**Action, Meaning and Understanding: Seeing Sociologically with Harvey Sacks**

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**Introduction**

Harvey Sacks suffers no want of authoritative interpreters, and reading, for example, the likes of Coulter (1976), Schegloff (1992a, 1992b), Lynch and Bogen (1994), Watson’s commentaries (1994; 2009) or Silverman’s introductions (1998) certainly deepens our understanding by revealing layers in Sacks’ work we might otherwise miss. Nonetheless, while these guides are invaluable, the real “joy of Sacks”, as Fitzgerald (2012) memorably puts it, lies in reading and engaging with his work for ourselves, as anyone who has begun to delve into *Lectures in Conversation*, his transcribed lectures, quickly comes to see. The ground Sacks covers, his breadth of interests and the diverse range of examples and materials he focuses on means his work affords all manner of opportunities for engagement – returning to it, there is always something else to be discovered in it and taken away (and see Bjelić 2017, Lynch 2017, Fitzgerald 2018 for just some of the more recent returns). Rather than try to anticipate a variety of possible engagements, however, this chapter attempts something much more limited: it charts just one line through Sacks wider body of work, concentrating on the distinctive way Sacks handles and helps us to handle the relationship between action, meaning and understanding. While that relationship has long been treated as a problem in and for the social sciences, based on his detailed analyses of our everyday practices, Sacks refused to follow suit and treat it as a problem for the sociologist at all. For Sacks, to understand the meaning of someone’s actions is just to grasp what they’re doing, and that is not a theoretical but a practical matter, one internal to and resolved in social life. Although Sacks did not dwell on this insight but put it to work in developing a new way of practicing sociology, tracing its bases and what it shows about the value of his approach to doing sociology is salutary in several respects. Drawing from material across his lectures and published writings, the aim of this chapter is therefore to do just that and highlight one of the ways in which Sacks shows us how to see sociologically.

In that, this chapter is also an attempt to excavate the grounds of and thus communicate something about our own first engagements with Sacks. Reading Sacks for the first time is an intellectually revelatory experience in many ways. It is something we did some 40 years apart; with one (Sharrock), along with other colleagues at Manchester, making his way through mimeographed copies of the transcribed lectures distributed shortly after they had been delivered by Sacks (a group that also had the benefit of meeting and discussing Sacks’ work with Sacks himself, see Carlin, this volume), but with the other (Mair) making his way through the print version of the collected lectures as a postgraduate student in discussion with the first generation Manchester ethnomethodologists who, like Sharrock, originally got them hot off the press. That 40-year gap is not negligible, of course, but nor does it over-determine a reading of Sacks’ work. Any first time reader of Sacks, and something similar could be said in relation to the work of Harold Garfinkel, will encounter the same “shock of the new” (Hughes 1980). And it is a shock; a jolt indeed. Until you read it, it’s difficult to imagine that sociology could be approached *that* way. After you read it, the idea you could approach it any *other* way becomes difficult to imagine. In light of that before and after contrast, we want to draw out something which connected us as first readers. That is, we both read Sacks on the understanding that Sacks intended his work to be read *as* sociology. Sacks was ambivalent about sociology (1963) and conversation analysis has drifted away from it as it has developed. However, as part of what we might term a local “anthropology of reading” (Livingston 1992), here our own, we want to stress the value of preserving that connection by engaging in an explicitly sociological reading of Sacks. For all the flaws he diagnosed in it, sociology provided Sacks and hence his readers with problems for thinking with and pushing against and it is an aspect of that critical dialogue with sociology that we seek to foreground here.

**Language, perception and social activities**

One of Harvey Sacks’ most significant and enduring intellectual contributions, attested to in various ways by all contributors to this volume, was to show through fine-grained empirical analyses that our language comprises heterogeneous collections of methods of practical action and reasoning whose coherence, orderliness and stability is grounded in their use by us, as members of society, on actual occasions. Rather than focusing on what ‘language’ was in itself, whatever that might mean, as if ‘it’ somehow stood apart from our practices, Sacks demonstrated time and again, particularly in his lectures, that to talk of language was to talk not just of what we do with language but of how we go about doing it, typically with others in all manner of situations. Considerations of recorded talk thus became a central focus for a respecification of the ‘problem of language’, with ordinary conversations providing a primary site for studying “the [variety of] methods persons use in doing social life” (Sacks 1984a: 21), that is, how they “do … whatever they do, in the ways that they do it.” (Sacks 1992: V1 416).

