

Respecifying “ecological validity”

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic materials collected as part of an interdisciplinary research project involving epidemiologists, molecular biologists, veterinarians and sociologists on the topic of antibiotic resistance, I pursue two lines of argument. First, I examine Cicourel's notion of "ecological validity", showing what it owes to experimental psychology and behavioral ecology which Cicourel often invokes as sources of borrowing (1996; 2007). The second move consists in respecifying "ecological validity" as members' *practical problems in the spirit of Garfinkel (1964; 1967), which means departing from treating it as a methodological-analytical concern that arises* *ex post* *for the researcher, in their effort to give an account of their sociological work. Making this move -- i.e. showing that attention to ecological validity is a "member's problem" -- will enable me to show the strong opposition that then emerges between Cicourel's posture and the ethnomethodologically inspired sociology of science (Garfinkel et al., 1981; Lynch et al., 1983; Lynch, 1985; 1993), which adopts an anti-demarcationist assumption between science and common sense, or, to put it another way, between scientific reasoning and ordinary reasoning. Analyses of linguistic exchanges during work sessions aimed at developing inclusion criteria for a biomedical study will be used as the basis for discussion.*

Cicourel has made numerous references to the concept of “ecological validity” (1964; 1982; 1996; 2007, inter alia). As early as in *Methods and Measurements* (1964) he expands on the classical problem of the “validity” of the data (in relation to “reliability”), and “ecological validity” is called upon in several subsequent texts. Overall, “ecological validity” seems to pertain to (i) a methodological commitment involving the accumulation of data (primary and secondary, via the multiplication of methods borrowing from various epistemological traditions in the social sciences, but also the medical sciences, psychology and linguistics), and (ii) an epistemological concern as to how to establish and communicate knowledge afterward (“convince others”, 2007: 735).

In this presentation, I develop two lines of argument.

A first section will be devoted to an examination of Cicourel’s diverse uses of the notion of “ecological validity”, showing what it owes to experimental psychology and

behavioral ecology, often invoked as sources of borrowing (Cicourel, 1982; 1996; 2007). In fact, it seems that this notion is the topic of fierce epistemological debates in these disciplines, and we shall review the different acceptations that Cicourel had picked out and adopted. Yet, what interests me is not to make a conceptual examination for the sake of a conceptual examination, but to reflect on the basis of concrete social practices, thereby being consistent (hopefully) with the ethnomethodological gesture of respecification. Hence, the second aspect will be dedicated to the discussion of empirical materials, and in particular, ethnographic data made up of exchanges during the elaboration of inclusion criteria in a biomedical study.

The second line of argument will thus seek to respecify attention to “ecological validity” as “members’” practical problems in Garfinkel's (1964, 1967) sense, and not simply as a methodological-analytical concern that arises *ex post* from the researcher's need to account for his sociological work. Making this move will ultimately enable me to demonstrate the strong opposition that is evident between Cicourel's posture and the ethnomethodologically inspired sociology of science (Garfinkel et al., 1981; Lynch et al., 1983; Lynch, 1985; 1993), attentive to what Lynch has called the “shop work”, and assuming an anti-demarcationist stance between scientific reasoning and ordinary reasoning.

Drawing on ethnographic materials collected as part of an interdisciplinary research project bringing together epidemiologists, molecular biologists, veterinarians and sociologists around the problem of antibiotic resistance, analyses of language exchanges during work sessions will be used as empirical data providing the basis for reflection.

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