability to treat enquiries, descriptions, and recognitions as if they were done in some 'way,' as if they constituted algorithms or procedures. It is precisely in the application of the concept of 'method' that the proposal just outlined either wrecks itself or becomes truly radical. We cannot hope to elaborate the programme, in radical form, here. However, three tastes of the problems involved, based on research, will be described in conclusion.

Triviality

Paradoxically, Roland Wulbert summarised a great deal of work in phenomenology of everyday life when he proposed about normal environments that 'nothing much was happening.'[9] The comment confronts us with the triviality of common situations and the lack of concern, energy and attention, which that triviality both consists of and warrants. We described the things that were 'there' in a daily situation as if they were explicit recognitions, and as if those recognitions came about because

[8] 'Placing oneself in the presence of the phenomena' is a phrase of Trent Eglin's. It is admirably non-committal with respect to the sort of process a description might be.

[9] Wulpert, Roland. 'Second Thoughts on the Commonplace,' *Pacific Sociological Meetings*, April, 1972.

of deliberate enquiries where persons followed cohorts, scanned physical spaces, reasoned in accordance with decision rules, and so on. If a reader of this paper were to go to that embassy for a visa, he would find the paper's comments to bear only a metaphorical resemblance to 'what was going on.' They would turn into ways of talking about the embassy; they could not be seen as literal. Off and on, such a person might explicitly notice one of the practices mentioned in the paper. But in that very act, he would no longer be merely getting his visa. In our terminology, triviality is a thematic property of ordinary situations. There were things that only a participant was in a position to see; now there are things he alone is in a position to not see. In the very way an activity is ordinary, it does not consist of technical work for its doer. There are ways of transforming it into such a task. In other research, the author investigated the ability of visible incompetents—babies, foreigners, mental retardates, and so on—to transform a setting into a technical place where members discovered the presence of rules, procedures, systems and explicit meanings.[10]

Thus, in certain ways, the presence of 'methods' of enquiry can become visible as part of an ordinary setting—as phenomena. But, in general, the concept of 'method' is our heuristic device for finding our way into a setting. It seems that a way needs to be found to deal with triviality in its own right, as a property of enquiry (although, obviously, this is a paradoxical way to put it). The things we found in a setting are just barely there for its participants in an ordinary situation. In a way, triviality protects settings against science since reproducing it as a property of our own demonstrations removes the presence of 'anything very much going on' in such settings. 'Triviality' may seem a central feature of queues if one encounters them as one of the necessary little chores of, say, everyday American life. But this impression is extremely ethnocentric. For America's homeless and poor, for much of the Third World, queues have a kind of abnormal normality: they are a consistent part of daily life, but are anything but taken-for-granted or mundane. What is at stake in a queue, often enough, are the bare necessities of life—food, shelter, clothing, medical treatment. Witness this account from the two-tier economic system of the Soviet Union, transitioning to capitalism:

> Once after standing in line for more than an hour to buy potatoes, the person at the front of the queue announced he would buy all the remaining potatoes.
>
> Pandemonium broke out. The people behind me rushed to the front, seizing potatoes. Some even started lobbing them at the man filling his plastic bags.
>
> Later a friend of mine told me that she was worried about her child, as she could no longer buy milk. Another told me that his mother could no longer afford the bribes to buy the medicine she needed.
>
> This was the beginning of the 'Wild West' style capitalism that was to characterise Russia's transition to a market economy.

[10] 'The Life History of a Social Norm,' in David T. Helm, Timothy W. Anderson, Albert J. Meehan and Anne W. Rawls (eds.), *The Interactional Order: New Directions in the Study of Social Order*, New York: Irvington, 1989.

> In those last winter months of the Soviet Union, the shine was already rapidly fading from the golden August days when people-power overturned a coup.[11]

Even poignant differences like these can escape the focus of a 'well' designed research programme. Indeed, one of the anthems of this paper has been, 'how can uniqueness and particulars penetrate the thick conceptual haze of orientations, plans, frameworks—and what we think we already know?'