While Sacks’ influence on how we might revisit (mis)conceptions of language by attending to its ordinary use is profound, however, his work also raised a range of other concerns, some fleeting, some recurrent. One of the recurrent concerns, conventionally framed, was perception. Sacks was interested, for example, in explicating how parties to a conversation come to see, to borrow from Austin, what others are doing with words – not least because that might involve something being done to them (e.g., Sacks 1992: V1 350-51; 417-426) – but extended his examination of seeing as understanding beyond communicative exchanges to how we ordinarily and routinely get the measure of scenes of social life and what can relevantly be said to be happening within them – a concern explicitly topicalised in a study of the methods the police employ to assess ‘moral character’ (Sacks 1972) and found more generally throughout his work. For Sacks, and this shall provide our point of departure, part of “seeing sociologically” (Garfinkel 2015) involved explicating how any and all “activities … are done, and done recognizably” (Sacks 1992: V1 245).

Just as the phenomena of language, when approached via Sacks’ characteristic ways of working, decomposed into assemblies of locally organised social activities (Lynch & Bogen 1994), so perception did too. Undermining the very idea of a unified theory of perception as he went, social, scientific or otherwise, Sacks provided a series of vivid examples of ways of seeing and their ordinary social grounds – i.e., of ‘praxiologies of perception’ as they have subsequently come to be called (Coulter and Parsons 1990). The observability of social action – that is, the connections between action and its recognition and the “possibility” of both (Sacks 1992: V1 422, see also Livingston 1987: 59-64 and Wieder & Pratt 1990) – was a major focus in this. As Sacks puts it, “social activities are observable; you can see them all around you, and you can write them down … If you think you can see it, that means we can build an observational study, and we can build a natural study” (Sacks 1992: V1 28). Moreover, because social activities are “routinely observable” (Sacks 1992: V1 31), that is, available to members of society’s (or, more simply, member’s) ordinary ways of looking “as anyone can easily find” (Sacks 1992: V1 40), sociology does not need to “await developments in … genetics or analyses of the light spectra [i.e. the presumed ‘scientific’ bases of perception] to gain a secure position from which members’ knowledge, and the activities for which it is relevant, might be investigated” (see also here Lynch 1993; Lynch & Bogen 1994). Instead, given social activities *are* observable, sociology can instead proceed with the work of describing “how it is that any activities … which members do [are done] in such a way as to be recognizable as such *to members*” (Sacks 1992: V1 245, emphasis added). For Sacks, the question thus becomes: “For anybody … to do … an activity, what makes it recognizable as whatever it happens to be?” (Sacks 1992: V1 422). From there, “[what] we want to do then … is to provide for how it is that something that’s done is recognized for what it is, where the big thing is that some action is recognized as a something, as a case of some activity” (Sacks 1992: V1 236-7).

Armed with these insights, Sacks got on with his observational studies rather than setting out lengthy programmatics as a prelude to them. We want to return to these issues and some of the better-known sections of the *Lectures*, however, because we think there are things worth emphasising in the explicitly sociological bases of what Sacks was seeking to do. It can be easy to forget the enterprise’s starting points and the manner in which Sacks both responded to but also departed from conventional social science (mis)treatments of the phenomena he concentrated his analytical attention on. Recovering those starting points may strike some as unnecessary. However, there are dangers in forgetfulness: confusions and misunderstandings can proliferate, for instance, if we lose sight of the care Sacks took in setting out the grounds of his observational social science, dangers we will expand on next.

