

# STRATEGIES FOR INTERPRETING QUALITATIVE DATA, *exempt*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As I sit in my office up to my eyeballs in data, I am once again impressed with the enormity of the problem of analyzing qualitative data. I have audiotapes, floppy disks, and written documents. I have my field notes and some of my students' field notes. I have copies of reports and minutes of meetings. I have between 10,000 and 20,000 electronic mail messages and another 2,000-3,000 pieces of hard copy mail. I have buttons and calendars and thank you notes. It will take me several weeks working full time just to review all these materials. How am I to make sense of them?

Many people who have worked with ethnographic or other qualitative data will recognize these feelings. The task can be overwhelming. One sometimes feels that reviewing the data only reinforces the complexity and ambiguity of the setting. While it is well to remember this complexity and ambiguity, the task at hand is to create an interpretation of the setting or some feature of it to allow people who have not directly observed the phenomena to have a deeper understanding of them.

## Interpretation Creation

The tricky part of this interpretation creation, of course, is to create an interpretation that is neither simply the application of some preexisting theory to your data nor only a description of how the members of a culture understand particular phenomena. Either of these is possible, but often one wants to go beyond these. By the time you have completed fieldwork, you have so much data that, if you were looking to support a particular theory, you probably could. That is not, however, the point of this research. If that is the intended goal, there are much more efficient ways to achieve it. At the same time, the goal is not only to describe a culture. Though describing a culture (or even knowing it well enough to start to describe it) is very difficult and, of course, one cannot describe a culture without also interpreting it (Clifford, 1986), people who do qualitative research are often expected to go quite a bit beyond describing what members know about the culture. The goal, it seems to me, is to develop one's own interpretation of how parts of the culture fit together or influence or relate to one another that is intrinsic to the setting one has studied and, at the same time, sheds light on how similar processes may be occurring in other settings.

If we accept this end, the present problem is how to start. Starting to create an interpretation is like trying to start a jigsaw puzzle that has a million indeterminate pieces. To make this puzzle more confusing, there is no unique solution. That is, one piece may fit with many other pieces. Imagine, in addition, that the picture consists almost entirely of shades of gray (imagine a jigsaw puzzle of a Rothko painting) so that one does not get immediate clues about the fit of the pieces from the picture that forms. (If one were to take this puzzle metaphor too literally, one might think that I am suggesting that there is ultimately a right answer. I am not. While I do not think that all interpretations are equally reasonable or legitimate, I also understand that these concepts—reason and legitimacy—are culturally bounded.)

My experience with ethnographic data suggests that clusters of data tend to stick together. These clusters probably depend on both what is in the researcher's thoughts as the data are gathered and how the members of the culture tend to organize their culture. Some of the challenges at this point of the research involve how to loosen the boundaries of these clusters, how to encourage clusters to interact with one another, and how to access clusters that have potential for interacting. The techniques for

data analysis that I describe in this book all have the potential to help the researcher with these challenges.

## Purpose of This Book

My purpose in writing this book is to introduce and give examples of some interpretive techniques for analyzing qualitative data. In choosing the four theories that underlie these techniques, I have focused on theories that are oriented to the interpretation of cultures or the context in which actions are taken. In every case I have seen the techniques used, I have been impressed with how much information they allow the author to provide the reader in a relatively succinct manner. I have used each of the techniques with my own data and have been struck by how much more I understand and can communicate about a culture or context after using the techniques. I also like the theories from which these techniques are drawn because they each have relatively few assumptions so that they are applicable to a broad range of phenomena. I do not claim that they are the only useful theories or techniques. Others may be equally or more useful for certain pieces of research. I also recognize that each of the theories I present could be used independently and that each warrants a book of its own. In fact, each has many books devoted solely to it, and I cite many of these books in the text. I find, however, that it is also useful to analyze data from the combined perspective of these theories. As I discuss in Chapter 6, while each of the theories focuses on different aspects of a context, when all four perspectives are combined, the aspects are interrelated in a way that makes the result a rich and textured interpretation of the context. Of course, by focusing on only one of the theories, one can go more deeply into a particular aspect of the context. Individual researchers have to make their decisions about which is more appropriate for their research. In this text, I try to provide the reader with a basic understanding of each of the four theories and some of the techniques for analyzing data that derive from these theories. I provide references so that the reader may pursue in greater depth any of the four theories. I also illustrate the techniques with examples from my own data.

## Four Theories

The techniques of analysis I describe are based on ethnomethodology, semiotics, dramaturgy, and deconstruction. All of these theories have

assumptions and the researcher must be careful that the assumptions are appropriate to the setting being studied. To my mind, these assumptions are relatively minimal. It is, however, entirely possible that the assumptions do not hold in all contexts. It is therefore important to be aware of them. In this introduction, I briefly describe the main ideas important to each of the techniques. A thorough understanding of the techniques and their appropriate uses is probably best developed through experience. In the following, I attempt to provide a basic understanding by addressing the question of what one is likely to look for and find if one looks through the eyes of an ethnomethodologist, a semiotician, a dramaturgist, or a deconstructionist.

