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Note om layout

- Sidetall er øverst på siden
- Det er noen utdrag fra samtaler som er transkribert, som ikke har blitt helt bra oknvertert. Det vil si at det ofte mangler hvem det er som snakker. I tillegg er det noen lingvistiske spesialtegn som har blitt dårlig konvertert. Jeg har ikke gjort noe mer med dette, viss du vil ha det rett må du gi beskjed så må jeg gå igjennom det mere nøye.
- Ingen fotnoter i teksen
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This is the first description in a book about the business done with descriptions. The book is asking how people construct their world in their talk and texts, and what is done with those constructions. Acknowledgements do business of all sorts and are often the occasion for some pretty ambitious psychology and sociology. They are fenced around by conventions - even the ironies on the conventions are conventional! How is it possible to acknowledge influence and debt? What is visible and what is transparent? What discourses should be drawn upon to constitute the world of acknowledgement?

Let me start more psychoanalytically with my parents - Mary and Percy. Of course, if this was a serious psychoanalytic account I would refer to their toilet training but, given that this might be family reading, I will stress, instead, their wonderful combination of (almost) thoroughgoing scepticism and sense of social responsibility.

For a somewhat more recent socialization account, I want to thank my PhD supervisors. Indeed, I have dedicated the book to them. In Peter Stringer and Michael Mulkay I was blessed with two supervisors (at different times) who each combined enormous originality of their own with wonderful support for me, personally and intellectually. I cite them occasionally in the book that follows - but that does not do justice to the enduring impact that they have had on my thinking and approach to social science.

To bring out some issues in sociology and ideology, I would like to thank my wife for staying at home and giving me such wonderful support. I can't thank her, however, as I am not married. Margaret Wetherell who was originally going to write this with me got bored with waiting and wrote a book about men and masculinity instead (surely a coincidence!). So I blame the shortcomings in my book on her lack of input, but have to accept that many of its qualities are a result of the specific comments that she made on draft chapters as well as her general intellectual example.
By rights, Sue Jones and Ziyad Marar from Sage ought to be part of an economic and practical account. But, by chance or otherwise, I have dealt with two Sage editors who were genuine academics who made valuable contributions to the content of this work.

My immediate social network has been great. I have written so much with Derek Edwards recently that it seems odd to be writing something without him. Luckily he was there with detailed suggestions and long discussions about the ideas developed here. The book would have been very different.
without his intellect, support and wit. Mick Billig and Malcolm Ashmore provided further intellect and humour in spades.

Over the years Loughborough's Discourse and Rhetoric Group has provided a nurturing, although always argumentative, environment for exploring these ideas. I am particularly conscious of the input from Anne Smith, Ava Horowitz, Belinda Cripps, Dave Middleton, Jon Fong, Katie Macmillan, Mick Roffe, Mike Gane, Sumiko Mushakoji. Outside of Loughborough, I received helpful comments on various drafts from Anna Madill, Alexa Hepburn, Kathy Doherty, David Bamberg, Hedwig te Moulder, Nancy Budwig and Nigel Edley.

In direct institutional terms, the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council provided support (grant R000231439) for the work on making a current affairs television film that is drawn on occasionally through the book. More importantly, the Social Sciences Department at Loughborough University has housed, paid and supported me throughout.

Last, but by no means least, I am particularly grateful to the various people who allowed their talk to be recorded and used for the research on which this book depends. Without them nothing would have been possible.

Introduction

In virtually any situation appeal to the facts, to what really happened and what is only invention, can be a powerful device. Factual accounting is the stuff of arcane scientific disputes over whether neutrinos have been detected, of mundane domestic conflict over who last washed the dishes, and of ideological concern as particular versions of the economy are assembled and undermined. Descriptions are so bound up with our lives that virtually any conversation includes reports of events and actions. We read newspapers and watch television programmes which overflow with real life stories and varied factual claims. Factual reports are a commonplace currency of occupations as varied as doctors, teachers, engineers and police officers. And fiction, too, ironically but interestingly, is full of realist description striving to make characters believable and plots coherent.