**Starting with not arriving at ‘the action’**

It is easy to be deceived by Sacks apparently ‘naïve’ stance on what would count as sociologically relevant phenomena or an adequate treatment of them. He did indeed emphasise “unmotivated looking” and worked with “found” objects conventional social science by and large rejected as too “small” or “uninteresting” to take up and systematically study (Sacks 1984a). As his various papers and off-hand references in the *Lectures* indicate, however, that naivety was deeply informed; Sacks was steeped in the theoretical, methodological and empirical literatures of the social and indeed natural sciences but remarked that he found social science “strange” and sought to develop his approach to sociological description independently of the standard presuppositions that characterised the bulk of work conducted in it (Sacks 1963). In working through an alternate approach to the study of social life, Sacks thus paid close attention to the kinds of work it was to be an alternate too. Missing that can have consequences; cultivated naivety is one thing, genuine naivety quite another. One area in particular where those consequences can be particularly pronounced connects to the classical sociological problem concerning the relationship between action, meaning and understanding.

As Wittgenstein (whose work Sacks admired) once noted, the “*general* notion of … meaning … [is] a haze which makes clear vision impossible” (1953: §5, emphasis added) and, from their discipline’s inception, sociologists have found themselves lost in the conceptual “fog” surrounding it. Although committed to the study of social life, sociologists have had great trouble specifying what would constitute an adequate account of what people do and do routinely. The typical solution has been to devise external criteria by which the sociologist could independently arrive at a determination of the meaningful character of social action but it is a solution which creates its own problems. Even Max Weber’s attempt (e.g., 1962) to found an interpretive sociology that would overcome these problems ended up following the same unstable twin-track others had laid before him, separating out action and meaning by treating their relations as an observer’s problem, i.e. as something to be decided outside the social activities under examination and resolved through analytical means (Sacks 1963; 1999). Sociology has thus been caught in the grip of the view that unless the discipline’s investigators secured meaning, meaning couldn’t be secured. Despairing at the difficulties associated with that task, many social scientists simply sought to do without meaning altogether, offering instead various reductive schemes in which action would be accounted for in more ‘basic’ terms. The 20th C thus saw a raft of reductionist projects that aimed to achieve that goal, but with no more success that than their ‘integrationist’ precursors. In seeking to do away with the meaningful bases of our ordinary practices in favour of something putatively more elementary, these projects effectively did away with the sense of those practices, making them systematically *un*recognisable. They had not been accounted for, they had simply been blocked out of analytical view; and pretending something is not there has never been a particularly satisfactory way of dealing with it, whether among ostriches or sociologists.

As Sacks saw clearly, it is their starting point which generates the intractable analytical problems as well as the need for increasingly extreme measures to ‘resolve’ them. Once we have accepted there is something called ‘action’ and something else called ‘meaning’ which somehow stands separately from it or is layered on top it and where an analytical reconciliation is required if the two are to be brought back together again, we are already lost. It is not that people do things and then find meaning in them, as part of a separate process. It is instead that action is something which is done recognisably and that in ordinary, routine and unproblematic ways – something Sacks reminds us of time and again in his work. That is, we do not see some doing and then work out what it is that has been done as if that were an addition to the action[[1]](#footnote-1). Instead, we see what was done in its doing; action and meaning are, as we might say, “internally related” (Read, Hutchinson & Sharrock 2009: 96). Moreover, and this was Sacks’ central insight and one he developed in conjunction with Harold Garfinkel, ‘understanding that relation’ isn’t and could not be the analyst’s problem in any primary sense. Insofar as it is a problem (and it generally isn’t as Wittgenstein reminds us), it is one which is encountered and dealt with by members of society on specific occasions in the course of their ongoing dealings with one another. It is a practical matter not a theoretical one. In starting with the ordinary recognisability of social action in its contexts, taking action and its displayed meaning together, Sacks short-circuits the analytical problems that have continued to waylay conventional social science: we cannot advance down the twin-track when we begin where Sacks begins.

Unfortunately, the picture of action and meaning as separate retains its grip on the sociological imagination. In setting out to undertake an “observational study”, it is all too easy to imagine the best way to develop at an understanding of what is going on in any social scene is first to watch the doings and then arrive at an account of what has been done – but then, to repeat what we said above, we have simply reinstated the same insoluble problem. As Sacks notes, that is precisely *not* how members of the society either act or recognise actions in the doing. Yet the misconception persists, often in research which invokes Sacks as a precursor. We therefore want to show next how a return to Sacks can help dispel that misconception.