Reflexive coupling

The next topics further elaborate the strangeness of the concept of 'method.' They are examples, in everyday life, of what I have called in logical investigations the property of reflexive coupling.[12] It might best be described with a logical example. Consider a proposition of the form 'a = b,' 'a' and 'b' two proper names. How does one find the meaning of such a statement? Obviously, one locates the referent of the two nouns; one differentiates, or fails to differentiate, two objects. How is the statement's truth determined? Again, one attempts to differentiate two objects. In this form of identity, meaning and truth are so related that the procedure which determines the symbolic meaning of our statement is virtually identical (pun unintended) to the procedure that determines its truth. 'What is so' and 'if it is so' are determined together. This, of course, contrasts to the preferred situation for scientific hypotheses. One does not want as a condition for being able to propose a question—that one knows the answer. When description and described are related in this way, I say they are reflexively coupled. Alternately, reflexive coupling can be thought of as praxis—as a way of working with meaning and truth. A consequence of praxis having this property is that it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish a descriptive activity from what it describes (its referent or meaning). This renders any search for the 'method' used to describe perhaps as problematic or strange as it can get. We now turn to two examples.

Specific vagueness

Beginning computer science students, at a certain university, before writing their first Fortran programme and running it, are given certain advice by their instructor: part of the computer is a device called a compiler which translates Fortran into machine language. The students will be using a compiler programme with many error-checking functions. Therefore, if they check the printout when an incorrectly written programme is run, it will tell them the specifics of what they did wrong, in many ways. Many, if not most, of these students have never seen or used a computer, compiler, or printout. Both students and instructor understand that the students do not know, in any specific way, what they are being told. The advice is treated as vague, in a specific way. It will become clear by engaging in a certain activity—running the programme at the computer centre. At that time, it will become clear both what was told to them, and if it is so. Further, this is

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[11] 'Eyewitness: Collapse of the USSR'. BBC News, Wednesday, 15th August, 2001, 15:22 GMT (available on the internet).

[12] A more detailed discussion of reflexive coupling is contained in the author's dissertation: *Mental Disorder and the Study of Subjective Experience: Some Uses of Each to Elucidate the Other*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, Spring, 1971.

the most practical way to both clarify the advice and assess its validity.

If we construe the advice as instructions for reading printout, then it might seem that such instructions, in the way they constrain reading, furnish part of a 'procedure' for looking at printout. But the advice constrains in a peculiar way. Only after the meaning and validity of the advice becomes clear is it available what the constraints were.

In general, we have found specific vagueness to be an extremely prevalent way in which all kinds of instructions are used in the learning of technical skills. As such, it represents a strange but pervasive form of practical enquiry. In such situations, people treat it as the most casual matter that something systematic needs to be done but it will not be until the doing that what needs to be done, and how, will be available.

Non-discursive reasoning and paranoia

This last example represents, perhaps, the most extreme form of reflexive coupling. It was found in the midst of a study of paranoia.[13] When patients are asked about the details of their delusions one obtains, among other things, descriptions that come out sounding like conclusions. I thought the fog was poison gas; I thought the rock was a house and that my girl friend was inside; I believed my wife was dead (these are all actual accounts). I was looking for the methods they used to come to such conclusions. I found no methods. Patients and therapists alike found my concerns all very interesting but had nothing much to contribute about any methods. After a fair amount of research, a simple realisation arrives of the type already mentioned. When described it will appear obvious, although it was not noticed over a period of months.

Consider reasoning not as a social activity but as a mode of awareness. Then, we can ask what sort of awareness is involved in the reasoning carried out in connection with delusions. Let 'finding' be a verb. 'A finding' instead of a confirmed hypothesis is a case of some social and/or psychological activity directed to an empirical issue. Objects like conclusions are integrated into such activities as sought objects, as matters of concern, and so forth. Thus, one sense of reasoning is an activity experienced by its doer as a deliberate recursive process, performed serially over time, and directed to some specific questions or issues. In such cases some experiential process is interposed between issue and answer, no matter how brief the process may be. It might involve thoughts (verbal or non-verbal), asking, listening, searching, and various kinds of co-operation with others. This is ordinary discursive reasoning. There is another descriptive process that justifies the label 'reasoning.' It is non-discursive. In this process, there is no separation between question and answer, concluding and concluded. Both occur together as inseparable aspects of the same action.

