Larry Wieder's Radical Ethno-Inquiries

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D. Lawrence Wieder was a member of the first cohort of Harold Garfinkel's graduate students and participated in many of the initial discoveries that led these early phenomenological sociologists to conceive of a radical ethnomethodology, discoveries that concerned the accountability of social action, the reflexivity of those accounts, the documentary method of interpretation, and the collaborative nature of local orderlinesses. The fabulous aspect of that early group is that they all went to school with each other, and their founder Garfinkel learned as much from his remarkable students (Wieder, Harvey Sacks, David Sudnow, Melvin Pollner, and Don Zimmerman were only a few of them) as they learned from him. It was scholarly life at its very best.

Although they were influenced by Edmund Husserl, Aron Gurwitsch, and Alfred Schutz, these path-breakers were not content with theoretical projects involving constitutive subjectivities or transcendental intersubjectivity. They wanted to study the real life-world, not the theoretical life-world. They determined that this could only be achieved by their going out and finding it. As Schutz (1970, p. 90) once commented in a response to Eugen Fink:

> Husserl showed the way—even if he did not take it—which a phenomeno-logical analysis of the social world—the ontological status of which is to be accepted—would have to follow. This is not the way of transcendental constitutional analysis, but of a phenomenology of the natural attitude.

Larry Wieder was one of the early ethnomethodologists who showed the way to phenomenological inquiries of naturally occurring social events.

It was the developing discovery of these early ethnomethodological researchers that the efficacy of any social orderliness was the result of the local contingencies that come into play, contingencies that were not anticipatable by general theorizing

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but could only be discovered; in fact, it was the parties to a local interaction who did the discovering—ethnomethodological researchers were only on site to identify, and to describe, the contingent practices that parties located. One of Wieder's important contributions was to remain steadfast in rejecting any essentialism related to what they found. In so doing, Wieder's field work offered a model for all ethnomethodological researchers who followed him: the components of a local order are not to be interpreted as attributes of an essence that lay behind them but were the very thing itself; a thing is nothing more than what it is—"doing some particular thing *is* that thing" (Wieder and Pratt 1990a, p. 46)—and if anything is essential about it, it would be its very occasionality. Actions do not "represent" a phenomenon; rather, they are the phenomenon. Parties may collaborate in making a phenomenon evident to each other, but there is no phenomenon that abides with a status that is independent of those collaborative practices.

For instance, take the case of a queue: "Whatever it is that one does to make it evident to others that one is, for example, actually standing in line, that activity of making it evident is an essential constituent of standing in line itself" (Wieder and Pratt 1990a, p. 46). A place in line is not the sign for a queue, it *is* the queue—the queue exists nowhere else in being. "Similarly, however it is that one shows that one is a friend, that activity is an essential and organizing constituent of being a friend." That is to say, "friendship" is mythology, whereas friendly acts are real worldly things. According to the documentary method of interpretation, one might "read" a friendly act against a hypothetical friendship, and that "friendship" can come to reflexively establish the sense of the act, but all one actually has in hand is a friendly act—nothing more, and nothing less.

In other contexts ethnomethodologists have said that a given action occurs "in and as" a course of affairs, while being careful to specify that the course of affairs has no ontological reality apart from the actions that compose it.[1] For instance, in the case of being an American Indian "Being a real Indian is not something one can simply be, but is something that one becomes and/or is, in and as 'the doing' of being and becoming Indian" (Wieder and Pratt 1990a, p. 46). For Wieder, the radical ethnomethodologist, there existed only practices, without essences. Consulting a hypothetical "Indianness" would only be sociological mystification, for the reason that Indianness is not a stable property and so is not amenable to "a situationally transcendent logic;" rather, Indianness is a local accomplishment—a "situated and contingent achievement" (Wieder and Pratt 1990b, p. 69). The real task of the sociological researcher is to discover these contingencies.

And what are the contingencies that are to be found in just-how Indians interact with each other? They were described in this detailed paper that Wieder co-authored with Steven Pratt,[2] "On Being a Recognizable Indian Among Indians," which was published in a reader on intercultural communication to which I also contributed, thanks to Larry's good offices. This paper has not received the attention it deserved, and it is a remarkable study. Wieder and Pratt (1990a, p. 50) write,

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[1] For a discussion of the phrase "in and as," see Liberman (2007, pp. 106–107).

[2] That so many of Wieder's publications were co-authorships is testimony to his durable congenial nature, which was one of the noteworthy aspects of the life he lived.

Being a visible and recognizable (i.e. accountable, in Garfinkel's 1967, sense) real Indian for other real Indians is a continuous, ongoing, contingent achievement involving both the doings of the person who would be a real Indian and the doing of those real Indians with whom he or she interacts.