**Natural observational studies**

‘Natural observational studies’ as conceived and practiced by Sacks have a particular character. Some elements of what Sacks was proposing and doing can seem relatively transparent. For example, according to Sacks, “what we want to watch for is the kind of components that complex activities have, and the ways that sets of complex activities can be put together” (1992: V1 425). Proceeding in this way, “it may be that we can come up with findings of some considerable generality by looking at very singular, particular things. By asking what it takes for those things to have come off” (1992: V1 298). The question is, however, what things? How are they to be identified? This is important because it can sometimes appear as if Sacks is advocating a sociologically inflected version of something like the work of Eadweard Muybridge, the Victorian photographer who undertook some of the first photographic studies of bodies in motion, capturing for example the “component parts” of the “complex” physical movements involved in such things as walking, climbing stairs or throwing a discus. In Muybridge’s photo-studies, a specific human body (often his own) was made to stand for *any* body by instantiating what were treated as typical forms, see Figure 1 below, something that could be and was extended to equivalent studies of how non-human animals typically move too. In its pursuit of generality via specifics, then, Muybridge’s project may seem to have affinities with the analytical “aesthetic” Sacks outlines (1992: V1 113).

**Figure 1, Eadweard Muybridge’s Studies of Bodies in Motion[[2]](#footnote-2)**



The parallels in approach may seem clear: pick some quotidian activity, meticulously record how it ‘comes off’ in detail and then construct an account of the components it is built up out of based upon an, ideally, mechanically recovered and ‘replayable’ record. However, the idea that Sacks’ observational sociology is akin to stop-motion photography is misleading in several respects. Part of the problem derives from the idea that we could come to an understanding of social activities just by inspecting them (Sacks 1963: 15). While we might be able to begin a study of the biomechanical organisation of typical human movements based on Muybridge-style pictures, i.e. flexing joints, twisting ligaments, progressively tensed and relaxed muscles and so on, this is not a sociological account. Nor does it provide materials that might be used in developing one. This is primarily because observational studies, at least in Sacks’ hands, proceed from the recognition that ‘observation’ is something that those being studied engage in as well. What is more, their ways of looking are analytically primitive, the sociological observer’s derivative. That is, observation is already a feature of the social world and, because it is, it has to be accounted for; it cannot be naively employed in accounts of its organisation as this would presuppose its availability to and for description, the very aim of the exercise (Sacks 1963; 1992: V1 295; 1999). There is in Sacks’ work, therefore, “no room in the world” (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970: 176; Sacks 1992 V1: 516) for ‘just looking’, i.e., for observing, scrutinising, eyeballing or otherwise sizing up what members of society are doing (Sacks 1992: V1 258; cf. Foucault 1976: ix). Witnessing is already part of the action and has to be dealt with on that basis. As Sacks himself put it,

“[What] I have been proposing could be restated as follows: For members, activities are observables. They see activities. They see persons doing intimacy, they see persons lying, etc … And that poses for us the task of being behaviorists in this sense: Finding how it is that people can produce sets of actions that provide that others can see such things.” (1992: V1 119)

That characterisation is important; if this is a form of naturalistic behavioural study it is so in a highly qualified way. Such studies are behaviouristic only in the sense that they would focus on how *members* go about making use of “procedures to find the sense of some set of observables” (Sacks 1992: V1 120). Contra behaviourism, however, Sacks’ ‘observational studies’ treat observation as part of the phenomenon and not a privileged means for accessing it. Those studies unavoidably start where members start, with the witnessed and witnessable scenes of social life and the sense those scenes demonstrably have for those within them. As Schegloff neatly puts it,

“This way of working, then, mixes a *kind* of naturalism (in its insistence on noticing and crediting the potential seriousness of particulars of the natural occurrences of conduct) with the ethnomethodological concern for Members’ methods for the production of a mundane world and commonsense understandings of it.” (1992a: xxx, emphasis added)

Seeing sociologically, for Sacks, turns on just these considerations. This comes across very strongly in Lecture 11 of Sacks’ Fall 1964-Spring 1965 lecture series, ‘On Exchanging Glances’ (1992: V1 81-94). In the lecture Sacks discusses an assignment he had set the class in which they had to report back on observations they had made of people exchanging glances. In a much-quoted passage, Sacks has the following to say:

