Meeting Egon Bittner in 1974

and Some Thoughts about Organisations

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In 1974 Egon Bittner gave a guest lecture to the Sociology Department at the University of Manchester. He explained some of the major ideas that Harold Garfinkel had introduced in his book *Studies in Ethnomethodology* such as 'indexicality' and 'reflexivity' and 'the documentary method of interpretation'. Although Bittner explained these very well I remember being disappointed that he had not presented some of his own work, especially since it had not been long since Garfinkel, himself, had presented, while he was The Visiting Simon Professor in the Department, a series of lectures that dealt, at length, with the issues that Bittner was addressing.

I was also disappointed because 1974 was the year that Roy Turner published an edited collection of previously published work in his Penguin volume *Ethnomethodology* within which he included Bittner's 1965 paper 'The Concept of Organization'. I would have liked Bittner to have talked to that paper and to have heard more in the same vein. The reason for wanting him to do so was that ethnomethodology, at the time in the UK, was being mainly articulated through Conversational Analysis, which was interested in the details of interpersonal interaction, rather than with the organisational structures within which the interaction was talking place – although some of the material that Harvey Sacks used was gleaned from organisational environments. In addition, although the materials of some ethnomethodological studies were also drawn from organisational contexts, ethnomethodology was not explicitly talking to existing sociological concerns with organisations. This was not a criticism of early CA and ethnomethodology. However, clearly, Garfinkel was explicitly addressing the discipline of sociology, and clearly was dealing with organisations, and clearly an important concern for sociology was organisations. Yet Bittner's paper was alone in ethnomethodology in showing how the study of organisations could be radically re-specified through 'the study of organization as a common-sense construct' (Bittner, 1974: 74).

At the time, I was in the first year of my Ph.D. and dealing with some taped materials of meetings of an artists' co-operative in Vancouver that my supervisor,

Wes Sharrock, had brought back from a sabbatical year spent in Canada working with Roy Turner. The artists were preparing for the arrival of the taxman, and inevitably we were bumping into the issue of how the artists were thinking about organisational matters. We were drawing heavily off Harvey Sacks, but as the only person at the time who had explicitly talked to the concept of organisations I would have liked to have heard Bittner expand upon his thinking.

Surprisingly, today, little has changed with respect to the explicit articulation of organisations within ethnomethodology. Conversational Analysis has had an important impact on fields such as linguistics, and disciplines concerned with interpersonal communication such as education. Ethnomethodology has had an important impact on how the study of work is conducted in fields such as science and technology studies, and Human Computer Interaction, and Computer Supported Co-operative Work. However, although materials in Conversational Analysis and in Ethnomethodological Studies of Work have been gathered in the context of what Organisational Sociologists would regard as 'modern organisations', how they address this social phenomena and how it could be addressed as a common sense construct, remains, in contrast, little explored. In this respect Bittner's paper still stands as a landmark.

Also, the idea expressed in Bittner's paper is as relevant today as it was when he first published it, and has been important for those, few, ethnomethodologists who have attempted to more explicitly engage with organisations. The study of organisations in Sociology is still heavily dominated by the theoretical rendition of the formal structures of organisations and Weber's normative concerns, which Bittner, in part, contended with, are still important. In this respect Bittner's re-specification of organisation as a common-sense construct is as relevant and as fresh as it was in 1965.

Certainly, and although he only refers to him once in the paper, Bittner, in addressing the idea of a common-sense understanding, is drawing off Harold Garfinkel. The emphasis on common-sense knowledge of social structure is not as heavy in ethnomethodology as it was in its early days. However, Garfinkel exposed that the fact that members of society display common-sense knowledge of social structure, and display its organised properties is a central concern for how sociology can address the social world, and a central concern for Garfinkel's program of ethnomethodology. Bittner made an original elaboration of both of these matters for the concept of organisation.

With respect to the first, he makes the point that the theoretical and formal renditions of organisations within sociology are inevitably built upon common-sense understandings of organisation. This way of putting the matter predates by some time Zimmerman and Pollner's (1970) popular phrasing that sociology is using as a resource that which should be a topic, common-sense knowledge of

social structure. Of course Bittner, and Zimmerman and Pollner are making the point off the back of Garfinkel, but unlike Zimmerman and Pollner who are making the point for sociology in general, Bittner is illustrating and deepening the point for the study of organisations through displaying how it is the case for important foundations of organisation studies.

With respect to the second issue, the organised properties of common-sense knowledge are important for the program of ethnomethodology, Bittner did not just content himself with showing how sociology inappropriately, because it cannot substantiate its claims, articulates organisations as formal structures, but he also went on to demonstrate how the concept of organisation can be, appropriately, articulated in addressing common-sense understandings. To this end he provides three examples: 'the gambit of compliance', 'the concept of the formal organization as a model of stylistic unity', and 'the concept of organization as corroborative reference'. In all three he emphasises what was new at the time but has now become commonplace 'that the methodical use of the concept of organization must be studied by observing competent users' (Bittner, 1974: 80).

REFERENCES

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