Ethnomethodologists look for *processes* by which people make sense of their interactions and the institutions through which they live. They assume that people do make sense of these phenomena and that their sense making is the basis of their future actions and interpretations (what ethnomethodologists refer to as "going on"). They look for instances in which people have trouble "going on" or for ways in which the "going on" could be problematic but isn't. In other words, ethnomethodologists look for two apparently diametrically opposed situations: breakdowns and situations in which norms are so thoroughly internalized that breakdowns are nearly impossible. Because ethnomethodologists believe that breakdowns are fairly rare, the focus tends to be on widely accepted and taken-for-granted practices. These practices are often characterized by agreement about what is appropriate and tautological explanations of their appropriateness. (For instance, if asked why an action is appropriate, a person might respond that it is the right thing to do.)<sup>1</sup>

A semiotician looks for surface manifestations and the underlying structure that gives meaning to these manifestations. *Denotative* and *connotative* meanings are linguistic terms that are often used in semiotics in relation to surface manifestations and underlying structures. *Denotations* are explicit meanings and *connotations* are implied meanings. For example, the denotative meaning of the word *door* is a "hinged, sliding or revolving barrier that closes an entrance or exit" (*Oxford American Dictionary*, 1980). Its connotation depends on the context. It might connote hidden possibilities, possible linkages, closure, and so forth. Because not all semiotic analyses are of language, the term *surface manifestation* is often substituted for *denotation*. Rather than the word *door*, we may be talking about an actual door. Either the word or the physical manifestation

may have connotations or implied meanings depending on the context. An underlying structure is a reasonably coherent set of connotations. The same underlying structure gives meaning to many different denotations or surface manifestations.

A person carrying out a dramaturgical analysis is looking for a performance. Standard dramaturgical categories include scene, acts, actors, means, and motives. The primary focus of a dramaturgical analysis is the meaning of a performance for the actors and the audience or potential audience. A dramaturgical analysis has much in common with semiotics. Features of the performance could be considered surface manifestations and the meaning of the performance would be the underlying structure. The dramaturgical approach, however, constrains the focus of analysis to events and draws attention to particular features of an event. Dramaturgical analysis tends to focus on people in their roles and on the intentional strategies they have for producing desired understandings or effects.

A deconstructionist looks for the multiple meanings implicit in a text, conversation, or event. A deconstruction points out both the dominant ideology in the text, conversation, or event and some of the alternative frames that could be used to interpret the text, conversation, or event. Taken-for-granted categories (often in the form of dichotomies) and silences or gaps are elements that support the dominant ideology. Disruptions (sometimes in the form of a slip of the tongue or a joke) are elements that reveal the possibility of other meanings and the instability of the dominant ideology.

In the following chapters, I discuss each of these theories in turn. My objective in these discussions is to provide the readers with sufficient information to be able to use the techniques with their own data. I assume that the techniques will be used after the researcher has in-depth knowledge of the events being studied and the context in which they take place.<sup>2</sup> This knowledge may have been gained through participant-observation or interviews or other data gathering techniques.<sup>3</sup> I also assume that the researcher has data in the form of field notes, interview notes, audio- or visual tapes, hard copy documents, or other forms as appropriate to the setting. I do not specifically talk about ways of managing these data. I assume that the data are used as a record of events and context and also to remind the researcher of aspects of the events or context that she or he has forgotten and to fill in features of the events or context that she or he did not notice at the time of data collection. In this sense, I treat the knowledge of the researcher and the data as coterminous. From this point on, when I

use the term *data* I am referring not only to notes or tapes or other tangible objects but also to what the researcher knows as a result of the data gathering process. The analysis I describe, then, is not simply a matter of combining and recombining the recorded or collected data. It also involves using one's knowledge of the setting to determine which of the data are relevant, to have reasons for combining different pieces of data, and, at times, to fill in information that is not in the recorded data. This latter use of one's knowledge is particularly relevant for observational data. Because the recorded data are one's observations and not all observations are recorded at the time field notes are taken, one may find that something one saw but failed to record is a relevant and necessary piece of information.

### Background Information

The data I use for the examples are from a four-year case study in the campus Housing Department of a major U.S. state university. The purpose of gathering these data was to understand more about change in organizational routines. By *organizational routines*, I mean repeated organizational actions carried out by two or more interdependent actors. Hiring processes and budgeting processes are examples of such organizational actions. While much of what people do while performing these organizational routines is repeated from previous times, the actors are also often quite sensitive to the context in which they are performing. As the context changes, so may aspects of the routines. Further theoretical background on organizational routines is not included here because the focus is on the techniques of analysis. In this text, I wish to demonstrate how the techniques of analysis can be used to create an interpretation of a setting. The interpretation, then, provides a basis for understanding issues within the setting. For me, for instance, the interpretations provide a base for understanding more about change in organizational routines. I do not talk about my understandings of change in organizational routines in this text. These will appear in a later work (Feldman, forthcoming). The focus here is on understanding the setting in which the routines take place.

The reader does need to know some information about the campus Housing Department to be able to understand the examples. In the following, I provide some basic information. Throughout the text, I give more information as necessary for specific examples.

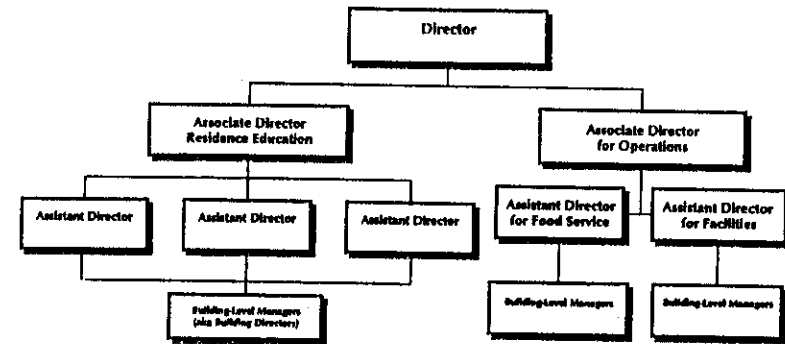


Figure 1.1. Campus Housing Department (partial organizational chart)

In this text, and indeed in everything I write about this department, I focus on specific aspects and necessarily omit others. While I cannot enumerate here the many functions the department serves, I can say that the employees of the department provide a service essential to the university community and that my long period of involvement with the department led me to respect and admire much of the work and most of the people.