This book is concerned with two closely related sets of questions. First, how are descriptions produced so they will be treated as factual? That is, how are they made to appear solid, neutral, independent of the speaker, and to be merely mirroring some aspect of the world? How can a factual description be
undermined? And what makes a description difficult to undermine? Second, how are these factual descriptions put together in ways that allow them to perform particular actions? What kinds of activities are commonly done using descriptions? And why might descriptions be suitable for doing those activities?

There are three main objectives for the book. First, it provides an overview of the main traditions of work on fact construction: the sociology of scientific knowledge, the closely related perspectives of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and the 'structural tradition' of semiology, poststructuralism and postmodernism. The coverage is necessarily selective. I am trying to capture the main thrust of the arguments, and pull out the issues which are particularly relevant to the study of fact construction, while avoiding getting bogged down in unnecessary technicalities. The coverage is comparative and points of convergence and conflict are emphasized where possible. Anyone hoping for a full integration will be disappointed; however, I do draw on elements of all three traditions in the more specific discussion in the later chapters.

The second objective of the book is to give an account of some of the basic procedures through which the factuality of descriptions is built up, and how those descriptions are involved in actions. This combines a detailed discussion of a range of relevant research on fact construction - some derived
from the traditions reviewed earlier, some with more disparate roots - with novel analyses of my own. In particular, a set of themes in the construction of facts are identified and illustrated with sample analyses. My hope is that these will both provide an organizing framework for making sense of the different studies and highlight some issues which any research using descriptions would wish to discuss. Further, they should provide some considerations which anyone analysing descriptions and accounts of any kind are likely to find helpful.

The third objective is more diffuse, but perhaps more important. I hope the book will show both how significant the role of descriptions and factual accounts is in our lives and what a rich and fascinating topic it is to study. I have deliberately chosen to draw on materials from a wide range of factual descriptions to illustrate the generality of the questions I am raising. At the same time, many of the examples should be familiar to most readers (for example, newspaper reports and relationship disputes) which I hope will make the points more accessible as well highlighting their generality. I have come to see that factual discourse, even in casual, mundane settings, such as in an argument between a husband and wife, is organized in enormously fine detail and with great subtlety. If I can convey some of that subtlety and intricate organization here I will be very happy.

Before starting with Chapter 1, there are three tasks. First, I will provide a small number of brief examples to illustrate more explicitly what is involved in studying fact construction, and to raise some of the themes that will come up later. Second, I will comment on some background issues relevant to the book and discuss one or two precursors to the work described here. Finally, I will give a brief overview of the book as a whole.

Welcome to the Fact Factory

A Fictional Undercover Cop

In Quentin Tarantino's film, Reservoir Dogs, a central character is a young undercover cop, Freddy. His mentor, Holdaway, has helped get him access to a gang of jewel thieves and is teaching him a story that he can use to make his criminal identity convincing.

_Freddy:_ I gotta memorize all this? There's over four fuckin' pages of shit here. You remember what's important and the
rest you make your own. You can tell a joke, can't ya?

I can tell a joke.

Well just think about it like that. Now the things you hafta remember are the details. It's the details that sell your story. Now your story takes place in a men's room. So you gotta know the details about that men's room. You gotta know if they got paper towels or a blower to dry your hands. You gotta know if the stalls got doors or not. You gotta know if /Holdaway continues... I Now what you

Holdaway:

Freddy:

Holdaway:

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gotta do is take all them details and make 'em your own. This story's gotta be about you, and how you perceived the events that took place. (Tarantino, 1994: 71)

What lessons are there here? The first is very basic, and easily missed. It takes work to produce a description that is convincing; it can be done well and it can be done badly. There are more or less standard procedures that can be drawn on when establishing the veracity of an account. Note the emphasis that Holdaway places on detail. It is not the general pattern of events so much as the details that makes the story credible. These are the sorts of things that someone who was there to witness events would know but which are not intrinsic to the general narrative. This is a theme that will be explored in Chapter 6.

