

## Ethnomethodology and the institutional context\*

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**Abstract.** Ethnomethodological studies of work attempt to examine ordinary activities for the ways in which they exhibit observably and accountably competent work practice as viewed by practitioners. Because it is the analyst's task to describe activities as viewed by practitioners, *qua practitioners*, two methodical problems must be solved. The first problem is how the analyst can know and describe the members' point of view. Because members display their point of view to each other, the problem can be formulated as the question of how the analyst can identify members' displays. This is the *problem of observability*. The second problem is how the analyst can make a distinction between activities done by practitioners, *qua practitioners*, and other activities. How can the analyst for instance, distinguish 'talk *as work*' from 'talk *at work*'? This is the *problem of specificity*. This paper's aim is to critically examine the ways in which ethnomethodology manages these two problems. First, the concept of the 'occasioned corpus of setting features' is discussed. Next, two examples of ethnomethodological studies of institutional work are examined. It is argued that these studies fail to provide an adequate description of the specificity of the work studied because both disregard practitioners' orientation to the requirements of institutional accounting and reporting. Finally, it is discussed how practitioners' orientations to institutional criteria can be made observable in the analysis.

### 1. Introduction

Harold Garfinkel is fond of citing an exchange between Fred Strodbeck and Edward Shils. Here follows a published version of this story:

In 1954 Fred Strodbeck was hired by the University of Chicago Law School to analyze tape recordings of jury deliberations obtained from a bugged jury room. Edward Shils was on the committee that hired him. When Strodbeck proposed to a law school faculty to administer Bales

\*This paper was written when the author was a visiting scholar at the Department of Sociology in Education, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto. The department's hospitality is gratefully acknowledged. The author is grateful for comments on earlier versions of this paper by Peter Grahame, James Heap, Charles Kaplan, Gerhard Nijhof, Dorothy Smith and Brian Torode.

Interaction Process Analysis categories, Shils complained: "By using Bales Interaction Process Analysis I'm sure we'll learn what about a jury's deliberations makes them a small group. But we want to know what about their deliberations makes them a jury" (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 133).

Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston state that the social sciences are unresponsive to this complaint and that technical methods for turning it into an agenda of researchable phenomena are not available to them. The literature on work in institutional settings does not provide descriptions of what work practice in these settings consists of and how practitioners manage the tasks they are confronted with. Thus, according to Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, the social sciences do not provide an answer to such questions as "How is an accountably adequate surgical incision produced and recognised?" and "How is the utterance of a juror the recognizably judicious outcome of 'talking in a juror's fashion'?"

One result of this gap is that "occupational practitioners frequently fail to recognize themselves or their daily concerns in social scientific accounts and for this reason they find the latter to be uninteresting, misleading or plain exasperating" (Heritage, 1984: 299). Ethnomethodological studies of work, in contrast, attempt to examine ordinary activities for the ways in which they exhibit observably and accountably competent work practice as viewed by practitioners (Heritage, 1984: 302). This approach implies a "unique preoccupation with local production and the worldly observability of reasoning" (Lynch, Livingston and Garfinkel, 1983: 206).

Because it is the analyst's task to describe activities as viewed by practitioners, *qua practitioners*, two methodical problems must be solved. The first problem is how the analyst can know and describe members' point of view. Because members display their point of view to each other, the problem can be formulated as the question of how the analyst can identify members' displays. This is the problem of observability. The second problem is how the analyst can make a distinction between activities done by practitioners, *qua practitioners*, and other activities. How can the analyst, for instance, distinguish 'talk *as* work' from 'talk *at* work' (Zimmerman, 1992: 41–42)? This is the problem of specificity.

This paper's aim is to critically examine the ways in which ethnomethodology manages these two problems. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I discuss the concept of the 'occasioned corpus of setting features' (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970), which provides the frame for the subsequent examination of the problems of observability and of specificity that are the topic of this paper. Subsequently, I discuss two examples of ethnomethodological studies of institutional work, namely Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston's study of the astronomical work of discovering an optical

pulsar (1981) and Zimmerman's study of how 'context' is achieved in 911 emergency calls (1992). I argue that these studies fail to provide an adequate description of the specificity of the work studied because both disregard practitioners' orientation to the requirements of institutional accounting and reporting. Finally I discuss that, and how, practitioners' orientations to institutional criteria can be made observable in the analysis.

## 2. The occasioned corpus of setting features

Ethnomethodology's approach to the problem of 'institutional context' is clearly formulated by Zimmerman and Pollner in their paper "The everyday world as a phenomenon" (1970), in which they coined the concept of the 'occasioned corpus of setting features'. This concept captures the notion that the features of a setting are not 'given' but rather are achieved by participants who 'assemble' the corpus: "[E]ach social setting and every one of its recognized features is construed as the accomplishment of the situated work of displaying and detecting those features at the time they are made visible" (1970: 94). Garfinkel, who had used the concept 'corpus of knowledge' in his study of jurors' decision making (1967: 107), had borrowed it from Kaufmann (1944) who, discussing the methodology of the social sciences, had pointed out that science knows only that which it has admitted to the body of its findings (its 'corpus of knowledge') by the appropriate procedures, i.e., independent from common sense.

In Garfinkel's reading, the upshot of Kaufmann's viewpoint was that, since sociology had no established and agreed standards for including knowledge within its corpus, the sociological theorist, qua theorist, knows nothing. Hence he concluded that sociologists must possess their knowledge by something other than conformity to the rules of scientific inquiry. In other words, they depend on what is common sense and obvious (cf. Sharrock and Anderson, 1986: 44). According to Garfinkel, this conclusion does not only apply to sociological knowledge. In his study of jurors' decision making, for instance, Garfinkel inferred from interviews with jurors that they decide 'the facts' of a case, which may be used as the basis for further inferences, not by applying forms of scientific reasoning but rather by consulting the consistency of alternative claims with common sense models. According to Garfinkel,

[T]he sorting of claims between the statuses of correct and incorrect grounds of inference produces a set of accepted points of fact and accepted schemes for relating these points. The sorting produces a 'corpus of knowledge' [. . .] This 'corpus' is treated by the jurors at any given time as 'the case'. [. . .] The 'corpus' permits [the jurors] to infer the legitimacy of their expectation that they will be socially supported for their

choice of verdict (Garfinkel, 1967: 106–107).

Garfinkel emphasises that jurors apply neither a method of scientific inquiry (1967: 108) nor other types of formal or official procedures of deciding (1967: 114). He claims that, instead, jurors' decisions which sort fact from fancy

do not differ substantially from the decisions [a juror] makes in his ordinary affairs. Nevertheless, there is a difference. The difference bears on the work of assembling the 'corpus' which serves as grounds for inferring the correctness of a verdict (Garfinkel, 1967: 110).

Thus what makes a jury a jury (rather than a small group) is, according to Garfinkel, the "work of assembling the 'corpus' which serves as grounds for inferring the correctness of a verdict". It is doubtful whether Shils would be satisfied by this finding, since it does not specify the criteria that are used in inferring the correctness of a verdict. But Garfinkel gives good reasons for not providing such a specification. An appreciation of these reasons is crucial for the understanding of ethnomethodology's approach to the 'institutional context'.