The campus Housing Department provides housing for about 10,000 single students and about 1,700 married students and their families. My focus is on the part of the organization that deals with single-student housing. These students reside in approximately 15 buildings or complexes. Each building has three coequal managers. There is one manager in charge of food service, one in charge of maintenance and housekeeping (facilities), and one in charge of Residence Education. (See Figure 1.1.)

Residence education is the major focus of my study. Residence Education consists of an associate director, three assistant directors, and 16 people who report to the assistant directors. Most of these 16 people are the building level managers in charge of Residence Education. They are called building directors, and they manage a staff of from 3 to 40 students (depending on the size of the building) who live in the buildings. These students are called resident directors and resident advisors.

The routines I observed in this organization were the reserves process (a budgeting routine in which approximately 10% of the annual budget is spent), the opening and closing of buildings, and the staff selection process (the process of hiring the approximately 300 resident staff who work for

the building directors). I describe these routines in more detail throughout the text as necessary for understanding the use of the analytical techniques.

## NOTES

1. In my research with Lance Bennett on jury trials, for instance, we asked people to assess the credibility of stories. There was widespread agreement on which stories were credible. When we asked why a story was credible, people said things like "because it sounded right" or "because it was believable." The task for us as ethnomethodologists, then, was to find out what made a story "sound right."

2. See Agar (1980) and Lofland and Lofland (1984) for excellent discussions of the entire research process for qualitative research.

3. See Agar (1980), Lofland and Lofland (1984), and Spradley (1979) for discussions of data gathering techniques.

## 2. ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

The fundamental assumption of ethnomethodology is that people within a culture have procedures for making sense. These procedures are "ethno-methods," or culturally based methods. Many of these procedures are verbal. They include telling stories and giving explanations. Other procedures such as the forming of lines (e.g., at a bus stop or a ticket counter) are nonverbal. Ethnomethodologists claim that culture consists of processes for figuring out or giving meaning to the actions of members rather than consisting of a stable set of things that members are supposed to know. The ethnomethodologist's primary focus is on how the norms<sup>1</sup> of a society are developed, maintained, and changed rather than on what those norms are. From this perspective, "the outstanding question for social science . . . is not whether social facts are objectively grounded, but how that objective grounding is accomplished" (Suchman, 1987, p. 57).

Ethnomethodologists are concerned with discovering the underlying processes people use to produce acceptable behavior in a variety of situations. They often study activities that ordinary people engage in without thinking. These include such activities as having conversations, telling stories, waiting in lines, or riding elevators. Sometimes these understandings of daily activities are incorporated into understanding activities that we often think of as more complex and requiring significant expertise. The

research Lance Bennett and I did on jury trials is an example of this. First we studied how people listen to stories and decide whether to believe them. Then we showed how this process plays a part in the activity of *doing* justice in a jury trial (Bennett & Feldman, 1981).

### Basic Ideas of Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was developed by Harold Garfinkel.<sup>2</sup> Garfinkel's fundamental project involved demonstrating "the researchability and the constraining power of a world organized according to Schutzian [or phenomenological] principles" (Heritage, 1984, p. 74).

The Schutzian principles that Garfinkel was concerned with can be summarized as follows:

1. People will assume things are as they appear to be unless there is some reason to believe otherwise.
2. Actors' knowledge is held in typified form and will necessarily be incomplete. Knowledge is progressively clarified and expanded in the course of action.
3. People engaged in coordinated action assume that others see things as they do. They will actively seek to maintain this shared nature of their knowledge.

Garfinkel undertook to research how we maintain a "world in common" by attempting to disrupt shared "realities." He did this through his "breaching experiments" in which common understandings are violated: Rules of the game are not followed, people ask for clarification of ordinarily well-understood statements or questions, and so on (Garfinkel, 1967). In one experiment, for instance, Garfinkel (1967) asked his students to engage in an ordinary conversation and to insist that the other person "clarify the sense of his common-place remarks" (p. 42). Two of the reported results follow:

#### Case 1

The subject was telling the experimenter, a member of the subject's car pool, about having a flat tire while going to work the previous day.

(S) I had a flat tire.

(E) What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered in a hostile way: "What do you mean, 'What do you mean?' A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question!"

## Case 6

The victim waved his hand cheerily.

(S) How are you?

(E) How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my . . . ?

(S) (Red in the face and suddenly out of control.) Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are. (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 42-44)

The failure to take for granted what is ordinarily taken for granted is a breach of the Schutzian principle and, more important, a breach of everyday experience.

Garfinkel found that people quickly become very disturbed by these breaches. The breaches, he suggested, are upsetting because they threaten the very possibility of a shared existence. In later experiments, he demonstrated one of the defenses against this threat by showing how difficult it is for a breach to occur naturally. The consulting experiment was one of these experiments. In it each subject was paired with a counselor who answered the subject's questions with a "yes" or a "no." The counselor consulted a random number table to determine the answer. Subjects were instructed to think out loud about the answers. The transcripts clearly show the subjects' ability to construct a pattern of meaning even out of responses that appear to be directly contradictory to one another (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 79-94).