Before going any further let's put a little meat on these rather obtuse theoretical bones with an actual case.

[13] A more detailed description of processes of paranoid reasoning, and of non-discursive reasoning, may be found in the author's dissertation and in the author's 'General Features,' in James Schenkein (ed.), *Topics in Ethnomethodology*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Publishers, forthcoming.

The delusional system of one couple involved a common general feature: the seeing of personal danger. In their case, it seemed to them that someone(s), for unknown reasons, was trying to kill them with insecticide. They found the stuff as strange particles floating in their water, as stains on their clothes, as what they smelled in the air, as the agent responsible when they felt faint or tired, ————you can see the possibilities. Primed or 'set up' in this way, the husband came home to the sight of his wife laying motionless, eyes closed, in the bed in mid-afternoon and his dog in a similar condition on the floor. What did he see? He saw his loved ones unconscious or dead, having succumbed to the fumes of the insecticide. The poor dog was unceremoniously pulled outside into the 'fresh air' by his tail!

The example is instructive in several ways. The man didn't think, but 'saw' what had happened, saw a conclusion as part of the meaning of a physical scene. While no serial enquiry was involved his prior conclusions and experiences figured in what he concluded in that they 'set up' the relevance of the possibility he saw. Such prior experiences, from his point of view, were not part of some process of enquiry initiated by raising the question of his loved one's state of health prior to entertaining his home. Instead, the issue and its answer were posed simultaneously by the scene itself. In this way, the scene explicated itself for him. 'What happened' was part of what he *saw*.

Indeed, the patient reported his experience as his 'mental processes,' 'beliefs,' and 'thoughts.' This would seem to contradict my version of this episode. But there is experimental contamination here, as there usually is in such cases. In the interview situation, we asked him 'questions' initiating a discursive reasoning process on his part in an attempt to provide us with 'answers.' The tape reveals him remembering, correcting himself, and otherwise step-wise reconstructing what happened to him in accordance with the implicit theory of his illness inherent in our questions. While his initial experience in his home might have been non-verbal, or certainly far removed from a voice in his head, reciting for him what must have happened, he was able to formulate and understand the incident as a series of propositions which he thought or believed when he witnessed the scene. It seems generally true that these experiences, once undergone, are available to memory and formulate-able as hypotheses, if solicited as such. Thus, it takes some tricky questioning to evoke the sort of details from persons which we are currently discussing.

After making this distinction, many accounts given by paranoid patients become understandable in a new way. It seemed to be possible for non-discursive reasoning and what is ordinarily thought of as 'common sense' to be independent systems operating simultaneously for a single person and a single issue. Thus, all sorts of bizarre-sounding accounts became understandable as attempts to construct common sense explanations of how esoteric conclusions produced non-discursively could have come about. For example, one way to come to terms with the absurdity that someone is trying to kill you, when there is no motive or way for this to be, is precisely to treat it as evidence that you are crazy. This is how the insecticide people came to seek out help. However, equally understandable

is the feeling that there is a device on the television which is watching the watchers, given that you 'see' the man on the TV show is talking to you personally (this is an actual example also). Otherwise, how could he possibly know you were there? Many other consequences flowed from noticing non-discursive reasoning, in understanding mental disorder.

As predicted, when the author lectured about non-discursive reasoning to a recent class, a member of the class awkwardly raised her hand: 'I hate to say this but it seems that most of the conclusions I come to every day are non-discursive conclusions.' Indeed, they are. Given the idea, it is easy to find numerous cases of such reasoning in everyday life, but finding the idea in the first place might prove (and did) more difficult.

One can see reflexive coupling here in an extreme way. Never has it been so natural to abandon any desire to talk of a method of describing distinguishable from the thing described, as in non-discursive conclusions.