Garfinkel notes that it is easy to find rules for assessing a jury's competence. He lists ten of such rules, but emphasises that, although jurors talk about them, there is no indication that jurors use them in actual decision making. Instead, the official rules are used for retrospectively finding that the outcome of their deliberations is a competent decision:

[P]ersons, *in the course of a career of actions*, discover the nature of the situations in which they are acting, and [. . .] the actor's own actions are first order determinants of the sense that situations have, in which, literally speaking, actors *find* themselves (Garfinkel, 1967: 115; emphasis in the original)

The notion of actors 'finding' themselves in situations of which the sense is determined in the course of their actions is also prominent in Garfinkel and Sacks' paper "On formal structures of practical actions" (1970), in particular in their discussion of 'Richards' gloss'. According to Garfinkel and Sacks, I.A. Richards (1955) suggested

the use of question marks to bracket some spoken phrase or text. For example, ?empirical social research?, ?theoretical systems?, ?systems of sequences?, ?social psychological variables?, ?glossing practices? instruct a reader to proceed as follows. How a bracketed phrase is to be comprehended is at the outset specifically undecided. How it is to be comprehended is the task of a reading whereby some unknown procedure will be used to make the text comprehensible. Since nothing about the text or procedure needs to be decided for a while, we will wait for the while, for

whatever the while. When and if we have read and talked about the text, we will review what might be made of it. Thus we can have used the text not as undefined terms but as a gloss over a lively context whose ways, as a sense assembly procedure, we found no need to specify. (Note: we mean that none was called for, and that in other glossing practices something else could be the case.) (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970: 343).

In the quoted fragment, Garfinkel and Sacks describe the work of making sense of a text as a 'glossing practice' of which the outcome is contingent on the specific course the activity of glossing will happen to follow. This outcome is dependent on a specific 'context' which is not known at the outset but comes into being in the course of the glossing work. In other words, 'discovering' a sense within a 'context' is a form of documentary interpretation, i.e., it is a reflexive practice:

Richards' gloss consists of practices of talking with use of particular texts in a fashion such that how their comprehended character will have worked out in the end remains unstated throughout, although the course of talk may be so directed as to compose a context which embeds the text and thereby provides the text's replicas with noticed, changing, but unremarked functional characters such as 'a text in the beginning,' 'a text as an end result,' 'an intervening flow of conversation to link the two,' and so on (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970: 343).

This is a gloss of how members make sense of texts (and of talk and behavior, for that matter). But what does this imply for the question of how the analyst should read that same text, talk or behavior? Two answers are possible:

1. If we take it as the analyst's task to determine the 'sociological' meaning of the text, he or she must gloss the text in a specific, recognizably sociological way, i.e., he or she must 'compose a context which embeds the text' sociologically. The sociologist's gloss will be different from members' glosses.
2. If it is the analyst's task to describe the sense that the text has for members, he or she must describe how the text is glossed by members in a particular event, i.e., he or she must discover and describe the 'context' that was composed by members in their glossing work.

The first mentioned task, determining the 'sociological' meaning of a text (or behavior), is the one that sociology traditionally sets for itself. This is, however, problematic for ethnomethodology, precisely because 'sociological' glosses differ from, and are independent of, members' glosses. It is the description of the sense that texts and behaviors have for members that ethnomethodological studies of work explicitly take as their task. The question which 'context' is allowed to enter the analysis must, therefore, be an-

swered by referring the question to members: they decide in their practices what counts as ‘appropriate’ context. Hence it is the analyst’s task to

examine a setting and its features as temporally situated accomplishments of parties to the setting. [. . .] For the member the corpus of setting features presents itself as a product, as objective and independent scenic features. For the analyst the corpus *is* the family of practices employed by members to assemble, recognise, and realize the corpus-as-a-product. Accordingly, from the point of view of the analyst, the features of the setting as they are known and attended to by members are unique to the particular setting in which they are made observable. Any feature of a setting – its perceived regularity, purposiveness, typicality – is conceived as the accomplishment of the work done in and on the occasion of that feature’s recognition. The practices through which a feature is displayed and detected, however, are assumed to display invariant properties across settings whose substantive features they make observable. It is to the discovery of these practices and their invariant properties that inquiry is to be addressed (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970: 95).

The implications of this approach are many, of which several are discussed by Zimmerman and Pollner (1970: 95–102). First, the occasioned corpus does not consist of a stable collection of elements. Such elements may encompass the biographies of the setting’s personnel, its norms, its history, and so on. But whether such features are to be included in the analysis depends on what members do or did on the particular occasion that is studied.

Second, for members, the work of assembling an occasioned corpus consists in the ongoing ‘corpusing’ and ‘decorpusing’ of elements. The availability of a particular element is conceived to be the consequence of a course of work through which it is displayed and detected. The analyst must describe members’ composing of context(s) as an ongoing process without a fixed end-point. The analyst does not have recourse to such explanatory devices as a shared complex of roles, motives, norms, values, and the like, standing independent of and prior to a given occasion: “No setting is conceived as a product. Each setting and every one of its features consists of the way in which the setting and its features are displayed and detected” (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970: 97).

Third, the elements organized by the occasioned corpus are unique to the particular setting in which it is assembled, and hence ungeneralizable to other settings. This implies that the analyst cannot study how the recognisable accountability of, e.g., ‘psychiatric interviews’ in general is accomplished. The analyst can, instead, only describe how a specific setting is made accountable as an instance of a ‘psychiatric interview’. (This does, however, not exclude the possibility of studying members’ work of constructing typologies of classes of social settings.)

Fourth, features of everyday social settings are ‘reduced’ to a family of

practices and their properties. The occasioned corpus is conceived to consist in members' methods of exhibiting the connectedness, orderliness, and relevance of the features of any particular setting as features in, of, and linked with a more encompassing, ongoing setting, typically referred to as 'the society'. The features of that society are, from this perspective, to be found nowhere else, and in no other way, than in and upon those occasions of members' work, lay and professional, through which those features are made available.

The ethnomethodological approach, thus, consists of two distinct, though related, steps. The first step is the definition of 'context' or 'setting' as something essentially contingent on its display by members participating in the setting, and therefore uniquely bound to a specific occasion. In contrast, the practices by which features of a setting are displayed, are considered invariant and hence not bound to specific occasions. The second step is taking the invariant features, i.e., the practices of displaying 'order', as the main object of inquiry. This short introduction to the concept of the 'occasioned corpus of setting features' clarifies why the results of Garfinkel's study of jurors' deliberations did not consist of a list of substantive features that make them recognizable as a jury's work. According to Garfinkel, it is the occasioned jurors' work of displaying its deliberations as such that make them a jury.

The above discussion of Zimmerman and Pollner's concept of the 'occasioned corpus of setting features' can only provide the frame for the examination of the problems that are the topic of this paper, namely, the problems of observability and of specificity. However, these problems can now be formulated in a more precise way, as follows:

1. Observability: How can the analyst identify the elements of the corpus?
2. Specificity: How can the analyst distinguish between the elements that are observably oriented to practitioners' work and other elements?

### **3. The work of discovering an optical pulsar**

In their study of the discovery of a pulsar, Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston (1981) explain why the sociological approach to the study of work in organisational settings gives a distorted picture of that work. The work of discovering a pulsar would in such an approach be depicted as the mere application of a generally accepted way of astronomical reasoning. This would, however, be a misleading depiction, because it is obvious that

their collection, when it is examined in the light of the first time through, was obtained, and was only obtainable, case-after-case, as an historicized series. The series was done as a lived orderliness, in real time. Only as a

feature of its local historicity did the series project as its possibility that it could become an atemporalized collection of measurable properties of pulse frequency and star location that according to a Galilean science are independent of the local practices as of which just this gathering of observations was composed (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 135).