Through these experiments, Garfinkel began to demonstrate the flexibility of meaning construction. He showed that all actions have meaning. Both actions consistent with prevailing norms and those inconsistent are meaningful. Deviations from norms are interpreted as motivated and therefore meaningful. These two ideas—that we have ways of producing mutual understanding that are shared and generally acted upon unconsciously and that deviations from these ways are interpreted as motivated, or given meaning—are central to the theory of action developed by Garfinkel. They are also fundamental assumptions of ethnomethodology.

Here the difference between ethnomethodology and earlier theories of social action (à la Parsons, with whom Garfinkel studied) becomes most obvious. Garfinkel rejected the Parsonian notion that people *follow* rules to produce action for a notion that people use rules to interpret and choose actions. In addition, Garfinkel pointed out that this act of interpretation is thoroughly dependent on the context of the action and that every action

alters the context. Thus the whole notion of rule becomes inadequate because for each context there would have to be another rule. Because every context is unique and contexts are constantly emerging, there cannot be a set of preexisting rules that are waiting to be followed.

Greetings provide a simple but compelling example of the difference between following a rule and using a rule to choose and interpret actions. Speaking is one form of action. As with other actions, interpretation of speech is context dependent. Speakers assume that listeners are using the context to make sense of what they are saying and that listeners will use whatever context is necessary to make sense of what the speakers say. There is a simple norm in my culture that, if someone greets you, you should greet him or her back. This behavior is often observed. One may also, not infrequently, observe the lack of a returned greeting. If I am greeted by a friend and do not return the greeting, the friend does not necessarily assume that I am either ignorant of or flouting the rule that is supposed to guide my behavior. I may not have heard the greeting either because I am out of earshot or because I am distracted by something else I am thinking about. Or I may have chosen not to return the greeting as a sign that I am angry with my friend. My friend, being aware of these and other possibilities, if she is not otherwise distracted, may interpret my behavior and act according to her understanding of my motivation for not returning the greeting. She may repeat the greeting more loudly if she thinks I am out of earshot; she may chide me with a phrase like "earth to Martha" if she thinks I am being absentminded; she may initiate a discussion of why I am upset or avoid me in the future (depending on her manner of dealing with conflict) if she thinks I am angry. I, in turn, will respond to each of these moves according to my interpretation of what my friend is doing. My interpretation of her behavior is not necessarily related to the reasons for her behavior. I may, in fact, be oblivious to her reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Meaning is created through our actions and our interpretations of our own and each other's actions. Particular actions do not have set meanings. Virtually any meaning is possible. The only absolute in ethnomethodology is that meaning will be made and that the meaning will depend upon how we connect the actions and the context.

Accounts are important in ethnomethodology. One of the principal ways that we understand that someone has perceived a deviation from a norm is when that person asks for an account. In the above example, for instance, my friend may later in the day ask me, "Why didn't you answer

me when I said 'hello' to you earlier?" This is a request for an account of my behavior, and it signals to me that I have done something that my friend thinks I should be held accountable for. Consistent with the ethnomethodological perspective on norms, I may have many different reactions to this request for an account. I may agree that one is appropriate and provide one; I may not think that an account is necessary but provide one nonetheless; I may not provide an account; I may provide an account of why I am not providing an account. The possibilities are virtually endless. Again, the only absolute is that each response will have meaning for me and my friend.

Accounts are not always requested. Sometimes people spontaneously provide accounts because they perceive or fear that their behavior or speech will be interpreted in a way other than they wish. They may offer an account to place the behavior in a context that they think is appropriate.

### **Ethnomethodology in Residence Education**

The work of people in Residence Education, particularly the building directors, is intimately involved in developing and maintaining a world in common. The housing of as many as 1,200 students in one building provides many opportunities for the development of norms and for deviations from them. The building directors are the ultimate arbiters of appropriate behavior. While there are rules about what people can and cannot do, whether the rules have been transgressed, by whom, and what is the appropriate response are all matters of interpretation. How does this process of interpretation take place?

The process is one of mutual<sup>4</sup> problem solving, negotiating, and defining. The process, while ongoing continuously, becomes most evident when some person (often the building director or a resident staff member) or group of people (e.g., the residents) announce that behavior they find inappropriate is taking place. A series of conversations ensue in which the participants come to a mutual definition of inappropriate behavior (this may or may not be the same as the behavior originally denounced), including why it is inappropriate, and they negotiate an understanding about future behavior and about ways to remedy any harm to individuals or to the community resulting from the inappropriate behavior. The result is codified in what is called a "behavior contract."

An example of a sort of behavior contract comes from a situation in which a house within the residence hall had used house funds and made

T-shirts that had a picture of a large can of beer along with the name of the residence hall group. This is a violation of the Housing Department's alcohol policy, and it angered many other people who had abided by the rules. The building director describes the interaction as follows:

I meet with the Resident Director of the house. He is a transfer student from another university and has not understood how seriously the Housing Department enforces the policy regarding the use of house funds to advertise alcohol. He had depended upon the judgment of his government Resident Advisor, a second year staff member, who underplayed my position as well as Housing's position. We discuss the situation and possible remedies. He asks for time to meet with his staff and to get back to me.

The Resident Director meets with his staff who try to talk him out of taking any action. Instead, he asks the government Resident Advisor to meet with me. The government Resident Advisor is in the process of finishing an honors thesis, so our "meetings" take place [through electronic mail]. After a dozen messages and responses, we agree to a solution, and he schedules a meeting with me and the house President and Treasurer, and the Resident Director. . . .