“Let me make a couple of remarks about the problem of ‘feigning ignorance’. I found in these papers that people will occasionally say things like, “I didn’t really know what was going on, but I made the inference that he was looking at her because she’s an attractive girl”. So one claims to not really know. And here’s a first thought I have. I can fully well understand how you come to say that. It’s part of the way in which what’s called your education here gets in the way of your doing what you in fact know how to do. And you begin to call things ‘concepts’ and acts ‘inferences’, when nothing of the sort is involved. And that nothing of the sort is involved, is perfectly clear in that if it were the case that you didn’t know what was going on – if you were the usual made up observer, the man from Mars – then the question of what you would see would be a far more obscure matter than that she was an attractive girl, perhaps. How would you go about seeing in the first place that one was looking at the other, seeing what they were looking at, and locating those features which are perhaps relevant?” (1992: V1 83)

He continues,

“And that’s why it’s sort of a pain to intellectualize this stuff such that you already talk about it as though, “I see a blob, and then I infer that it’s my mother because she’s a blob like that”, when what you see is not that … You may find that some philosopher has convinced you of this. But ‘inference’ has another kind of use.” (1992: V1 86)

In ‘On Doing Being Ordinary’, Sacks underlines his non-inferential, non-interpretive point again:

“[People] are not [from their perspective] arguing anything, they are not imagining anything … [All] they are doing is scanning a scene to see what is happening” (Sacks 1984b: 420-421, adapted)

The sorts of issues involved in conducting studies which would not (pseudo)intellectualise the recognisability of social activities are illustrated in ‘The Navy Pilot’ (1992: V1 205-22). There Sacks begins with a piece of ‘found data’, a newspaper article, a typically brilliant examination of which leads him to the following point:

“Knowing thyself does not mean knowing something very private, it means knowing oneself as a member of a community, knowing, that is, the things that obtain for one, which obtain for persons commonly … [It does] not involve knowing something about one[self] which … [is] distinctive, or special, or private” (1992: V1 221)

Sacks, ever attendant to the need for analytical consistency, understood that these considerations apply equally to researchers as these are the local conditions of possibility for their work too. Insofar as social activities are available to overlooking analysts, it is because they are available in the first instance to members of society, where an “equally extraordinary part of this … [is] that they [typically also] know what it is that you saw, that they saw the same thing, … and they make the same assessment.” (1992: V1 93). If this was not the case, then we would be in the position of the observers from Mars. This comes across in an exchange with a student at the end of the lecture on exchanging glances:

“Q: It seems like that was the basic assumption of the assignment; that we could notice them doing it [i.e., exchanging glances].

 HS: Right. It was the basic assumption, which could have been wrong. But of course it’s not like I came into this world the day before I gave that assignment. I know that people can do this, I’ve watched it many times, and I take it that you’ve seen it also. However, people who get this far in their education are very prone to intellectualize the whole operation and not see it. And so you don’t see [it,] … you figure it’s a philosophical impossibility, or you’d have to go through four years of analysis, etc.” (1992: V1 94)

The lesson, as we see it, is straightforward: to proceed as if we came into the world the day before yesterday, to operate on the basis that we don’t know what we’re dealing with, is to deny the very bases of our whole enterprise. We may seek to offer procedural accounts which show how people go about producing actions recognised as such by others in the doing but the action is where we begin. Where that is obscured, the whole edifice becomes unstable. On this last point, and as part of reaching a conclusion, we want to offer a brief comment on the ways in which a *natural* observational study, specifically, might address – by refusing to accept – the separation of action, meaning and understanding. We think Wittgenstein is again helpful here. As he puts it in the *Philosophical Investigations*,

“Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.” (Wittgenstein 1953: §25)

He later adds,

“What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes.” (Wittgenstein 1953: §415)