The authors emphasise that these activities could only *post factum* be described as merely the competent registration of features of an object that was only waiting out there to be discovered. In contrast to what the published article suggests and to what sociologists of science would expect, the work of discovery did not consist of “documenting theoretic provisions for the optical pulsar” (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 136), but rather was similar to the way a potter forms an observable cultural object: “[T]he pulse takes ‘shape’ in and as the way it is worked, and from a place-to-start with to an increasingly definite thing” (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 137). Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston’s approach implies that they, in their own words, do not examine

the end-point object for its correspondence to an original plan. We want to disregard, we want not to take seriously, how closely or how badly the object corresponds to some original design – particularly to some cognitive expectancy or to some theoretical model – that is independent of their embodied work’s particular occasions as of which the object’s production – the object – consists, only and entirely (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 137).

But, if the astronomers’ discovery of an optical pulsar is seen as the product of embodied work’s particular occasions which cannot be described as the enactment of an original design, how then must their work be described? According to Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, there is no descriptive solution:

[These practices] are unavailable to reasoned reflection, to introspection, to ethnographic reportage, to the analysis of ethnographic documentation, or to documented argument except, and at best, as documented conjectures (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 140).

Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston’s article does not provide any description of their data (consisting of transcripts of talk, reprints of logs, and the published article) which, however, are presented separately in appendices. By merely referring to this data in general terms, without any discussion of specific fragments, the article (10 printed pages) functions rather as an introduction, or preface, to this data (16 printed pages) than as a description or analysis. The article presents itself as nothing but an elaborate warning against using the data for a ‘constructive’ description of competent astronomical



work. Although Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston repeatedly claim that the outcome of this night's work in the observatory (e.g., the pulse frequencies as reported in the astronomical article) was accountably competent astronomers' work, they do not point in their data to any feature of this work that, as an element of the occasioned corpus, could count as a document of its accountability as astronomers' work.

The night's work's in the observatory was done in order to discover an optic pulsar and its result was the astronomically acknowledged discovery of just such a thing. Even if we grant Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston the point that this does not necessarily imply that the actual night's work consisted of the mere enactment of a design, the question remains what made their activities effectively produce the desired outcome, the discovery of a pulsar. Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston give a partial answer to this question by presenting in an appendix (Appendix 5; pp. 154–158) transcripts of talk that document how in the course of the night's work in the observatory the 'potter's object' took shape, i.e., the way how it developed from an 'evidently-vague IT' into a discovered optical pulsar (1984: 135). This data documents indeed that it is only 'as a feature of its local historicity' that the series of Runs' did project as its possibility that it could become a collection of measurable properties of pulse frequency and star location.

However, by emphasising so strongly the *possibility* that this series could become a collection of measurable properties of pulse frequency, Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston neglect the fact that it *actually* became such a collection. Their account does not provide any analysis of this striking feature of the night's work. The 'projection of a possibility' is, of course, not a sufficient explanation for its becoming true. Projected possibilities must be realized in the form of, e.g., specific diagrams that display very specific outcomes of manipulations of instruments. Although Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston (1981: 142) acknowledge that "[b]oth, practical action and practical reasoning, are chained to the certain, technical, materially specific appearances of astronomy's things", they do not describe this work of chaining in any detail, and one finds in their article only in passing a specification of what makes certain things count as 'astronomy's things'.

Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston present the transcripts in Appendix 5 as data that documents the historicity of the astronomers' observations. Apart from the work's historicity, however, this data reveals also how the artfulness of that work consists of performing it in such a way that both its result (the discovery of a pulsar with particular documented characteristics) and the activities that produced it can be reported. What, in other words, is neglected by Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston is that the astronomers do not only perform their work in an accountably astronomical way, but that they produce its account at the same time. In collecting technical data, in their

talk, and in their notes, they are already assembling the text of the article. They are not only, or primarily, 'projecting' the possibility that their work could be reported as a collection of measurable properties of pulse frequency, but they are already making that very report.

The data shows also that the astronomers' 'finishing off' of the discovery of the pulsar is not similar to the way in which jurors, according to Garfinkel, *retrospectively find* that the outcome of their deliberations was a competent decision. It is, in contrast, the astronomers' *prospective* orientation to what counts as a competent astronomical report that enables them to *conclude retrospectively* that they 'actually' have discovered a pulsar. Astronomical work is contingent, local and embodied, but it is not common-sensical in the way jurors' sorting of fact from fancy is. Like a 'potter's object', an astronomical discovery is not found but produced. But, unlike a 'potter's object', this discovery is self-reflexive in that (an account of) the way it is produced forms a necessary part of it.<sup>2</sup>

By taking it as 'obvious' that the astronomers are preoccupied with an astronomically accountable collection of observations, Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston do not address the questions of observability (the question of how they can identify and describe the participants' point of view) and specificity (the question how they can identify and describe an astronomically oriented preoccupation). It can only be inferred from their account of this 'obviousness', what kind of observables count for them as observable displays of an orientation to the rules of astronomically valid observations:

[E]ach observation is announced at the outset as one in a numerical series of successive observations, settings on the instruments are recorded, and mention is made of how the observations will be a repeat of or a check on previous observations. The mathematical collection is obvious too in their article where they display their first chart recorded case of a pulse as an icon for the class of pulse it names (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 135).

It is interesting to note that Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston do not only identify the announcement of observations, and the mentioning of how observations will be a repeat of or a check on previous observations, as documents of an orientation to the general and formal procedures of astronomy, but also the way in which the pulse is displayed by the astronomers in the article. However, it is not clear whether they consider this only as a feature of the article (as a feature of how the work is presented) or as a feature of the work itself.

In summary, on the one hand, Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston demonstrate clearly ethnomethodology's argument that work can only be studied adequately by acknowledging its contingencies and historicity. But, on the

other hand, they disregard a very important feature of that work, namely, that the discovery of an optical pulsar (as viewed by the practitioners) does not only consist of the work of observing its features (pulse frequency, etc.) but of its competent reporting as well. The result is at best a partial description of how the work in the observatory is done, in which its observable orientation to the wider context of the discipline of astronomy, a specific interweaving of doing observations and reporting about them, is downplayed. In the following section I discuss a similar problem in a conversation analytic study of 911 emergency calls.

#### 4. Zimmerman's study of the achievement of 'context'

In his article "Achieving context" (1992), Zimmerman examines

the notion that the achievement of an entry into an encounter mutually understood to be 'institutional' is a situated, turn-by-turn accomplishment of participants focusing general interactional skills and specific knowledge on issues posed by the exigencies of the call as an interaction and a service encounter (Zimmerman, 1992: 37).

How is, according to Zimmerman, this entry 'achieved', and how can the analyst identify participants' 'specific knowledge'?<sup>3</sup> Zimmerman begins his discussion with stating that in any call the caller is accountable for calling and that this accountability has a particular salience in emergency calls. He illustrates this with the two following, rather exceptional, calls (Zimmerman, 1992: 38; cf. Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987: 179):

##### *Extract 1*

D = dispatcher; C = caller.