I meet with the group, reiterate Housing policy, and remind them that they had heard all this the previous fall. . . . I also talk about the reasons for the policy. They admit knowledge but cite as examples other houses' shirts from other years. The Resident Advisor notes that the policy is not clearly spelled out in the advisor materials and encourages Housing to include such an explanation. I acknowledge that the Alcohol Policy does not specifically address house shirts and that tradition is difficult to break. I note that the power of folk knowledge which is in opposition to written or spoken policy is one reason that I do not want the shirts to be around next year. We agree on a solution.

All shirts will be sold by the end of the year. If all shirts are not sold, the house officers will cover any advance monies paid to the vendor for the shirts. The house officers will write a letter apologizing for the design on the shirts and for any mixed messages they may have sent to residents or to staff of other houses. They also agree to create posters for the residents of the house explaining in a positive light the actions which have taken place. They agree to see that the poster is placed in conspicuous places in the house and to see that the other officers of the house will understand and support the action agreed upon. (Building Director Role Report, 1989, pp. 23-24)

The process is not always so neat. People do not always agree that they are engaging in inappropriate behavior or that it is any other person's business. Sometimes behavior contracts are made but are not fulfilled.

I explore further the building concept and how it is developed in the Residence Education context.

### Discovering Norms and Institutional Realities

How does one begin an ethnomethodological analysis? As mentioned previously, norms and institutional realities are taken for granted. They may be so embedded in the culture of a setting that no one talks about them or is even aware of their existence. This can make it difficult to know how to start.

As illustrated in the previous example, one is sometimes fortunate enough to witness (or cause) a breach. Luck, however, is not the only route to this mode of interpretation. Because a breach may not happen in your presence or may not come readily to mind, you may think about what would constitute unacceptable behavior in this context. Then you need to think about *how* you know that it would be unacceptable behavior. What kinds of cues are given to members, perhaps particularly new members, that help them know how to act? Once you are thinking along these lines, you will probably recognize that the process is not simply socialization in which those who know tell those who don't know *what* they can and cannot do. It is, instead, a much more complex negotiation about what actions mean and which actions fall into what categories. The negotiations can take place through either behavior or speech. The behaviors and speech through which interpretations are made in a particular setting are the "ethnomethods" of that setting.

### Summary

The key factor in doing an ethnomethodological analysis is to focus on *how* sense is made rather than on *what* sense is made. Of course, the two are interrelated. Only in the abstract does one have a process without a substance. Any empirical research on the process also requires a deep understanding of the substance. An analysis, however, may emphasize either process or substance. An ethnomethodological analysis emphasizes process.

Remember that you need to consider whether the assumptions of ethnomethodology are appropriate for the research you are doing. The assumptions are as follows:

1. Actions and interactions have meaning for participants. Both following norms and deviating from them are meaningful acts. While the meaning of following norms is often well established, the meanings of deviations often need to be constructed. Meaning may also need to be constructed if no shared norms exist.
2. Participants mutually engage in ethnomethods to construct meaning. The *means* participants use to construct meaning is the primary focus of the ethnomethodologist's attention.

### NOTES

1. I follow Heritage in using the term *norm* in reference to constructs that are implicated in the ongoing creation of meaning rather than constructs that determine behavior. Heritage (1984) describes normative accountability as "the grid by reference to which whatever is done will become visible and assessable" (p. 117).
2. This summary draws heavily on John Heritage's book *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology* (1984). I encourage anyone interested in ethnomethodology to read Heritage's book and Garfinkel's experiments.
3. For another example of the difference between following a rule and using it as a guide to understanding and producing behavior, see Rosaldo's description of Ilongot visits in *Culture and Truth* (1989).
4. My use of the term *mutual* is not meant to imply that the participants have equal power in the process—they don't.
5. The improbability of acquiescence to such a change was no doubt increased by long-standing tensions between the building directors and people higher in the hierarchy to whom the building directors would necessarily be ceding power.

### 3. SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Semiotic theory is defined as "a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication" (Eco, 1976, p. 3). "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else" (Eco, 1976, p. 7). It is "the study of the signs or systems of signs [and it] concerns the principles by which signification occurs. Signification refers both to the processes by which events, words, behaviors and objects carry meaning for the members of a given community and to the content they convey" (Barley, 1983, p. 394). A key assumption of semiotics is that surface signs

are related to an underlying structure. A related assumption is that there is an underlying structure.

Semiotics is fundamentally cultural in its approach. Eco (1976) claims that "semiotics studies all cultural processes as processes of communication" and, while he does not claim that semiotics is the only way to study culture, he does say "that the whole of culture should be studied as a communication phenomenon based on signification systems" (pp. 8, 22). Roland Barthes has used the semiotic approach to study such diverse aspects of culture as professional wrestling (1972), the structure of a city, and addresses (1982).

Semiotics is concerned with identifying signs and understanding the processes by which they come to have meaning. The mechanisms most often cited by semioticians as ways of producing meaning are metaphor, metonymy, and opposition. Metaphor and metonymy are similar concepts (Eco, 1976, p. 279). Metonymy involves a relationship between the sign and the signified in which both are in the same domain—the crown stands for the king; both crown and king are in the same domain of meaning. With metaphor, the sign and the signified are not in the same domain—a rose as a sign of love or a crown as the sign of quality. Opposition is a different kind of relationship between the sign and the signified. The sign has meaning because of what it is not. A sign saying "Exit" only has meaning in the context of other signs or other potential signs that say "Entrance." Thus what you are meant to do when you see the sign "Exit" makes sense because of your prior knowledge of the existence of the entrance. In other words, it makes sense only if you know that you are in something. If you didn't know before seeing the sign, in fact, the sign would presumably make you aware that you are in something. This knowledge is fundamental to knowing that you can go out.