These interactive achievements involve a variety of coordinated displays, which include reticence (an unwillingness to thrust one's presence or ideas into the limelight), razzing ("inappropriately dealing with it leads to rejection as a candidate real Indian," p. 54), attaining harmony in face-to-face relations, modesty ("one displays modesty and does not visibly pursue one's own interests at the expense of the group," p. 63), and "a way of being with others in silence" ("the one who is silent is a real Indian," pp. 51 and 59).

Wieder and Pratt (1990a) conclude that being a real Indian is not so much a matter of identity as it is a result of these concerted practices:

Only through engaging in concerted actions with other Indians can any Indian be questioned, tested, supported, enabled, sustained, and realized in his becoming and becoming-being a real Indian. (p. 64)

Wieder and Pratt also draw comparisons between their study and the concerted practices by which Garfinkel's Agnes (1967, pp. 116–185) attained the identity "woman." The study is one more illustration of something that Wieder has asserted in all of his investigations—"The accomplished sense of an interaction is the concerted accomplishment of the setting's participants—it is not analyzable as an individual achievement" (Wieder 1984, p. 5), nor as a status that transcends those concerted practices.

As Wieder concludes in his 1984 address to the International Communication Association, "All appearances of persons as a type of person are the managed accomplishments of the person presenting him/herself" (p. 4). To this end Wieder learned a good deal about the performative aspects of reality from Erving Goffman; however, Wieder took pains to reject Goffman's essentialism in the light of ethnomethodology's discoveries. Wieder says that Goffman misses the "bond between the representing and the represented—he misses the fact that the representing is a reflexive constituent of the represented" (1984, p. 19). It is not even that activities naturally lead to accounts that represent them, which then become confirmed by others and elevated into a sort of social truth. Rather, an account reflexively creates the intelligibility of the activities it describes, which in turn further elaborates the meaning of the account.

Especially, Wieder emphasized the importance of the local work of making observable and evident whatever social principles were to be applied locally, work that ethnomethodologists call accountability. Social actors are fated not merely to act, but to act accountably (1984, p. 20). Wieder emphasized the collaborative character of this work, and he was the master ethnomethodologist of accountable action. The practices of making something evident and account-able is what ordinary social life consists of. He criticizes Goffman's view of "a working consensus" as being too static. Instead, Wieder (1984) writes,

> There does not need to be any shared agreements at all in the sense that the participants have the same or even similar thoughts. What is required is that each respond to the other in a fashion that enables the performance of each. (p. 35)

For ethnomethodology there is no "negotiated" or "shared" meaning; the actual processes are by no means that logical or straightforward. Instead, Wieder says, "The resulting organization is a temporally unfolding gestalt-contexture, the appearance of which varies for each of the participants" (1984, p. 36).

This amounts to an indictment of what traditional sociology does as its stock-in-trade:

> There is no real independent structure or set of structures which somehow stand behind the actually observable occasions of social life and which animates them …. It is methodologically unsound to treat the appearances of persons as reliable and valid indicators of something else (Wieder 1984, p. 37).

Ethnomethodology, in this radical sense, has no recourse to the projection of a priori "social structures" that exist divorced from the practical activities of real persons. One can study the documentary method of interpretation as members use it in the course of their ordinary work of sense-making, but it is inappropriate for ethnomethodologists to use it themselves as part of their own rigorous methodology.[3]

Wieder applies a vital distinction between "the enthusiastic theorist's logic" and "the discoverable logic of some naturally occurring situated events" (Wieder and Pratt 1990b, p. 69). Wieder declined to administer any pre-existing list of competencies formulated via procedures independent of the actual judgment of real persons. He easily could have done so, and by so doing have substantially shortened the period of his fieldwork; instead, he insisted upon locating the actual situationally contingent and collaborative practices (Wieder and Pratt 1990b, p. 74). He was the Jack Webb of ethnomethodological researchers—he called a spade nothing more than a spade. But the contingencies he discovered in the course of his ethno-inquiries were not merely cohort-dependent, they were also cohort-independent, and so he would say that the convenient dualism of subjective understanding and objective affairs is misapplied. Wieder's craft was locating practical objectivities, which operate in situ.

Most common or conventional sociology today sifts through remnant husks of human actions in order to "*explain*" or predict social behavior by correlating one phenomenon with another. Such sociologists may not even witness any activities as they are lived and done, and what is worse, in most cases they never miss the fact that they never witnessed any. Ethnomethodologists observe and *describe* the concerted production of actual worldly events as they happen in real time. Conventional sociologists disqualify as un-objective any phenomenon that preserves the subjective looks of the world for parties as they concert themselves for the

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[3] It is inappropriate, but it also may be unavoidable.

purpose of producing a social order, which rules out of bounds most of the real work of ordinary social life. Ethnomethodologists are oriented to the production of practical objectivities that are used by parties to ensure the orderliness and communicability of their notions and local procedures. This is a very different view of objectivity than that of conventional sociology. Wieder's conclusion is that "We must abandon much in the way of traditional research methods or techniques and the conceptual apparatus that depends on and is sustained by those research traditions" (1984, p. 11).