- 01 D: County Emergency  
 02 ((Caller hangs up))  
 03 ((Phone being dialled and ringing))  
 04 C: Hello?  
 05 D: Yes, this is nine one one emergency calling back, do you have an  
 emergency?  
 07 C: No we don't

##### *Extract 2*

- 01 D: Nine one emergency  
 02 ((Loud voices in the background –  
 03 screaming and arguing))  
 04 ((Click))  
 05 D: Oo:::ps! Sounds like a domestic

06 ((Dispatcher calls phone number from which call  
 07 originated))  
 08 D: This is thuh Sheriff's Department.  
 09 Is there a problem?

After having provided the background information that in this 911 dispatch center the telephone number of callers dialling the 911 number appears on a computer screen, permitting the dispatcher to recontact a caller or to dispatch assistance if warranted, Zimmerman notes that its utilisation displays

the dispatchers' presumption that emergency assistance is the purpose of the call until determined to be otherwise. In extract 1 the callback 'disconfirms' the assumption of need. Background sounds serve to frame extract 2 as a request for assistance in a domestic dispute, which the dispatcher seeks to confirm in the callback (Zimmerman, 1992: 39).

Thus, questions such as "Do you have an emergency?" and "Is there a problem?" observably display, according to Zimmerman, the dispatchers' presumption that emergency assistance is the purpose of the call until determined, by the dispatcher, to be otherwise. Zimmerman's general comment on this kind of data is:

The fundamental 'institutional' connection between a server and a client, generically, and, in this case, emergency dispatching organizations and the public (i.e., citizen complainants, victims, and so on) is found in the initiation and completion of the telephone connection between caller and answerer (Zimmerman, 1992: 40).

It is a general feature of any call that callers identify themselves in the beginning and that callers account for the purpose of the call. These general procedures are applied in these particular calls as a device for the 'achievement' of the 'institutional identities' that the callers will have in these calls. In 911 emergency calls, dispatchers and callers present themselves as particular 'identities' with particular purposes which are made available to each other as features of specific situations called 'emergencies'.

Zimmerman's approach is characterised by the application of a methodical restriction consisting of the strict avoidance of any inference of 'context' that is not made observable by the participants. This does not imply that the analyst must or can abstain from using her or his knowledge of the 'context' he or she is studying. Its use, however, is restricted to only those instances where participants observably display an orientation to it. Similar to the participants, who must know the features of a 'context' such as an 'emergency call' for being able to display them in their talk, the analyst must know the features as well in order to be able to identify them. The analyst must pro-

vide the underlying pattern (i.e., the ‘context’ and its features) in order to describe an utterance as its display (document).

Thus, the ethnomethodological and the ‘constructive’ approach to ‘context’ do not differ in the kind of knowledge they bring to bear on the analysis. Both cannot but apply the knowledge that analysts as members have of the more or less abstract and generalised features of societal institutions. But there is a difference in how this knowledge is used. The ‘constructive’ analysis of institutional encounters usually will rely on the unrestricted use of that knowledge in order to *explain* the observed events. An ethnomethodological analysis, in contrast restricts its use to those elements of this knowledge that are necessary for *elucidating* them. This can be illustrated with the following example (Zimmerman, 1992: 40):

*Extract 3*

- 01 D: Nine one one emer:gency  
 02 (0.6)  
 03 C: Yes, I need a towing tru:ck for one car away  
 04 ( ) they di:d park in my parking spa:ce the  
 05 who:le day and overnight (0.6) ‘n they won’t  
 06 mo:ve.  
 07 (0.5)  
 08 D: I’m I’m sorry?  
 09 (1.2)  
 10 C: Okay, I need a towing truck (0.6) for towing.  
 11 D: You need a TOW TRUCK?  
 12 C: Yes.  
 13 D: Then call a tow company.

According to Zimmerman, this call demonstrates that and how a receiver displays an interest in determining whether callers seek the kind of service that his organisation provides. The assumption is that anyone (i.e., participants and analysts) will see that the receiver’s advice to call a tow company is not the service requested by caller (although the caller does express his needing a towing truck and does not explicitly mention what he expects the receiver to do) and that caller’s request is not an emergency. This presupposes that we all know what an emergency is (not a car in a private parking space) and what 911 dispatch centers are supposed to be called for (for dispatching emergency assistance, not for giving advice about whom to call when another kind of service is needed), i.e., that we share a detailed knowledge of the ‘context’ that is involved here.

Taking ‘displaying and orienting to context in talk’ as the topic of analysis does not imply a specific stance on whether or not, and how, talk in institutions is ‘influenced’ by the institutional context. It does simply not address the latter question. It is clear that Zimmerman’s analysis of 911 calls would

have yielded very different results if the question had not been restricted to participants' *mutual* understanding of the encounter as 'institutional', but had been oriented to the question how dispatchers manage calls as part of their work as a whole, which consists of a variety of other tasks, such as producing records of calls and dispatching messages to others in the organisation. Such a question is an ethnomethodological one in its own right. However, the topic of analysis would not be restricted to receivers' display of 'context' to callers, and *vice versa*, but include receivers' display of 'context' to colleagues and supervisors as well.

Zimmerman consistently confines the analysis to what happens between caller and receiver. Apparently he is not interested in how receivers organize their other tasks, such as sending dispatches to patrol units, or in how they comply with formal obligations, such as writing 'complete' records and calling back callers who have not given a reportable reason for their call. The 'success' of a call, as viewed by receivers, is arguably dependent on the degree to which the call's course facilitates the competent completion of these other tasks. Receivers' questions in callbacks, such as "Is there a problem?" and "Do you have an emergency?", therefore, do not necessarily (or only) display the dispatchers' presumption that emergency assistance is the purpose of the call until determined to be otherwise (although it will likely be heard this way by the caller). At the same time, or primarily, it can be a display of an orientation to established rules of operation, and be heard as such by colleagues and supervisors.

Similarly to Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston who explicitly disregard practitioners' observable orientation to the extra-local context of astronomy as a writing science, Zimmerman disregards receivers' orientation to a context that, although it is not observable for the caller, is nevertheless acutely and immediately present for the receiver. In both examples of the ethnomethodological study of work, the 'occasioned corpus of setting features' is arbitrarily confined to elements that display considerations that are relevant for the immediate tasks at hand such as, respectively, doing measurements that count as astronomical observations and telephone conversations that can count as competent 911 calls. Both studies dismiss as elements of the corpus orientations to concerns (such as the writing of an astronomical article and the completion of an institutionally required record of a 911 call) that, though not visible in their data, are no less immediately relevant in the course of the work studied.

The restriction of the analysis to only those elements of the 'corpus' that are made observable in the call (or conversation for that matter), provides the analyst a double handicap. On the one hand the analyst restricts the description of the work of one party to only those elements that are made observable to the other party, which results in the analyst knowing in principle

as much of the first party as the second does. But, on the other hand, he or she restricts the description of the work of the second party to only those elements that are made observable to the first, which results in the analyst knowing much less than each of the parties. What is deliberately lost is a sensitivity to power differences, 'hidden agendas', and other forms of inequality that are characteristic phenomena of institutional encounters.