Semioticians have devised several techniques that I find useful for interpreting qualitative data. These techniques help one connect the surface indicators to what underlies and gives meaning to these signs.

### Semiotic Clustering

The first technique is very simple yet quite powerful. I found this technique in Manning's (1987) book *Semiotics and Fieldwork*. One sets up a table with three columns. The first column is labeled "Competing Meanings" and also can be thought of as denotative meanings or signs. In

Table 3.1 Semiotic Cluster Analysis

Competing Meanings	Connotative Meanings	Institutional Concerns	
Buildings . . .			
1. as physical structure	institutions	legitimation of organizational role	} external
2. as residence	home		
3. as community	neighborhood		
4. have reputations	person/organism	legitimation of Building Director role and location of power and control	} external
5. have characters			
6. have needs			
7. are unique	independent	location of power and control	} internal
8. as field	subservient		
9. as fiefdom (vested interest)	independent	location of power and control	} internal
10. are autonomous	independent		

this column, one writes all of the various ways one has observed or heard people use the concept of interest. In Manning's case, the concept of interest was "policy"; in my case it is "building." I use the semiotic analysis to deepen my understanding of the institutional reality I became aware of through the previous ethnomethodological analysis. The first step was simply to list the ways that I heard people in Residence Education talk about buildings. Table 3.1, titled "Semiotic Analysis," lists 10 common ways people talked about buildings. They are not listed in order of importance but are grouped by their relations to the other columns.

The second column is labeled "Connotative Meanings." Here the notions of metaphor, metonymy, and opposition are useful. The fundamental question one has to ask oneself is this: "What does it mean when someone in this culture talks about, for example, a building as a community?" This step obviously relies on the researcher's intrinsic understanding of the

I listen to a taped discussion or read my field notes, I have a new stock of knowledge about what people might be saying when they talk about buildings.

The second device is particularly useful for examining *how* a culture manifests a particular opposition. In this case, for example, it helped to show how the organization tries to establish the residence halls as homes rather than as institutions. This particular opposition gives meaning to the acts and policies that are observed in the setting for both participants and observers. For instance, the ability to substitute one's own furniture for the furniture provided could have many meanings. In a rented apartment, for instance, it would be considered a right and the denial of this right is what would be particularly significant. The possibility of institutional rules in the context of the residence hall is what helps give it the particular meaning of homeyness. The device used for the second semiotic analysis is especially useful for focusing on a relationship of opposition and exploring how the opposition gives meaning to specific acts and policies.

The third device also emphasizes opposition and is used by some to discover and discuss the oppositions (Enomoto, 1993; Fiol, 1989). While I find it useful for this purpose, I think its greatest use is in exploring the differences between sets of rules at different levels or in different parts of an organization. A narrative about what actions are being taken by whom is useful for this technique. The relevant oppositions can, then, be diagrammed for the actors in each phase of the narrative. This adds information about the narrative. In my case, it suggested an entirely new possible explanation for a paradox in the narrative.

Many researchers may be able to use all three devices to aid in constructing interpretations. Some of the devices, however, may not be appropriate for certain sets of data. Using all of them is not of any particular importance. What is important is to use them in ways that aid in gaining new understandings and to be aware of the assumptions you are making in using these techniques.

The devices are somewhat coercive. They work on the assumption that there are underlying relationships between denotative phenomena, or signs, and connotative phenomena, or meanings. They assume that there is an underlying structure and that the signs are manifestations of it. They assume that opposition is an important element in underlying structures. If you do not believe that this is true of the culture you are studying, you should not use these devices. In this matter, the researcher has to rely on her or

his common sense and understanding of the culture and of semiotics. The devices cannot reflect on their own appropriateness.

## NOTES

1. The new kind of building director would claim that the problems are there and that it is better to deal with them proactively.
2. In this section, I use the word *institution* to refer to a particular approach to housing. It is unlike the use of the term in other parts of this text.
3. Greimas's terms for the oppositions involved are *contradictories* and *contraries*. A *contradictory* is a true opposite. A *contrary* is an opposing relationship also referred to as a *homologous contradictory*. That which is not prescribed is the contradictory of that which is prescribed. That which is prohibited is the contrary of that which is prescribed.
4. Note that, in this case, that which is prescribed and that which is prohibited could be reversed if the rules were worded differently. That is, having both a noun and a verb is prescribed and having noun-verb disagreement is prohibited.
5. The most common example of where this is not the case is where the subject is implied, as in a command (e.g., "Close the door") in which the implied subject is "you."
6. The idea of a failed semiotic square occurred to me as a way of thinking about the constraints on the choice of the contraries on the top horizontal line.
7. I provide only the details necessary for understanding the semiotic analysis here. More details are available in Feldman (forthcoming).
8. Of course, the extent of alienation depends on the extent to which the hierarchical subordinates rely on the approval or acceptance of their hierarchical superiors or the extent to which the hierarchy defines the larger society.

## 4. DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS

As the name suggests, the central principle of this form of analysis is the concept of the drama. Life is a stage upon which performers play. The public performances they make (where public is what is done in the presence of other people or that affects other people—in other words, most acts are public) are what produce meaning. Thus meaning is produced in action. While dramaturgical analysis is generally used to explicate very public performances such as organizational rituals, it can also be used to understand relatively private performances such as the execution of parental roles. The analysis includes not only the act itself but also and, more important, the meaning produced by the act or the messages that are conveyed by the act.