A further consideration is that Freddy is working up an invented story. It is tempting to consider this to be totally different from someone recounting an actual story. That is, we might consider the actual story as the standard, natural form and the fake one as a derived form or parasite. However, both the conversation analyst Harvey Sacks and the philosopher Derrida offer reasons for not accepting this hierarchy too readily. It may be that an authentic story draws on the same resources as a subversive alternative that pretends to authenticity.
And maybe the way authentic stories are organized is partly a consequence of the possibility of inauthentic alternatives.

Two final issues are highlighted with this example: the contrast between fact and fiction and reflexivity. This is not a real dialogue between an undercover cop and his boss - it is invented, and it is part of a fiction where a whole set of considerations about the dialogue will be at work over and above whether it is the sort of thing that might actually be said in a real-life example of this kind (does it work dramatically? does it develop the characters? and so on). Indeed, there are all sorts of reasons to think that a real life conversation between cops like this would be very different. Most basically, a comparison between transcripts of actual conversations and playscript dialogue is likely to show the actual conversation to appear messier than the fictional one - it will be full of corrections, hesitations, pauses, ungrammatical constructions. However, that does not mean that actual conversation will not be organized in subtle and artful ways; nor, for that matter, that the fictional example is uninteresting. Both are fascinating, and both throw light on each other.

One of the interesting and paradoxical features of fiction is that it is a major domain for fact construction. Novelists and playwrights produce texts which need to be credible and believable on some level. For example, the vivid detail and witnessed perspective that Holdaway emphasizes is also a central feature in the literary skill of making a story convincing. Tarantino's text is both about the cop's process of learning fact construction and, simultaneously, doing fact construction as it vividly paints this interaction for us with its swearing, colloquialisms and displayed anxieties. And this reflexive relationship is repeated here in the introduction to the current book, where it
is both standing as an example of fact construction and contributing to the credibility of this text. Freddy is convincing the jewel thieves; Tarantino is convincing cinema goers; I am trying to convince readers.

Economies of Truth

In the course of the famous 'Spycatcher' court case in Australia, in which the British government attempted to prevent publication of a book claiming the security organization M15 was run by a traitor, Sir Robert Armstrong famously responded that he had been 'economical with the truth' when examined by defence attorney Malcolm Turnbull. The following is reconstructed from partial reports in different newspapers:

Mr Turnbull:
Sir Robert: Mr
Turnbull: Sir
Robert: Mr
Turnbull: Sir
Robert:

Mr Turnbull:

Sir Robert:

Did the letter contain an untruth? It does not say we already had a copy of the book. It contains an untruth. It does not contain that truth. It gives a misleading impression. It was a misleading impression in that respect, but a lie is a straightforward untruth. And what is the difference between an untruth and a misleading impression? The question is rather one of being economical with the truth.

This example illustrates a number of relevant themes. Note first that the phrase was produced as a response to cross examination. That is, it is part of the interaction, it is occasioned by its context where it is a response to an accusation. It addresses inconsistencies in testimony while resisting the implication that the speaker had been lying. The simple point here is that people do not produce descriptions out of the blue; they produce them for what they can do in some stream of activity. Sir Robert's claim should not be understood as an abstract claim about truth that he will stand behind in whatever future context he might find himself; it is produced on this occasion for this occasion.
A second point is related to the idea of being economical with the truth itself. It captures in a very neat way how the business done by a description can relate to both what is described and what is left out. The point of the being 'economical with the truth' in this version is that you can provide an answer to a question which does not contain actual falsehoods, but works by leaving out something that would give a very different impression. For example, in this case Sir Robert denied that the government had a copy of a book without telling the questioner that it had the proofs of the book; that is, although it did not have an actual bound copy it did know what it would contain. This is a feature of factual accounting that we will return to in detail in Chapter 7.