Addendum (2001)

The social experience of time in queues

Lakoff and Johnson cite 'metaphor' as a universal aspect of human thought, and, as an example, show how particular metaphors for time were crucial to the discoveries of seminal scientists and philosophers.[14] There are problems with their approach,[15] but it provides a convenient organising framework for familiar experiences of inner-time, made possible by the organisation of different queues.[16]

Time as a commodity

Temporal decision making

Lakoff *et al* might cite phrases like, 'I saved an hour' or 'I can only give you five minutes' to illustrate one metaphor for time—a 'commodity' that can be 'spent' well or badly.[17] In this regard, new entrants decide whether to enter a queue at all, when to enter it, of which of several similar queues to enter, in part, on the basis of 'whether it is worth the wait' and 'how long will it take?'

Estimating 'how long it will take' can be as simple as noticing how many people are already seated in an embassy, but typically, more complex information is available and used. Queues where people are visible in spatial lines—those for theatre tickets, those at banks, autos in front of a bridge toll booth—permit one to observe a line's speed of movement as well as its size. Checkout lines at grocery stores, and retail outlets permit the observation of how many items

[14] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999.

[15] For a discussion of some of these problems refer to Craig Stanford, *Significant Others: The Ape-Human Continuum and the Quest for Human Nature*, New York: Basic Books, 2001

[16] The examples described here are based on the results of several years of observations, made by students in the author's classes. However, the examples are intended, in Garfinkel's words, as 'aids to a sluggish imagination', not as validated ethnographic data.

[17] Lakoff *et al* appear to use an inference procedure popular in philosophy and linguistics: as native speakers they invent a set of phrases or find them in texts like a thesaurus. They then use these phrases to both discover and validate a common metaphor that 'mind' can use to generate the set of phrases.

each queue member is carrying (e.g. in a shopping cart). Some checkout counters are manned by both a clerk who totals prices and a 'bagger' who simultaneously places items in carry-out bags. Other counters may have only one clerk who must do both tasks, one after the other.

Restaurants provide unusually complex data that can be used to decide whether a meal is 'worth the wait': How many of the people waiting have reservations at fixed times, and how many of these people are 'parties of four'? How many tables for four exist, and how many are already taken? Of those at the tables-for-four, how many have no food on the table, napkins still folded, glasses still overturned; how many are eating the meal proper, how many finishing dessert, and which tables exhibit that credit-card folder that marks the imminent occurrence of payment?

Racial stereotyping or 'profiling' is also used, on occasion, to estimate waiting times. Some caucasians report eschewing lines that contain many people of colour because these people 'take longer'. Why? Because (it is assumed) such people perform transactions slower or less competently, pay in small change or script rather then with larger bills or credit cards, and so on.[18] Adults also report stereotyping of teenagers, e.g., they will probably talk more among themselves, not have enough money, take
longer to decide, etc.

Interestingly, whether to enter a queue to begin with appears to be a much more common decision than whether to abandon it once you are one of its members.[19] This may occur because, as one waits, waiting accumulates as time 'spent'. If one leaves the queue after entering it, accumulated waiting time becomes time 'wasted'.

Because of this, people monitor the queue's progress after entering it, in part to decide if and when to give up and leave, and, in part, to evaluate the quality of their original decision to join the queue. If one is seriously concerned with 'wasting time', certain events qualify as temporal catastrophes. They just 'occur' before you get served, obliterating the value to all of your prior waiting: imagine the reaction of the person just about to approach the embassy desk, when the service attendant declares the dreaded 'break for lunch'. Everyone vacates the room, and the entire hour you spent in the room now gains you nothing. Similar events can occur when, for one reason or another, a cash register, credit card machine, or bank computer breaks or goes down.

Independent of outcome, there is a sense in which you subtract time spent in a queue from your real social and psychological life. Like sitting in a commute train or standing in an elevator—queues are experienced as 'in-between' places where things that matter are not expected to happen. In and of itself, one's wait in, for example, the doctor's 'waiting room' does not count as something you did and a place you have been that day. In places like the embassy, seated patrons showing the classic symptoms described by Goffman of an attention that is mostly gone 'away':

> At such times the individual may demonstrate his absence from the current

[18] Not a made up example, actually reported by members of queues.

[19] This is a qualitative, pseudo-statistical observation, made by students observing lines. It has not been formally tested.