Dramaturgical analyses may focus on the display or they may focus on what makes up the display. For instance, some dramaturgical analyses are about the meaning of public presentations or ceremonies such as the police funeral or the publication of arrest statistics (Manning, 1977). Other dramaturgical analyses focus on the elements of these performances such as the roles people are playing and the setting in which they are played. Burke's pentad of social action fits this latter sense of dramaturgical analysis. It divides social action into five basic elements: scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose (Burke, 1969). Of course, some analyses combine both the public performance and the elements that make it up. Erving Goffman (1959, 1967, 1974) is one of the best known users of the dramaturgical approach to sociological phenomena. He focused particularly on the concepts of role playing or role taking, front and back stages, ritual, and the control of meaning.

Dramaturgical analysis tends to have a functional tone to it. The observation that dramas serve certain purposes should not, however, be taken to imply either that these purposes are necessary or that the particular means of fulfilling the purpose is the only way (Manning, 1992). For example, the budget (reserves) meetings discussed in the section on semiotic squares serve a number of symbolic purposes. They establish the authority and decision-making status of the people who attend them. They express the unity of concern about the buildings by the various organizational units (e.g., Facilities, Food Service, Residence Education). This concern for the buildings helps to draw the parts of the organization together with a common purpose. This sense of common purpose helps to legitimate all of the units. This legitimation may be most helpful to Residence Education because its purpose is the most ambiguous. These symbolic purposes are not, however, necessarily essential to the organization and these meetings are not the only way to accomplish these ends.

Fundamental to doing a dramaturgical analysis is the question of what performance is taking place or what meaning is being portrayed to an audience and how the elements that make up the performance contribute to that meaning. Burke's five elements are very useful in this process. The scene is the setting of the performance, the act is what is done during the performance, the agent includes the actors and the roles that they play, the agency is the means through which the agents bring about their actions, and the purpose is the reason or motive for the performance. I find it

helpful to consider explicitly the audience as well given that a performance may have many audiences and the meaning may be different for each.

### A Housing Drama

The reserves meetings held every year in November are an event appropriate for a dramaturgical analysis. While they are witnessed directly only by those attending the meetings, they provide an arena for a performance that has meaning to both hierarchical subordinates and superiors. The director of the Housing Department, the only central administrator who does not attend the meetings, receives the budget decisions and gives final approval (or disapproval). The subordinates (e.g., building-level managers) are aware of the performance, in part, because they provide many of the props (in the form of information). They also await the outcome of the performance. The instrumental purpose of the reserves meetings is to determine how approximately 10% of the budget will be spent. This 10% is used for furniture, equipment, maintenance, and renovations in buildings. Removing asbestos, replacing elevators, buying mattresses, resealing doors, carpeting hallways, creating a snack bar, renovating a dining hall, reupholstering lounge furniture, buying artwork and audiovisual equipment are all examples of specific projects funded through the reserves process. These projects often make a substantial difference in the living conditions, infrastructure, and appearance of the buildings. They tend to make the buildings easier to maintain and clean both because new things don't break as easily and because residents tend to be more careful when the appearance is aesthetically pleasing. The projects also help to support the community development goals of Residence Education. Some projects (e.g., buying audiovisual equipment) directly support the programming efforts of Residence Education. Other projects (e.g., new lounge furniture or artwork for lounges) help create spaces conducive to effective programs.

The participants in the meetings are the associate directors for Residence Education and for Operations, and the assistant directors of Facilities and Food Service and the administrative manager. In the last year I observed these meetings, an assistant director of Residence Education also attended. The assistant directors of Facilities and Food Service and the administrative manager report to the associate director of Operations so their immediate supervisor is in the room. The organizational chart (see Figure 4.1) shows the people who attend the meeting. (The director of the

the reserves drama and *The Wizard of Oz* is the ordinariness of the people making things happen—the wizard in the fictional drama and the decision makers in the Housing drama. Here, in fact, the fictional drama and the Housing drama diverge slightly. The decision makers in Housing actually do have the power to make some things happen. But the fictional drama and the Housing drama are still similar in that the mystification of the decision-making process increases expectations beyond what actually can be delivered.

My observations of the reserves process had mostly been of people engaged in relatively mundane practices: estimating the cost of new shower stalls, weighing the importance of new lounge furniture against replacing hallway carpet, and thinking about whether all this can be done within time and financial constraints. It was only when I looked at these observations through the categories imposed by the dramaturgical analysis that I began to create an interpretation that connected the ordinariness of these actors and the acts that take place in the conference room with the mystification and helplessness felt by the people who witness and receive the performance.

As with the other analyses, it should be clear that the interpretation I have begun here is just one of many possible. It draws on certain features of the phenomenon and not on others. Its validity does not come from the ability to use the dramaturgical categories but from its ability to help us understand the phenomenon in new and useful ways.

This form of analysis is very clearly based on the assumption that there is a performance going on and that the performance is influencing the meaning of the actions taken by the actors. While this assumption is often true (Goffman, 1959, 1974), it may not always be and it may not be a useful way to perceive the phenomenon. These decisions must be left to the researchers who are familiar with the settings and with the purpose of their interpretations.

The brevity of this chapter should not be taken to imply that I consider dramaturgical analysis to be either less important or simpler than the other theories. Indeed, the work of Goffman, alone, is sufficient to convince one of the dizzying possibilities of dramaturgical analysis. This book, however, is intended to provide an introduction to the theories and the resulting analytical approach. Many features of the dramaturgical analysis are already somewhat familiar to most readers through their consumption of popular media. This distinguishes this theory from the other theories presented

in this book, which may be familiar only in name to many readers. This familiarity means that less information is required for an adequate introduction to the approach. It may also mean that dramaturgy is more accessible to many readers though it is certainly no less revelatory as a result.