Summarizing, Zimmerman's article provides a solution to both problems that are the topic of this article, the problems of observability and of specificity. The solution to the problem of observability consists of a double act of identification. By identifying with one party, the analyst is supposed to be able to 'see' what is made observable by the other party, and by identifying with the latter he is supposed to be able to 'see' what is made observable by the first party. Apart from the analyst's competence as a member, no other competences are needed. The problem of specificity is solved in the same vein, by assuming that the parties in the situation studied share a stock of knowledge with each other (and with the analyst) that enables them to recognise 'contextual' elements as such. These solutions provide for the identification and description of 'mutually understood context' indeed, i.e., of receivers' work as viewed by *callers*. They do not provide for the description of receivers' work as viewed by *receivers*.<sup>4</sup>

The technical distance between receivers and callers in 911 emergency calls prevents callers from getting a complete picture of the receivers' activities during the call (among them the writing of a report of the call on a visual display screen). For Zimmerman and other conversation analysts (Schegloff and Jefferson among others), it was precisely this invisibility of each others' (other) activities that made telephone calls privileged sites for studying the achievement of 'context' in utterances only. In conversations, however, it is possible as well that an orientation to a specific 'context' is observably displayed by one party whereas, at the same time, it is not observable for the other party. In the next sections I will discuss instances of such occasions.

## 5. Hidden agendas

Because everyday conversations are characterised by the lack of any predetermined 'context', it is the participants' task to make observable for each other the specific 'identities' (such as, for instance, 'father' and 'daughter', 'husband and wife', 'just friends', etc.) that they consider relevant for that particular occasion. This is what ethnomethodology refers to with the expression 'mutually understood context'. Let us look at Extract 4 with this in mind.

*Extract 4*

- 01 S: Hi, Ray. How is your girl friend feeling?  
 02 E: What do you mean, how is she feeling?  
 03 Do you mean physical or mental?  
 04 S: I mean how is she feeling?  
 05 What's the matter with you?  
 06 E: Nothing.  
 07 Just explain a little clearer what do you mean?  
 08 S: Skip it.  
 09 How are your Med School applications coming?  
 10 E: What do you mean, 'How are they?'  
 11 S: You know what I mean.  
 12 E: I really don't.  
 13 S: What's the matter with you? Are you sick?

This is an interesting conversation, particularly for analysts who, in the ethnomethodological tradition, are interested in how members display mutual understanding (or its absence). The transcript shows how E displays his lack of understanding of S's questions, how S displays his lack of understanding of E's lack of understanding and, finally, how S is orientated to a possible explanation for E's behavior ("Are you sick?"). The extract shows that mutual understanding cannot be taken for granted and that conversationalists, in some cases, must do a lot of work in order to 'achieve' it. The extract could also be the starting point for a study of categories such as 'sick' that are used for explaining an apparently unexpected lack of understanding.

Readers who have already recognised this extract as an excerpt of an account by one of Garfinkel's students, as presented by Garfinkel in his "Studies of the routine grounds of everyday activities" (1967: 42–43), will immediately see that such an approach to this data fails to discover an important 'fact', namely, that E's utterances actually are not a display of a lack of understanding of what S says but, instead, a display of an orientation to Garfinkel's instruction

to engage an acquaintance or a friend in an ordinary conversation and, without indicating that what the experimenter [i]s asking [i]s in any way unusual, to insist that the person clarify the sense of his commonplace remarks (Garfinkel, 1967: 42).

In Zimmerman's approach, an analyst cannot include Garfinkel's instructions in the 'occasioned corpus' as long as E has not made observable to S that this occasion is not an 'everyday' conversation for him but, instead, a sociological experiment. Such an observable display is, of course, absent here because the nature of the experiment is precisely that it is not clear for S that he is its 'victim'.

Thus, the application of Zimmerman's approach to this data would result



in a misrepresentation of what the conversation was all about, at least in the eyes of one participant. The analysis would result in a more or less adequate description of S's utterances but would misrepresent E's utterances. The analyst would identify with S and, like him, be cheated. Although it is clear that this approach would not enable the analyst to describe E's hidden agenda, it does not follow immediately that there is something seriously and inherently wrong with it. One can, for instance, question whether it is reasonable to expect from a specific type of analysis that it is immune to lying. It can even be argued that it is an intended outcome of Zimmerman's methodological prescriptions that analysts are as vulnerable to being cheated as members are. If it is the analyst's objective to describe what is mutually available to participants in the situation (and nothing more), it is sufficient to restrict the analysis to what E observably displays to S (and *vice versa*). This implies that, even if Garfinkel's instructions are known, this knowledge should not be used.

Such, and other related, arguments could be taken as occasions for theoretical explorations of the principles of conversation analysis and of ethnomethodology. I would prefer, however, to take a more pragmatic stance. We could, for instance, examine the practical question on what conditions E's orientation to Garfinkel's instructions, though not observable for S, could be considered, even within the frame of ethnomethodology, as observable for the analyst. It is clearly not a sufficient condition that Garfinkel has given these instructions to E. But let us imagine another, more complicated, case. Suppose, for instance, that S leaves E at the end of Extract 4 and that Garfinkel, who was observing the conversation, now addresses E as follows:

*Extract 4b*

- 14 G: Well done, Ray.  
15 E: Yeah. I was nervous, but it was OK.

I assume that Garfinkel's and E's remarks would make a lot of a difference for ethnomethodologists who would analyze this conversation in accordance with Zimmerman's prescriptions, although it would not make a difference for S (if he had just left the scene). This exchange between Garfinkel and E would show the analyst that, from the beginning of the conversation, S was not the only recipient of E's utterances, and that E's talking to S was also an observably competent application of instructions, designed to be observed and evaluated as such by Garfinkel. But note that the assumed difference in outcome of the analysis depends entirely on Garfinkel's presence on the scene and the analyst's tape-recording of Garfinkel's exchange with E. Garfinkel could have said the same in his office after having heard a tape-recording of Extract 4, but that would not have resulted in the same outcome, only be-

cause the analyst would not hear this exchange (Extract 4b) and, hence, could not have known that Garfinkel was already from the beginning implied in E's audience.

Let us imagine yet another case. Let us suppose that E did not make a recording of the exchange with S, but only presented a report about it in Garfinkel's class. Or we can imagine that he did not prepare a written report, but that he attended the class and was prepared to report about his experiences orally if requested. In these imagined examples, in contrast with the examples above, Garfinkel is not the direct recipient of E's utterances in Extract 4. Would this mean that E's utterances were in any sense less oriented to the accomplishment of the experiment, including its reporting? To the contrary, these utterances are in all cases oriented to the presentation of a report, whether it will actually be presented to Garfinkel or not. The difference between these examples is not the degree in which E is oriented to the task of achieving a reportable experiment and hence of assembling the elements of his report while doing the experiment, but is instead the degree to which this is observable for the analyst.

It is the analyst's task to find the materials that enable her or him to make this orientation observable. From the examples discussed so far, it can be deduced that this requires that calls and conversations be studied within a larger context of coordinated activities. In the ethnomethodological literature, two arguments are used for the restriction of the description of 'context' to those elements that are made available by and to members in the situation itself, namely, an ontological and a methodical one. The first is that (occasioned) activities are not, and hence cannot be described properly as, enactments of plans, general designs, role expectations and the like. The second argument is that this restriction helps to avoid that analysts impose features upon the data that are not actually there for participants. These two arguments are, I think, no valid objections against the description of E's utterances as observably 'achieving a reportably sociological experiment'. Describing E's utterances as doing a sociological experiment does neither imply the assumption that E is following official or general rules of doing (specific) sociological experiments, nor does it mean that the analyst imposes her or his reading on the data.