> situation by a preoccupied faraway look in his eyes, or by a sleeplike stillness in his limbs, or by the special class of side involvements that can be sustained in an utterly 'unconscious' abstracted manner—humming, doodling, drumming the fingers on a table, hair twisting, nose picking, scratching.[20]

Waiting time as a trade-able commodity

Convincing evidence that queue-waiting is treated as a cost is that 'not waiting' in queues is a benefit that can be purchased:

> On the other hand, in most of the diplomatic missions people have to stand in long queues for hours to get a visa. One has to queue in front of the US embassy since 5 am. It is an open secret that places in queues are even sold.[21]

Indeed, service workers charge fees to wait in queues with others, in order to obtain tickets or other items. Higher-priced retail stores advertise 'no waiting' as a competitive advantage. Telephone ticket agencies (e.g. BASS) permit one to purchase concert tickets on the telephone by credit card, without physically traversing a line at a ticket office. 'Scalpers' offer highly sought sports or entertainment tickets immediately at exorbitant prices, that otherwise must be obtained by standing in long lines for hours—even the better part of a day for events like a popular rock concert.

More generally, immunity from waiting appears to be one of the privileges of the affluent. Airlines typically seat passengers in an order corresponding (in part) to the price of their tickets: first the disabled, next those with expensive first class tickets, then all other, regular passengers, and finally 'standby' passengers who sometimes purchase inexpensive tickets. In the oil crisis of the seventies, the driver of the Mercedes or BMW waiting in the long lines for gas at service stations was often the cook, maid or au pair, who worked for the actual owner of the vehicle. The affluent also have selective access to the alternate mechanisms for obtaining service—appointments, credit cards, telephones, internet, package delivery, servants and service workers, permanent residences, etc.

Temporal morality

If 'waiting' is a cost, one might expect it to be governed by sets of social norms.[22] And indeed, different queues, organised differently, present different senses of justice, fairness, and temporal morality. For the most part, noticed 'infractions' are actions that lengthen queue members waiting times unfairly.

Commonly known violations committed by queue members are practices like budding in line, 'saving' a place for your four friends who unfairly enter the queue at your spot, or the 'inexhaustible grocery basket trick'. In the latter, the husband stands in the (long) checkout line with a partially filled cart, while the wife

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[20] Erving Goffman, *Behaviour in Public Places*, New York: Free Press, 1963, pp. 70.

[21] 'Alternatives: When Flying is No More a Fun.' *Daily Star*, vol. 2, no. 177, February 11th, 1999.

[22] Who can or will enforce a queue's moral norms, and when, is an interesting and thorny issue. In some cases, violations are somewhat like a lawyer's remark that the judge instructs the jury to 'disregard': the actions are perceived as violations, but, once done, there is no practical remedy for reversing their consequences.

travels throughout the store, periodically adding items to the cart as it moves forward in the queue.

In their turn, service workers are a reliable source of moral outrage and frustration for those waiting to deal with them. Thus, the common irate patient with the medicine her doctor marked 'stat' or urgent, who has been 'waiting for an hour' to receive it. In a similar vein, customers often ask service workers a version of 'how long?' Anger and upset then grows, fairly reliably, along with the difference between an answer like '10 minutes' and the actual wait time.

This service person is also expected to enforce rules such as 'cash only' or '10 items or less', but often does not. One reason for this is that enforcing the rules will probably disrupt and delay the queue more than letting a violation or two pass.

Goffman considers ordinary conversational 'small talk' to be a legitimate part of a service transaction.[23] His view is not shared by those behind a 'chatty' clerk who casually talks to customers about the news, the weather, and so on while others wait.

A frequent moral problem is that service workers (must) take breaks, attend to personal matters, and even finish the paperwork of prior transactions—while the queue in front of him/her is in full operation. Many queue members believe the worker 'should' be devoting all or most of his time to processing each current transaction. Service personnel cope, in part, with this expectation by becoming experts at doing 'not looking' at the current customer, as they engage in activities of their own that are clearly not relevant to the current customer's needs. Customers response to this well known cat-and-mouse game, by trying to 'catch' the eye of the worker by loudly dropping items on the counter, clearing one's throat, trying phrases such as, 'Excuse me' —. In fact, it is not infrequent for a nonplussed set of customers to be lined up in front of, say a restaurant cash register, that is not manned by anyone at all for respectable amounts of time.