This example also shows up the sorts of skills that people have for undermining and resisting factual versions. Although this phrase was used as part of a distinction between lying and giving a misleading impression by withholding information (Sir Robert later claimed to have been drawing on Edmund Burke's distinction between 'falsehood and delusion' and 'economy of truth'), it was widely taken as a softened admission of lying. Indeed, since then 'economical with the truth' has become a popular pejorative phrase for certain kinds of official lying and deception. Here are just three examples from around 50 thrown up by a brief search through just three months of two newspapers on CD-ROM.

For ministers to point out that four out of five prescriptions are not paid for by individuals is surely being economical with the truth. Forty percent of the population pays for prescriptions. (Guardian, 19 February 1994)

Mr Paul Marland ... also disputed claims that Lloyd's never made Names bankrupt. He said the market was being 'economical with the truth'. (Daily Telegraph, 17 January 1994)

Grave doubts have been cast on the financing methods used to purchase Venables' stake at Spurs by indicating that he has been somewhat economical with the truth when he claimed he had put all his money into Spurs. (Daily Telegraph, 19 January 1994)

The phrase is not always directly quoted in this way; it can be modified to do different tasks. For example, an editorial about a minister's disputed hotel bill
(the issue being whether his visit was an undeclared gift) describes him as being 'miserly with the truth', and a cartoon about a government law officer's criticism of an official inquiry features one commuter saying to another, 'he feels they have been extravagant with the truth'. By modifying the phrase, reporters, cartoonists and others can draw delicately on the original and familiar meaning to ironize some claims and arguments.

More generally, the notion of an economy of truth serves as an appropriate metaphor for the topic of this book. Like money on the international markets, truth can be treated as a commodity which is worked up, can fluctuate, and can be strengthened or weakened by various procedures of representation.

The Anecdotalizer

This extract is from a light-hearted article where the author confesses to be a compulsive anecdotalizer.

Anecdotalising. It's an addiction. Every minuscule detail of my life is transformed into another party piece. Pubs, bus stops, the office, are all turned into impromptu theatre spaces ....

Often there is no incident. Having a point, an event or bizarre coincidence is reserved for beginners. Anyone can string out a tale about the time they were locked out of the house naked while a Salvation Army brass band marched down their street.

Only a true raconteur will hold forth on a failed attempt to adjust a wall thermostat. (Guardian Weekend, 6 January 1993)

One point that this extract neatly illustrates is that descriptions are not just
involved in situations of conflict, or where there is a strong concern with factual accuracy. People in their everyday talk tell stories to one another; they construct narratives - anecdotes - to make points, for entertainment and laughter.

In the continuation of the article the writer tells a story about recklessly starting an anecdote and only halfway through realizing that there is no point or punch line. This again stresses the theme of reflexivity. The article about the compulsive anecdotalizer is itself constructed as an anecdote, where a relatively trivial matter - not having a good ending to a story - is turned into a major disaster: 'like the captain of a sinking ocean liner, I refuse to acknowledge defeat, tell the band to play on'. And again, note, this narrative is being set to work in the current text that I am writing.

Another issue highlighted here is the flexibility of descriptions. Descriptions are not determined by events but are worked up, and this working up can itself be skillful. Thus the achievement of making the failed thermostat adjustment is turned into an interesting and involving story. However, while the surface implication of the article is that the compulsive anecdotalizer is a rather special figure, I will argue that issues involving the construction of versions are endemic in conversation. People package their lives into narratives which they tell for a whole range of different purposes. For example, one of the materials which will be used in several chapters below is taken from a relationship counselling session in which a couple each gives versions of an evening where the woman may have been flirting and the man may have attempted suicide (as we will see, these are already highly contentious descriptions). The anecdotalizing in this case is geared to actions such as assigning blame and showing who needs to change their behaviour.

These three examples are intended to provide an initial orientation to the themes that will be explored in detail later in the book. Before then there are some final introductory issues that need airing.