My interest in describing E's utterances as oriented to 'doing an experiment' could be considered wrong throughout, because it presupposes an interest in labelling or categorising E's work. It is, however, not my proposal that the analysis be aimed at the labelling or categorisation of conversations or settings. The objective is instead to provide a description of E's work as viewed by himself, in accordance with the aim of ethnomethodology to examine ordinary activities for the ways in which they exhibit observably and accountably competent work practice *as viewed by practitioners* (Heritage,

1984: 302).<sup>5</sup> In order to accomplish this task, the methodical rules that are current in ethnomethodology must be revised in such a way that they enable the analyst to achieve more adequate, though no less rigorous, descriptions of the work of assembling an occasioned corpus. I will now present my proposals in more detail by discussing extracts from a psychiatric interview.

## 6. Psychiatric interviewing as writing

The following extract is a fragment of a conversation between a psychiatric nurse and the parents of a patient, a woman of about 20 years old who lives in her parents' home. The nurse pays a home call in order to interview the daughter in order to decide whether she should be admitted in a hospital. Although it is not very early in the morning, the patient is still in bed. While waiting for the patient, the parents and the nurse have a chat in which the father, from the very beginning, complains about his daughter's behavior.

### *Extract 5*

F = Father; M = Mother; N = Nurse.

- |   |    |   |
|---|----|---|
| 1 | F: | I do not allow being laughed at by my children                        |
| 2 | N: | Have tensions between you existed for a long time?                    |
| 3 | M: | She is rather difficult   |
| 4 | F: | Well, the problem is, she thinks that she can rule the situation here |

Although the participants in this conversation (the father, the mother and the nurse) know that they are talking to each other because of their respective, different relations to a patient, this is not a sufficient reason for assuming that they 'mutually understand' the conversation as a psychiatric interview. Even in the 'constructive' sociological approach, this assumption would require a more elaborate argumentation with regard to questions such as: "When can a psychiatric interview be considered to have been begun?" and "How can a question about 'tensions between you' and subsequent answers be seen as part of a psychiatric interview?" In 'constructive' sociology, however, these questions can be answered by the analyst's referring to a point in the interview in which the nurse explicitly announces that he wants to know something about the patient, or by his identifying questions or answers that have a psychiatric meaning according to textbooks or experts.

In an ethnomethodological approach, however, the question is not whether there was at some point in the conversation an observable 'beginning' of an interview (though the study of such beginnings is an ethnomethodological endeavor in its own right), nor how the analyst can identify the nurse's question as a 'psychiatric' one. For ethnomethodology the only relevant question

is what the utterances of this extract accomplish as viewed by the participants, and how that can be determined by an analyst. An answer to the latter question may be found by consulting Zimmerman's study of the achievement of context in 911 emergency calls. In the examples of calls discussed above Zimmerman identified the achievement of a '911 emergency call context' in how receivers in callbacks seek a confirmation of their presumption that there is an emergency (Extracts 1 and 2 above), and in how a receiver refers an apparent non-emergency to another kind of service, a tow company (Extract 3 above). In these cases, the decisive point, for the analysis, seems to be that the parties observably orient to a decision about the delivery of a service. The callbacks are heard by callers (and by the analyst, for that matter) as receivers' attempts to determine whether further action is required. A referral to a tow company is, similarly, heard as a decision that no further action on the part of the 911 emergency center will follow.

If we apply Zimmerman's approach to Extract 5, it appears that we cannot find any 'context' in it. There is, in other words, no 'context' achieved. At least two reasons for this absence of 'context', in these four lines, can be identified. First, the speakers do not identify themselves in a specific relation to the other participants, or *vice versa*, e.g., as a nurse vis-a-vis the relatives of a patient. The 'membership categories' used are those of father and children (line 1), and of persons who share tensions (line 2) and a 'situation' (line 4). Next, the participants do not display an orientation, in these four lines, to a desired activity of one of them, e.g. a decision by the nurse to hospitalize the daughter. The conclusion is that, whereas 'constructive' sociologists (and psychologists and psychiatrists, for that matter) could easily identify, in this extract, parents' depicting their daughter's behavior as a problem that, if possible, must be solved by the nurse, *qua nurse*, ethnomethodologists will take a more careful stance and will emphasize that, although the parents observably present a problem to the nurse, it is not clear, in the extract itself, that they approach the nurse *as a nurse*.

The problem can be dismissed as irrelevant. Why should we care whether, in this extract of only four lines that is isolated from its context anyway, a 'psychiatric interview' is achieved or not? There are, I think, two good reasons for taking this problem seriously. Both are related to the question what it is that must be achieved by an ethnomethodological study of work in institutional settings. The first reason is that it is of immediate interest for the nurse, while participating in this conversation, whether the parents are complaining to him in his function as a nurse or not. It is for him of practical and moral importance whether the parents are, e.g., clients (who might expect a psychiatric service from him), informants about his patient (who accidentally is their daughter), or persons with whom he only shares company while waiting for the arrival of his patient. An ethnomethodological description of

his work must address this issue. The second reason is that the nurse is institutionally accountable for this conversation as a part of his dealings with this patient. The conversation is a part of the nurse's work and, therefore, it is relevant to know how he manages to achieve it as a specific kind of work. These two reasons presuppose that, however the parents see the nurse's role in the conversation (as an everyday conversationalist, as a psychiatric interviewer, as a provider of help to them, or as a combination of these), the nurse must decide what kind of situation it is he finds himself in. However contingent the situation might be, he must make sense of it as a nurse who is there to assess the case of the daughter of the persons he is talking to.

If it is accepted that, in the frame of an ethnomethodological study, it is relevant to attempt to determine whether and, if so, how the nurse achieves a psychiatric 'context' in Extract 5, the question is how we could proceed. As mentioned above, the extract itself gives no information that can solve this problem that arises precisely because the extract can be read as an example of an everyday conversation with the parents of a daughter. I assume that an ethnomethodologist would first consult the immediate environment of the extract: What did the nurse say preceding the utterance (line 1) of the father? How did he react to the parents' answers (lines 3 and 4) to his question (line 2)? It is possible that in a previous utterance the nurse had expressed an observably professional interest in knowing more about the father's ideas about his children, or that he in a later utterance observably acknowledged receipt of the parents' answers as psychiatrically relevant.

But what if, in a series of utterances before and after this extract, the nurse did not say anything that was observably oriented to a 'psychiatric context' (nor the parents, for that matter)? Would it be inevitable to conclude either that it was a mere everyday conversation for both parties (perhaps meant as the mere bridging of time until the patient would arrive) or that the problem could not be solved with the data at hand? In my view, we do not need such additional evidence in order to describe the nurse's question (line 2) and his hearing of the parents' answers (lines 3 and 4) as an observable display (though not for the parents) of an orientation to competent psychiatric practice. Similarly to my contention that E's utterances in Extract 4 can be described as an observable display of an orientation to Garfinkel's instructions (even although this cannot be observed by S, nor by the analyst if he or she confines the analysis to the transcript, and to observation for that matter), it is my contention here that the nurse's question can be described as observably oriented to the completion of his institutional tasks (even in case this cannot be observed by the parents).