Additional perceptions of violation result from differences between clients' and service workers' definitions of the legitimate order of service. Clients often assume that order of giving service should correspond (exactly or roughly) to order that service is requested. However, items like medicines or take-out food often take widely varying times to prepare. The result is that someone who has been waiting 20 minutes for her order can observe a new person request a medicine and receive it almost immediately. In most hospital emergency rooms, each new entrant speaks to a 'triage' nurse who determines the urgency of his or her problem. Because of this, patients are provided service, not only in a different order than they apply for it, but also in a order of severity that can appear to be unfair and contrary to common sense. Perfectly healthy looking people, for example, can enter the ER, say the words 'heart disease history' and 'chest pain' and obtain almost immediate service, largely for legal protection of the ER. More often than not, the pain turns out to be indigestion. Meanwhile, people moaning in pain, and visibly bleeding or faint can wait for hours. The US press has reported various cases where

[23] Erving Goffman, *Asylums*, New York: Anchor Books, 1961, pp. 328 – 329.

a person of low income and/or without medical insurance was kept waiting literally until he died, or turned away and instructed to go to another hospital.

Time as a line

Lakoff *et al* (mistakenly) describe Einstein's metaphor for time, as a visual, geometric time 'line':

> Einstein, like Newton before him, used the common metaphor that time is a spatial dimension. My present time and location is metaphorically conceptualized as a point in a four-dimensional space, with the present as a point on the time axis.[24]

Neglecting the validity of their analysis, some queues do look like lines composed of standing people, moving autos, etc.

Lines for buffet style food, airline/cinema tickets, and so on create a homomorphism—a correspondence between the visible, spatial order in the line and the temporal order of being served. In such queues, people have sufficient information for doing an internal mental countdown near the end of their wait—something like 'three people; two people; one person; (liftoff) my turn!'

Order-of-service is often allocated as if people formed a line, without the presence of a visible spatial line.[25] For example, queues that have new entrants 'take a number' create a kind of service 'line.' In these queues, the service worker may do the countdown for you: As the difference between each number he calls out and the one you hold diminishes, the temporal distance to your turn, psychologically, diminishes as well. Gaps between successive calling out of numbers become noticed time intervals of varying size, events such as your number being 'skipped' become errors or violations, and so on.

We named our embassy queue a 'line', for the interesting reason that queue members assume it is a time 'line'—but one that can not be visually seen.[26] Order of entry 'should' correspond to order of service. But, as our previous analysis showed, queue members can not actually verify this, or easily notice whether this rule is violated.

A frustrating class of 'line' type queues do not permit easy estimates 'how long it will take' because you can not identify the endpoint of the line, until you are very near to it. Imagine an auto traffic lane that suddenly become a queues because of some

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[24] George Lakoff in *Edge* (The Third Culture, Philosophy in the Flesh, 'A Talk by George Lakoff'), **51**, 9th March, 1999, pp. 5. Available at: http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lakoff/lakoff_p5.html

Also see Lakoff and Johnson, *op. cit.*

The Theory of Special Relativity itself proves this metaphor must be inaccurate, since the interval of time between two events varies with the position of the reference point (*i.e.* the 0 point) of any co-ordinate system. For Einstein's own description of relativity, written for the lay person, see Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, New York: Henry Holt, 1920.

[25] Allocating service by treating people as points on a time line might be called a FIFO (first in, first out) stack by programmers. Mathematicians would be more precise, and define a relationship called 'ahead of' between any two members of the queue, that has three properties: it is 'pairing', 'asymmetric' and 'transitive'.

[26] Thanks to Harold Garfinkel for immediately noticing the assumption-laden term, 'line', used in the original draft of this paper, instead of the word 'queue'.

accident, police checkpoint, road defect or other obstruction up ahead. In the stop and go traffic that ensues, one waits and makes 'progress'. But it is not until one is close enough to actually see the type of obstruction, that one can estimate how much progress has been made and 'how long it will take' to move past the obstruction. Before this, there is no way to know if one's wait may be minutes, or the remainder of the whole day. In these situations, forward spatial movement feels more like uncertainty than forward temporal progress.