Wieder's defining work is his classic *Language and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code* (Mouton, 1974), in which he describes the local uses of a code of behavior that ex-convicts developed for organizing interaction at a half-way house. Whereas classical ethnographers might have written only about what neatly fit their pre-selected narrative theme, Wieder described the story that was really there, even if at times it grew too messy for a clean story-for-the-telling:

> While one *could* propose such an analysis of the code as an exegetical organizing narrative, that would be something like a narrative which is offered by the tour guide of a museum or the narrator for a travelogue film, and to do so would be misleading (1974, p. 165).

What is remarkable about *Language and Social Reality* is that Wieder produced one of the few ethnographies in which only real events lead the commentary. He describes "a moral order as a continuous ongoing process, rather than as a set of stable elements of culture" (1974, p. 221). It is sociology made difficult, but made real.

The convict code is about the setting, but it is also part of the setting: "The code was not encountered 'outside' the scene it was purportedly describing, but was told within that scene as a continuous, connected part of that scene" (Wieder, 1974, p. 166). The code did not reflect a pre-existing order, nor did it establish an order by rule; rather, it lived in the "between" of rule and actions as "embedded instructions" (p. 208) that helped to produce the context of their own sensibility. An invocation of the code was an opportunity to exhibit an order and provided an occasion for "the active searching for coherent sense and meaning that listeners do" (p. 176), which is a topic familiar to social phenomenologists. But Wieder's ethno-inquiry is more radical than the "clarification of the sense-structure of intersubjectivity" that Schutz (1970, p. 84) and Husserl called for, since it was continually impregnated with the indeterminacies and occasionality that are uniquely identifying of any particular social scene. Meanings are not "negotiated"—that would be too static a view—so much as they are come upon serendipitously as gestalt-contextures.

Wieder writes,

> Situations, actions, and rules are not independent elements. The utterances, and behaviors upon which the code (or any other normative order) are based have no self-evident or self-explanatory sense in isolation from one another. Instead, they have a relative definite sense as constituent parts of an actually witnessed, concrete setting in the way that each is a constituent within a

system of functional significances. That is, situations, actions, and rules determine one another's sense as constituent parts of a gestalt-contexture (1974, pp. 222–223).

This matter of the "mutual and reciprocal interdetermination and interdependence" of the constituents of a gestalt contexture (Wieder 1984, p. 30) is an instance of where ethnomethodology took Aron Gurwitsch into the world and came back educated. In Wieder's hands, Gurwitsch's accounts of gestalt-contextures were made to handle the intelligibility of occasional events without essentializing those understandings:

> In adopting the gestalt-contextural views of reality phenomena, we hold that the thing itself, experienced as real, is the all-inclusive systematic grouping of its appearances. That grouping must form a system whose organizational principle is gestalt-coherence (Wieder 1984, p. 28).

And the constituents of a gestalt-contexture are interconnectedly dependent phenomena. That is, there are no inherent essences. A figure may emerge from the ground, but the figure's internal coherence also determines the ground that establishes the figure, so they are co-determined. "The code provides for the sense of each [constituent] by reference to the others in the fashion of the mutual determination of aspects of a gestalt-contexture" (Wieder, 1974, p. 221). This is a very sophisticated social epistemology that Wieder pursues, and we still have more to learn from his inquiries.

One of the key passages from Gurwitsch (1964, pp. 134–35) that Wieder cites runs,

> Since each part of a Gestalt-contexture is defined and qualified by its functional significance, and since the functional significance of each part essentially refers to those of other parts, there is a thoroughgoing *interdependence* among all parts or constituents of a Gestalt-contexture. To be integrated into a contexture of Gestalt-character, a constituent must exist at a certain locus within, and have a certain function for, the contexture. This in turn purports that the constituent demands and supports, as well as is demanded and supported by, other constituents. Between the parts of constituents of a gestalt-contexture, there prevails the particular relationship of *gestalt-coherence* defined as *the determining and conditioning of the constituents upon each other. In thoroughgoing reciprocity, the constituents assign to, and derive from, one another the functional significance* which gives to each one its qualification in a concrete case In this sense, the constituents may be said to exist through each other (1984, p. 21).

Wieder finds in Gurwitsch's account of "*thoroughgoing reciprocity*" a forerunner of ethnomethodology's identification of the natural reflexivity of accounts. And Wieder's ethno-inquiry into the actual workings of the convict code is an extensive illustration of this discovery. According to Wieder (1984), even the production of a self is "analyzable within a gestalt-contexture theory, but even there it requires the notion of an ensemble of nested and/or interlocked gestalt-contextures" (p. 13) In his study of becoming-being a real Indian, Wieder supplies us with a concrete

instance of this. In one of his early lectures, Garfinkel describes a local social order as "a floating crap game." It was Larry Wieder who, with customary meticulous attention paid to the practical interactional work of local parties, supplied us with some of the ethnomethodological studies that best describe just what "a floating crap game" it is.

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