In order to make my point, I represent in Extract 5a the same utterances as in Extract 5, but with the addition of fragments of two written texts. Text 1 is a fragment from a report written by another nurse who had talked to the

same patient the previous day. The nurse had read this report before paying his home call. Text 2 is a fragment of the report that the nurse himself wrote after the home call.

*Extract 5a*

Text 1: Parents: father says particularly recently very angry. Has a strong feeling about being laughed at by his daughter.

- 1 F: I do not allow being laughed at by my children
- 2 N: Have tensions between you existed for a long time?
- 3 M: She is rather difficult
- 4 F: Well, the problem is, she thinks that she can rule the situation here

Text 2: Home visit information parents (Pat. is still asleep). Pat. is alleged 'to be difficult'. She wants to play the boss according to her father.

The father's utterance (line 1) is heard by the nurse as a confirmation of the colleague's report of which Text 1 is a fragment, of the 'strong feeling about being laughed at' in particular.<sup>6</sup> The nurse used the occasion for an attempt to get confirmed the preceding information in his colleague's report (about being 'very angry') as well. He does not receive this confirmation but does, instead, receive other information which he considers sufficiently important for being reported (see Text 2). The mere existence of the two texts, and their availability to the analyst, provide for the possibility to describe this one question of the nurse (line 2) as observably oriented to the rewriting of his colleague's report.

In this and the previous section I argued that utterances can legitimately be described as oriented to a 'context' that is not observable to the receivers of those utterances. It was my aim to demonstrate that these utterances could be described as observably oriented to, respectively, Garfinkel's instructions regarding how to do a 'breaching experiment', and to reporting requirements in an institution for emergency psychiatry. In the next section I will show how this observability (for the analyst) of practitioners' orientations to an institutional context of reporting enables the analyst to describe not only how practitioners such as psychiatrists 'discover' and 'finish off' reportable 'objects', but also how they can accomplish this in conversations with patients who are not aware of their own contribution to the practitioners' work.

## **7. Forming the potter's object**

As discussed above, Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston (1981) liken the astronomical work of discovering a pulsar to the work of a potter:

The analogy to the oscilloscopically displayed pulse is the developingly observable object of the potter, where the pulse takes ‘shape’ in and as of the way it is worked, and *from* a place-to-start with to an increasingly definite thing (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 137).

The ‘potter’s object’, however, is less appropriate as an analogy to the discovery of a pulsar, and to its ‘finishing off’ as a reportable object, than to psychotherapeutical and psychiatric work, of which the object-to-be-discovered is only available in talk and cannot be made visible in the form of optical pulses or in another material form. In the following extract from an initial interview in psychotherapy, for instance, it can be seen how a character trait of a client takes shape from a place-to-start with (the patient’s story about an encounter with his supervisor) to an increasingly definite thing (his being an introvert).

*Extract 6*

P = Patient; I = Interviewer.

- 1 P: Well, the problem is, things come up, and that started, uhh, with my work, and that was really the main reason, in principle. [. . .] And the main stumbling block, I keep saying, that, for example, the, uhh, I can’t say no. I am afraid that I uhh am not functioning well, at home, at my work, everywhere. I want to do everything well. [. . .] And last week I had the nerve to throw out everything to the managing director. And apparently he was startled by it and also startled by the absenteeism in our department. [. . .] And I now already feel relieved from a very big burden, because I have had this interview with him. For there was, uhh, that, I, for let me state it this way, that was in my eyes the most important point.
- 2 I: Yes, so really a lot of tension got off your back, because you started to ventilate, to disclose what is going on.
- 3 P: Yes, but that’s happening very often to me, when I quarrel with my wife, that does not happen every day, but once in a while something comes up, that I just blurt out.
- [data omitted]
- 4 I: But does that mean, John, that somehow you are an introvert?
- 5 P: Yes, one hundred percent. It keeps simmering in my stomach.
- 6 I: It all stays a little bit in your mind and at a certain moment you spit everything at once?
- 7 P: Yes, I am an introvert, yes.

First, the interviewer formulates the gist of the patient’s utterances by paraphrasing “I now already feel relieved from a very big burden” as “So really a lot of tension got off your back”. After having received the patient’s confirmation in utterance 3, he formulates the upshot of the patient’s talk in the form of a diagnostic label (“You are an introvert”) that later in the interview

(not presented here) and in his report functions as the ground for the interviewer's advice that the patient participate in assertiveness training sessions. There is, however, in this extract hardly any element that can count as observably 'psychotherapeutical', unless all talk about the management of tensions in the workplace and in the family is considered 'psychotherapeutical'. The latter approach would, however, beg the question what in this extract can count as competent professional work.

The analogy of a 'potter's object' is very appropriate in this case, because it acknowledges the principally open character of the interviewer's work. The eventual 'potter's object' can be a depression, a phobia, or whatever other diagnosis. It will become clear only in the course of the interview what the 'pot', the diagnosis, will look like. The interviewer cannot shape it according to a plan or design. As in the case of the astronomers' work, however, this analogy does not sufficiently acknowledge that, in shaping the 'pot', the practitioner's work is restricted in specific ways. In the case of an initial interview in psychotherapy, for instance, only a restricted range of therapeutical advice is available, each of which can only be used in combination with specific diagnoses, the use of which is restricted to specific combinations of symptoms. Without making the mistake to describe the interviewer's work as the following of a design, it is necessary to identify the interviewer's orientation to these institutional restrictions and in particular to the requirement to present the case in an observably competent way. Thus, although there is no explicit mentioning of a specific 'psychotherapeutical' element in this extract, the shaping of the patient's character as 'introvert' must be described as oriented to a 'corpus of knowledge' that specifies what kind of phenomena count as 'introvert'. The interviewer's achievement in this extract is not only to have shaped a 'pot', in a fine-tuned cooperation with the patient, but also that the shaping of this object is done in a way that is accountable as competent psychotherapy.

It is, however, not necessary that the institutional 'context' is demonstrably available to both parties in the interview. It is precisely the interviewer's task to achieve an observably competent interview, even in case the patient has no idea of what this competence consists of. Extract 7 illustrates such a situation. This extract is a fragment of the interview that the psychiatric nurse of Extract 5 had with the patient, after she had joined the nurse and her parents.

#### *Extract 7*

- 1 P: I've been used all my life. ((pause, then very softly:)) (what I had already ( ) the whole country)
- 2 N: Sorry.
- 3 P: The whole country knew that.



- 4 N: What did the whole country know?  
 5 P: What I just said.  
 6 N: I don't understand. I just don't get it.  
 7 P: I've just been used all my life.  
 8 N: By whom?  
 9 P: By boys.  
 10 N: Yes. And how does the whole country know about this?  
 11 P: It was broadcast.  
 12 N: It was broadcast. On radio or something?  
 13 P: And on TV.  
 14 N: That you're being used?  
 15 P: No uh with whom I went to bed.  
 16 N: Strange.

In this fragment, there is no observable sign that there is a mutual understanding of any other 'context' than provided by an everyday conversation about the woman's experiences. The explicit evaluation of the woman's story as 'strange' is not 'psychiatric' in any sense, but only an everyday judgment that any conversationalist could (and presumably would) make. An analyst who would follow Zimmerman's methodical advice would, I assume, be obliged to conclude that the 'occasioned corpus' does not provide any specific 'setting feature' except those of an everyday conversation about these kind of experiences. Inspection of the nurse's report, however, shows that he in this fragment was shaping a very specific 'pot', namely, a delusion:

*Extract 7a*

Text 2: There are clear delusional ideas. She fancies her sexual past being disclosed on the radio.