Indeed, looking for work has been described as waiting in a queue that has no obvious endpoint, until you are out of it (i.e., actually get a particular job).

Time as a river that 'flows'

The metaphor of 'flow' is attractive to physicists because it more accurately depicts parts of relativity and a feature of time that were difficult to mathematically explain: it seems to move in a direction—'forward', but not 'backward'. In this regard, Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity showed that time, in and of itself, flows at different speeds, depending on the velocity of the object that time is 'flowing' on.

Einstein's discovery corresponds to a common subjective experience in queues. Different queues, organised differently, provide different relative 'clocks' that create diverse experiences of lingering, delay, acceleration, and so on.

One can easily recall the sense of frustration—the feeling of lingering 'forever'—as you watch those in the longer line you avoided moving by you, briskly, one by one, as the movement of your 'short' line keeps pace with the proverbial tortoise. One also experiences variations in the flow of time as one monitors the length of each transaction, of those before you. Again, the speed of a transaction is sensed more by the rapidity of the sequences of events that constitutes it, than by the number of minutes passing on a clock. A real sample of this:

> A woman at an automated bank teller, places her ATM card in the machine, enters her private 'PIN' number, enters an amount of money, and then receives her cash and a receipt from the machine—all well and good. To the three people in line behind her, her transaction is complete, and a transition is imminent. But she does not move out of the way. Instead she stands in place, laboriously reads each line of her receipt, carefully replaces her ATM card in a special slot of her wallet buried in a large purse, and proceeds to close various latches and lacings of the wallet and purse. Those behind her experience unexpected 'delay' as they wait, and wait, and wait —. As the woman steps away from the machine, she looks at those behind her, flashing an embarrassed expression (real or contrived), silently communicating that she was not aware there were people behind her.

Interesting senses of temporal acceleration and delay are created by queues that process people in batches, such as those in restaurants, amusement rides, and auto toll booths.

> A line of (walking) people, for example, can move forward, more or less as a single unit. But it takes a little time for an auto to start moving, once the car before it moves. Consequently, lines of cars tend to move like caterpillars: First the line elongates starting at the front and then contracts from the rear, picking up the slack. Therefore, after a traffic light changes to 'go', it may take some 'time'

until there is enough room for the car of a real traveller to move forward *at all*—not to mention how far he may advance in the queue. Thus, at busy intersections many to the rear of such lines have the frustrating experience of watching the signal change, waiting as time goes by—and then seeing the signal change back to 'stop' while their car stands motionless during the entire cycle.

Time as a background expectancy

As we have seen, interest in 'how long it will take' hardly ends after deciding to enter a particular queue. It bears on the quality of this decision, when and whether to abandon the queue, what and how much can be done with the rest of the day, and so forth.

Therefore, continual, queue-specific ways of attending to time and time-related events act somewhat like a vague 'background feature' of the queue: as one waits, watches, and learns, this kind of attention gathers information and events in its wake, creating a kind of personal, dramatic (or undramatic) history, that tends to fade after the service is finally secured.

One begins to learn things like the different intervals of 'time' a transaction takes, the sequence of events that occur within it, and the various requirements and conditions for the successful completion of each stage. At the embassy, one presents a valid passport, and a completed application. The clerk examines the application and asks a series of questions, and fills out forms of his own. Then, if all goes well, you pay a fee, get your passport stamped with a visa, and signed by the clerk.

Consequently, one finds oneself inspecting those in front of you with an interest in things like: who is holding a passport in their hands; who has filled out their application form before they approach the desk, whether cash or a credit card appears during a transaction, or how fast or painfully slow someone fills out their check.

The examples of temporal objects, events and processes given here, although substantial, are potentially innumerable. They are one set of examples of the intrinsic, fabric-like links between a type of social organisation (queues), and experiences (of inner-time) that are often thought of as purely psychological.