Preface

When I was an undergraduate student at the London School of Economics in the late 1960s, ethnomethodology was not mentioned on the courses I took, nor for that matter were social phenomenology and symbolic interactionism.¹ However, in the library I did find Cicourel's *Method and Measurement in Sociology*, Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, the (then) three volumes of Schutz's *Collected Papers*, Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism*, and Becker's *Outsiders*, and I read them as representing a new approach to studying the social world, one that I found more interesting and worthwhile than much of what was on the official curriculum. When it came to choosing a place to study as a postgraduate, I selected the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester largely because I knew that some staff there had an interest in interactionism. When I arrived, I found that several of them had moved on to ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. While I was familiar with Cicourel's work, I had not read Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* and knew nothing of conversation analysis. I spent much of my four years in Manchester reading whatever I could get access to, particularly Sacks' lectures, then still in mimeographed form, as well as Garfinkel's book. I also participated in tutorials on conversation analysis in the Department.

I found Garfinkel's arguments appealing because they raised fundamental questions about mainstream social science, and did this from a scientific rather than humanistic point of view, by contrast with many other influential critiques at the time. However, I never quite converted to ethnomethodology – initially I remained closer to Schutz, Berger and Luckmann, and Blumer, and much later came to adopt a largely Weberian methodological position (see Hammersley 2014). Nevertheless, I kept in contact with developments in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and from early on I produced various drafts of a paper about ethnomethodology, though never completed it. Then, in the mid-2000s, I wrote a piece comparing conversation analysis with an influential form of discourse analysis that had developed within psychology, critically assessing each of them. I gave this paper to seminars at the Open University, Brunel, Manchester, and

¹ Paul Rock, who wrote a key book on *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism*, was teaching at LSE but, unfortunately, I did not come into contact with him.

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Loughborough; it received, at best, a mixed reception, not least from ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts in the audiences. It was later published and led to an exchange in the journal with Jonathan Potter.² What prompted me then to go on to produce this book was an invitation to speak at a *Mind and Society* conference in Manchester in 2015. This regular conference brings together many people with an interest in ethnomethodology and in Wittgenstein's philosophy, particularly as regards its implications for social science. The invitation prompted me to re-read the book *There is No Such Thing as a Social Science*, co-authored by influential figures associated with the Conference, and I gave a paper dealing with that book (Hutchinson et al. 2008; Hammersley 2017a). Attending a subsequent conference at Manchester on *Radical Ethnomethodology*,³ and engaging in conversations with various people there, launched me into the reflections that are presented here. As its title implies, it is the product of a critical engagement with ethnomethodology: I have tried to understand the character and appeal of this approach to studying the social world, but what I offer is nevertheless a reading and assessment from outside.

I am grateful to the organisers of the conferences just mentioned, and to participants in them for helping me to gain what understanding of ethnomethodology I have achieved. Longer term, as well as more recently, I have also benefited from occasional contacts with Bob Anderson, Alex Dennis, Lewis Hyland, John Lee, Wes Sharrock, Rod Watson, and others. I doubt that any of them will share most of my conclusions, but I hope that they will at least feel that I have made a serious attempt to understand what they said.

This book does not, however, stem solely from my personal entanglements with ethnomethodology. It also relates to a general concern I have about the nature of sociology as a discipline, and indeed about the social sciences generally. I am sceptical about the validity and value of much of what social science currently offers, and this is an attitude I share with many ethnomethodologists. So, part of the motivation behind the book was to explore common ground as well as to investigate areas of disagreement.

2 See *Discourse and Society*, 14:6, 2003.

3 See <http://radicalethno.org/>.