The 'pot' that is shaped in this extract, the delusion, is the product of the work of both parties in the interview, but only one party, the nurse, is oriented to criteria for establishing its character as a delusion. The nurse and the woman cooperate in the shaping of her story that hence can be considered their joint product. The nurse's evaluation of the woman's story as 'strange', however, is not shared. Although the nurse makes his evaluation explicitly available to the woman, he does not make available any other orientation than one of an everyday kind. However, it would be a misrepresentation of the nurse's work if it would not be described as oriented to a set of very specific psychiatric criteria. While shaping, in a fine-tuned cooperation with the patient, the story of the broadcasting of her sexual life, he is at the same time assembling the text of a psychiatric report in which he will claim to have discovered 'delusional ideas'.

## 8. Conclusion

In a critique of Goffmannian approaches, Rod Watson (1992) has called 'ironic' the ascription to actors of motives that are not observable in actual behavior. In the same vein, Sharrock (1979) has, in a critique of the 'discovery' of professional dominance in medical interviews, called it 'perverse' to see these interviews as sites of struggle, even where none of the participants, neither the patient nor the doctor, display any observable orientation to conflict. These criticisms of the discoveries that are claimed by 'constructive' sociology are justified. In contrast, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have developed a program of inquiry in which only those features of a setting are included in the analysis that are observably displayed by participants. This program has resulted in a series of studies which undoubtedly are not 'ironic' or 'perverse' in the way Watson and Sharrock apply these labels to other sociologists' work. It can be argued, however, that many of these ethnomethodological studies are equally, or perhaps more, 'ironic' or 'perverse' in another way.

Ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies of work in institutional settings tend to depict encounters in these settings as harmonious events that are characterised by mutual understanding and cooperation. This way of depicting these encounters is justified in one respect, namely, in that these encounters rarely break down. Parties usually display a mutual orientation to cooperation within a 'context' that is made observable to each other in their actions. This, however, does not imply that parties do not orient to other 'contexts' at the same time, without this being observable for the other party. Phenomena of this kind (such as, for instance, 'hidden agendas', 'different purposes') are usually neglected in ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies. This was, I assume, never intended.

There is, thus, in the ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies of encounters in institutional contexts a tension between, on the one hand, ethnomethodology's objective to examine ordinary activities for the ways in which they exhibit observably competent work practice as they are viewed by practitioners (Heritage, 1984: 302) and, on the other hand, the notion that the achievement of an entry into an encounter that is mutually understood to be 'institutional' is a turn by-turn accomplishment of participants (Zimmerman, 1992: 37). The latter notion disregards the obvious fact that in most institutional encounters only one party can be considered a practitioner and that the practitioners' point of view will only rarely be made part of a mutual understanding between the participants. The notion of the 'occasioned corpus of setting features' in ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies of work must be extended in such a way that it is allowed, or even acknowledged as good practice, to admit elements to which only one

party's orientation is observable for the analyst, even if that orientation cannot be observed by other parties in the event.

It must, of course, be avoided that an extended version of the notion of the 'occasioned corpus' would reintroduce practices of 'constructive' sociology in the analysis. It is necessary, therefore, that criteria be developed for the inclusion of elements in the 'occasioned corpus'. In the examples discussed in this paper, all elements that were admitted to the 'corpus' were available in the form of texts that were consulted or written (by the practitioner whose work was studied) in the course of the work of which the analyzed extracts were a part. These texts were taken as evidence that the practitioners oriented their utterances not only to the one recipient they were talking to, but at the same time also to colleagues and supervisors not present, and that these utterances would have been recognised by these colleagues as oriented to them if they would have been present. Only those elements are admitted to the 'extended corpus' which can be considered as observably oriented to *local practices of reporting* and which hence can be seen as oriented to reporting to specific colleagues on specific occasions. The difference between this approach and 'constructive' analysis is precisely the difference between this restriction to local practices, in which the studied encounters are embedded, on the one hand, and 'constructive' orientations to more abstract formal rules for professional conduct on the other hand.

Summarizing, ethnomethodology can achieve more adequate and more relevant descriptions of institutional encounters, if these encounters are not only considered as conversations of which a mutual understanding of its character is accomplished on a turn-by-turn basis by participants (Zimmerman, 1992: 37), but also, and at the same time, as work of which each element must be reportable to colleagues and supervisors in the local setting in which the work is done. It is proposed that actual reports composed by the practitioners whose work is studied, in either written or spoken form, be admitted to the 'corpus'. When these reports are admitted to the 'corpus', they will make *observable* how practitioners' turns in the conversation are oriented to the shaping of *specific* reportable objects.

## Notes

1. Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston use the term 'Run' where the astronomers themselves use 'Observation'. It speaks of a course of work, with an announced beginning and end, during which determinations are made and from which observations are extracted. Successive Observations are enumerated which, e.g., enables the astronomers to locate their discovery of a pulsar in the Observations 18 through 23. (Cf. Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 134, n.13.)
2. Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston (1981: 138) claim that, in the published article, the

pulsar “is depicted as the cause of everything that is seen and said about it”. This is misleading in so far as the self-reflexive nature of astronomical reporting provides for an acknowledgement of the astronomical work of observing and interpreting that is a necessary condition for ‘seeing’ the pulsar and ‘saying’ things about it. (I owe this point to Dorothy Smith.)

3. In this presentation I will use the term ‘context’ as consistently as possible for ‘institutional context’ in the sense as used so far. Zimmerman complicates matters a bit by using the term ‘context’ for ‘sequential context’ as well.
4. In this section the focus was on the article “Achieving context” because Zimmerman presents it as a programmatic discussion of the conversation analytic viewpoint, as opposed to “the grain of the received view of social structure” (Zimmerman, 1992: 35), and because it is remarkably consistent with Zimmerman and Pollner’s discussion of the ‘occasioned corpus’. Zimmerman shows interest in a more extended corpus, however, in more recent work, in particular in the paper he presented at the conference “Ethnomethodology: Twenty Five Years Later”, 13–16 August, 1992, Waltham, MA. At the same conference, a similar extension of the occasioned corpus as proposed in the present paper was advocated by Dorothy Smith, Jack Whalen and Marilyn Whalen in another paper on 911 emergency calls.
5. This is perhaps an unfortunate expression because it sounds rather close to a focus on ‘perspective’ or perception, whereas ethnomethodology clearly is not a form of ‘sociology of perspectives’. Something like ‘for practitioners’ would be better, since the emphasis is on members’ sensemaking practices. (I owe this point to Peter Grahame.)  
 Heap (1980: 87) argues that ethnomethodology’s task should not be conceived as the description of actual properties of courses of action and reasoning but instead of possible properties. Thus, according to Heap, Heritage should have written ‘viewable’ rather than ‘viewed’. It is the aim of the present paper, however, to discuss some self-imposed methodical restrictions that are a hindrance to ethnomethodology’s achieving proper descriptions of *actual* properties.
6. The nurse did not consult his colleague’s report during the interview with the parents. Apparently the nurse had a vivid recollection of the text.

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