**Preparations**

*Philosophy*

It is important to emphasize that this is not a work of philosophy. In particular I am not trying to resolve classic philosophical disputes between, say, advocates of realism and anti-realism. And I am certainly not trying to answer ontological questions about what sorts of things exist. The focus is on the way people construct descriptions as factual, and how others undermine those constructions. This does not require an answer to the philosophical question of what factuality is. Nevertheless, this approach cannot fail to have implications for broader
debates about the status of realism and relativism, and about the appropriate ontology for social sciences. Work of this kind contributes to the respecification of the nature of philosophical discourse as rhetoric (following Richard Rorty, 1991). Conversely, one move in linguistic philosophy has been to rework unmanageable and enduring metaphysical questions as issues which can be addressed through a consideration of people's discourse. For example, rather than trying to solve the philosophical question of free will, John Austin (1961) suggested it might be more constructive to consider the way people account for freedom and constraint.

Rather than arguing directly with realism, the sorts of rhetorical devices that are used to shore up a realist position have been analysed (Gergen, 1994; Potter, 1992). There are certain common tropes that realists use to attack the coherence of the sort of constructionist position developed in this book, most notably the furniture argument ('see this [bangs on table]; you're not telling me that's a social construction') and the death argument ('what about the victims of the Holocaust, the fleeing Iraqis on the Basra Road, victims of amnesia -surely you don't want to deny their reality'). Again, the response that Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore and I(1995) developed to these arguments was not to argue directly against them, but to take apart the rhetoric on which they are based; decoupling the implied equivalence between relativism and lack of political commitment, and emphasizing that constructionist arguments are not aimed at denying the existence of tables (a very realist idea!) but at exploring the various ways in which their reality is constructed and undermined. Interesting though they are, these debates move away from the main issues of this book, and they will not be further explored here.

Definitions and Etymology

The simplest way of characterizing the main theme of this book is in terms of the way descriptions are made factual, and what those descriptions are used to do. However, the words fact and description (and related terms such as report and account) have a complex history, and their current sense is only the start-point for research. Fact in the sense of 'a thing done or performed' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition on CD-ROM; henceforth OED) goes back to the sixteenth century; while the seventeenth century starts to see the more familiar modern sense, 'something that has really occurred or is actually the case', and contrasts made between facts and inferences or fictions: 'a particular truth known by actual observation or authentic testimony, as opposed to what is merely inferred, or to a conjecture or fiction' (OED). The interest in facts in this book is attributional rather than actual. That is, the topic is what participants count as factual rather than what is actually factual.

The term description can refer to both action and object: on the one hand, it is 'the action of setting forth in words by mentioning recognizable features or characteristic marks' and, on the other, it is 'a statement which describes, sets
forth, or portrays; a graphic or detailed account of a person, thing, scene, etc.’ (OED). Both of these senses date back to the fourteenth century. The terms account and report are described in a similar fashion. To report something is 'to relate, narrate, tell, give an account of (a fact, event, etc.); while an account is 'a particular statement or narrative of an event or thing; a relation, report, or description' (OED). Note the way the definition of description uses the term describes as well as the term account, the definition of report uses
account, and the definition of account uses report and description. There is a lot of circularity. However, the contrast that I want to pick out is the way fact implies truth and real occurrence while description does not. This book covers the interactional space between these two notions, the business of building up a description as a fact.

**Specificity versus Universalism**

One of the tensions in this book is that between specificity and generality. I will argue that to understand the way factual accounts are constructed, and the way they are bound up with activities, it is important to understand their specific features, and the way those features relate to the setting in which they are used. Harvey Sacks (1992) has effectively shown the way much of the business of interaction is carried by what might at first sight seem to be the details. In talk, for example, this may be the selection of one specific word from a group of words with similar meanings, or the appearance of delays and overlaps, hesitations and corrections. Much of the book will be concerned with specific features of talk such as this, or with the particular constructions that appear in newspaper reports or texts of other kinds.