#### NOTE

1. These complaints did decrease over the four years of observation. I am not sure, however, if I heard fewer complaints because there were fewer complaints or because the building directors had already spoken at length to me about them or for some other reason.

### 5. DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstruction is a process that rests on several assumptions. The first is that ideology imposes limits on what can and cannot be said. The second is that most authors write and actors act from within an ideology. Therefore their texts and actions are bound by the limits of their ideology. Deconstruction as an analytical tool aims at exposing these ideological limits. "Deconstruction turns attention to how language creates some meanings and suppresses other meanings" (Manning, 1992, pp. 203-204). "Deconstruction is a means to see words in context and to examine the effects of changing contexts on meaning" (Manning, 1992, p. 202).

Deconstruction is accomplished through several specific ways of looking at a text (a verbal exchange or an action). These ways of looking are often called moves. Some of the most common include looking at what is not said or looking at silences and gaps, dismantling dichotomies, and analyzing disruptions. Joanne Martin, in her article "Deconstructing Organizational Taboos" (1990), provides an excellent description, explanation, and illustration of these and other moves used in deconstruction. The example I use later in this chapter illustrates each of the three moves. Here I describe them briefly.

In any text, verbal exchange, or action, what is written, said, or done is a "selective and partial representation" (Manning, 1992, p. 202). It can be interpreted according to what is written, said, or done, but it can also be interpreted according to what is not written, said, or done. A humorous version of interpreting what is not done is represented by the joke about the mother

who gives her son two ties for his birthday. When he appears later in the day wearing one of the ties, she wants to know why he doesn't like the other tie. A less humorous version occurs in performance evaluations and recommendation letters in which what is not said may be more telling than what is said. The notion of damning with faint praise is another commonly known example of this phenomenon. One of the moves of deconstruction is to notice what is not said, or at least some of what is not said, even in situations in which the tendency is to focus on what is said.

Dichotomies divide the world into two categories. Common dichotomies are public and private, men and women, us and them, good and bad. Because dichotomies allow for only two possibilities, they tend to restrict the kinds of questions that are asked. If, for instance, we assume that everyone can be classified as either a man or a woman, then we rule out of existence, or at least out of our consciousness, the possibility of people with ambiguous sex identities (Geertz, 1983). Likewise, when we assume that the dichotomy is relevant (for instance, to the division of labor), we privilege the characteristics of the categories over the characteristics of individuals. We may become unable to see that people in different categories may have very similar characteristics. Similarly, if we assume that a matter is either public or private, then we make it considerably more difficult to deal with the implications for work (a public affair) of a person's family life (a private affair) (Martin, 1990). One of the moves of deconstruction is to be aware of dichotomies and to ask the questions that tend to be ignored because of the dichotomy.

The Freudian slip is probably the most widely known example of a disruption. A slip of the tongue is interpreted from the Freudian perspective as meaningful and not just as an accident. Similarly, a thought that is not completed, a great deal of hesitation before expressing a thought, sentences that start out going in one direction but end up in another, and so forth can all be interpreted as meaningful. The meaning attributed to these disruptions in the smooth flow of text, talk, or action depends upon the contexts, and it is up to the researcher engaging in deconstruction to make a convincing connection between the disruption and the interpretation of it.

I have seen deconstruction used to reveal either the ideology of a particular culture or the ideology of the analysts of a culture (which is, of course, a culture in itself). Carol Cohn (1987), for example, examines the language, jargon, and acronyms of the world of nuclear defense to reveal the images of sex and death in a culture that claims to be objective, distant, and

rational. She goes further to show that the language these people use to talk about the life-and-death concerns their work involves places boundaries on how these concerns can be thought about and acted upon. Finally, she shows how the language also delegitimizes, and therefore silences, people who may think differently about these issues.

Renato Rosaldo, by contrast, uses deconstruction techniques to show how categories used by analysts of culture systematically restrict the analysts' view of the culture they study. In his book *Culture and Truth* (1989), he examines the ideologies that suggest that chaos and social structure are opposites (chap. 4) and that time is a matter of segmentation and sequencing (chap. 5). Rather than deconstruct the ideologies of the people he studies (though he may do this in other texts), he deconstructs the ideology of the analysts. He helps us to see how, for example, by focusing on clock time, we tend to see more of the external features of events rather than their internal dynamics.

Deconstruction began in the field of literary criticism and was originally a way of analyzing texts. As it has been adopted by the social sciences, it has still been associated primarily with texts. Speeches (Martin, 1990), articles (Calás, 1992; Calás & Smirchich, 1989, 1992), judicial proceedings (Scheppelle, 1990, 1992), and automatic teller machine messages (Manning, 1992) are examples of texts that have been deconstructed. When deconstruction is used to analyze action, some people refer to this as "textualizing the action" (Calás, personal conversation, 1992, July 16). While I have seen deconstructions of such disparate phenomena as baseball caps (Manning, 1992) and the analysis of a visit in the Ilongot culture (Rosaldo, 1989), it is easiest for me to illustrate deconstruction using a "text." Thus, although many of the issues I have discussed in this book are amenable to deconstruction—such as the notion of building or the idea of building a community—I introduce a slightly new topic for this analysis. The issue is hierarchical power and the "text" is a segment of conversation from a meeting of several building directors, an assistant director, and the associate director of Residence Education.

### Analysis

I found it very difficult to do this deconstruction. It is possible that part of the problem in deconstructing the ideology of Residence Education is that Residence Education presents itself as a postmodern organization.