Sacks’ advocacy of ‘naturalism’ seems to us to follow from similar insights. One of the initial mis-steps that led sociologists into trouble was to divide actions and meaning from the outset. The components of action were primitive and first on the scene, meanings secondary and arrived at after-the-fact, and one, it seemed, had to be dealt with independently of the other. This, in effect, created a special realm of activities involved in determining meaning which were supervenient on other apparently ‘more basic’ forms of activity, a substrate of bodily movements, physical gestures and the like. Sacks, like Wittgenstein, wanted to collapse that artificial partition. Our tutored sensibilities, shaped by “what’s called … [our] education” (Sacks ibid), leave us blind to what is “before our eyes” (Wittgenstein ibid), namely, the fact that meaningful activities are as much in the world as anything else. Equally plainly, however, Sacks, like Wittgenstein, knew we have to tailor our inquiries to the available particularities of the activities, like exchanging glances, we are attempting to make sense of. All activities require an approach suited to their particular character and Sacks’ great contribution was to open new vistas in that regard, whether by attending to the particularities of language-in-use or “how we see” on actual occasions (Sacks 1992: V1 488).

**Conclusion**

In this short, ‘alternate’ sociological reading of Sacks’ work, we have attempted to draw out aspects of his way of working through a consideration of his response to the problem of meaning in the social sciences. Based on that, we have argued that Sacks began his studies, in the first instance, from the position of “another member” (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970: 175; Sacks 1992: V1 486-488). That is, Sacks’ starting point was the unproblematic recognisability of action in context, its “routine observability” for members of society on particular occasions. From there, Sacks would investigate its production procedurally, seeking to find ways members could have arrived at those “products” together. This for Sacks was the basis of “natural observational studies”, studies in which observability would be treated as a phenomenon in its own right. What we have argued, drawing on passages from Sacks’ lectures and writings, is that Sacks always understood such considerations to apply equally to the analyst’s task in producing accounts of social action. That is, if “observation” is part of the phenomenon, social scientists can’t hope to naively make use of it to study social life. Seeing sociologically with Harvey Sacks involves, then, attempts to come to terms with the sense witnessed scenes and witnessed activities have for members in the ways they routinely do.

This may strike many as yesterday’s news but we feel it is worth repeating. As social scientists, ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts among them, increasingly make use of video in their studies of social life, for example, there is a danger that such studies collapse back into the sociology of the spectator. Muybridgean collages, under such conditions, can come to be seen as adequate sociological analyses. Such collages, however, resurrect the very problems Sacks’ observational studies worked to dissolve. Treating ‘meaningful actions’, for instance, as amalgams of non-meaningful movements, gestures and other ‘more basic’ elements of conduct puts the componential cart before the analytical horse. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis may now be following different paths but neither can afford to forget Sacks’ starting points: both seek to treat commonsense knowledge of social structures, however it is displayed, as their fundamental phenomenon, but, even though they do, both still start from a social world whose features are known and knowable by virtue of it. Proceeding otherwise leads to a re-entanglement in ‘the problem of meaning’. As Sacks shows us, the relationship between action, meaning and understanding is not ordinarily a problem at all, it is only when social activities are approached in a particular way that it becomes problematic – the problem of meaning is thus methodogenic, a conceptual oubliette of the social scientist’s own devising. The only way of avoiding this self-constructed trap is to ensure the “methods persons use in doing social life” are recognised as the practical grounds of our inquiries too. We can watch or film people going about their affairs as much as we like but it does not resolve the crucial prior problem: if we don’t know what we are looking at, what the action properly speaking is, we cannot arrive at an account of how it was done. This because what was specifically done won’t be available to us, leaving us to offer descriptions into a sociological void. That lesson remains as important as it was when Sacks first began his demonstrations of its salience in, to and for our everyday practices and, by extension, studies which might seek to get *their* measure. It is also an insight which remains as striking for us now as it did upon our first reading.

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1. Indeed, if we did have to begin with doings, if that was all we had, we’d never be able to specify “where the action is” (Ebersole 2001). This is because an account of action in ‘brute’ terms *fails* to specify the action at all (Ebersole 2001: 379, Read, Hutchinson & Sharrock 2009: 98-100; Hutchinson 2012; Lavin 2013; Sidnell 2017; Fish 2018: para 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Eadweard_Muybridge#/media/File:Muybridge_disk_step_walk.jpg>

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