As a counterpoint to this focus on specificity, I have deliberately chosen to cover a very wide variety of forms of factual discourse. In the chapters that follow, I discuss scientific discourse, newspaper articles of various kinds, a couple's relationship counselling sessions, novels and films, everyday talk and talk amongst documentary film makers. My use of this wide selection of materials is driven by the conviction that there are general features of fact construction. That is, there are considerations that are likely to be attended to whatever the type of discourse. By casting the net widely in this way these general patterns are more likely to be revealed along with limitations on their generality. It is notable that the main traditions discussed in Chapters 1 to 3 combine major theoretical differences with differences in the kinds of material they are focused on: sociology of scientific knowledge obviously deals with scientific practices; ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have come to focus on talk in everyday and institutional settings; and work in post-structuralism and postmodernism has concentrated on literary and philosophical texts. I have opted for a comparative approach at both the level of theory and material.

*Transcription*
A number of the chapters below discuss examples of **transcribed talk**. Most use the increasingly standard system of transcription developed by the conversation analyst Gail Jefferson (1985; for an overview see Psathas, 1995). In some cases the origin is published articles; in other cases the examples are reproduced from original transcript. Either way there is a dilemma over its presentation. Many people find the sorts of detail, and the transcription symbols that go along with it, interfere with its readability. That would be a reason for simplifying the transcript: stripping off the extraneous symbols and

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elements. However, given the sorts of arguments about specificity I have just noted, this kind of detail needs to be recognized as an intrinsic part of a good transcript. The transcribed detail is not just an empiricist flourish to demonstrate completeness or conscientiousness or rigour (although it might do those things - see Bogen, 1992); it is an intrinsic and essential part of the interaction. In addition, anyone wishing to evaluate the claims and interpretations I make about sections of transcript might want to do so without being handicapped by information lost through judgements about what is extraneous.

I have been mindful of both of these concerns, and I have retained transcription symbols and information unless it is a major handicap to the intelligibility of the example. I hope that those readers unfamiliar with the Jeffersonian system (briefly described in an Appendix) will soon come to see it as clear and, indeed, invaluable for giving a sense of the talk as situated, voiced and, most importantly, a co-constructed part of an interaction (Schegloff, 1995).

**Reflexivity**

This is a book about constructing facts. One of its themes is the way descriptions are organized to make some version seem credible and objective. This also is a book full of descriptions (of theory, of disciplines, of literatures, of findings, of bodies of belief, and so on). It is a book, then, that refers to itself. This immediately raises the issue of reflexivity. Let me put this in its sharpest form. If the book is revealing that facts are constructed by devices, what of the devices that it uses to construct the fact that facts are constructed by devices? Put another way, do the conclusions of the book have any implications for the book itself? Is it, for example, entirely self-destructive?

Without getting too far ahead of arguments that will be aired more thoroughly later, I do think that there are reflexive implications from work on fact construction for this book and for social sciences more generally. Indeed, I even think there is an element of self-destruction. At the end of the book the ideal reader should be able to turn their gaze back on the book itself and decompose the techniques and tropes that it draws on so freely. For I have opted to use a conventional mode of presentation. It is not a new literary form; no alternative
voices will pop up to argue with the main authorial voice (Mulkay, 1985); and it is not (I hope!) a parody of a social science book (Ashmore, 1989). I hope that erratic, but persistent, references to reflexive issues in the course of the text will underline their pertinence.

That is not to say that a novel literary form would have been inappropriate; more than anything it is the sheer difficulty of achieving one without making the text reader-unfriendly that put me off. So, as it stands the book has a single authorial voice (although thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981, might dispute whether any book actually has a single voice) and draws on many of the familiar tropes of social science writing and fact construction more generally. It is (almost) unashamed of *drawing* on the kinds of visual metaphors that imbue recent western writing about knowledge: it is concerned with *throwing*