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Ethnomethodology and the production of history: Studying 'history-in-action'

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Abstract

According to Lynch, in his article "Ethnomethodology and History", ethnomethodology offers a rich and valuable resource for studying the *in situ* production of history. In this article, we seek to lay out a research agenda for a 'new business history' that uses ethnomethodology to study "history-in-action". Our aim is to show how an ethnomethodological history can be used to study the practical work of those tasked with 'making history'. We discuss the value of ethnomethodology for core business history methods, including the production and use of historical archives and written records, the treatment of witness memories, (auto)-biographies and testimonies, and the production of official versions of past events from diverse historical sources of evidence. We conclude by outlining the potential of ethnomethodology as a distinct paradigm of enquiry, which marks it out from conventional social scientific approaches to the relationship between empirical evidence and theory-building, by discussing (a) the value of studying the practical reasoning procedures used for generating and interpreting historical evidence, and (b) the value of opening up new forms of reflective practice for practitioners within the field.

Introduction

Business historians work with all kinds of empirical materials to piece together the history of an industry, business system or organization: company archives, publicly-available archives, records of interviews, financial records, journalistic coverage, biographies, legal documents, governmental records, popular business books or magazines of the time, and so on. Business history enables us to use knowledge of the past to inform and educate scholars, students, business practitioners, policy-makers and the wider public about what happened and why – and perhaps even shape the future through this knowledge of the past. Thanks to the scholarship within the field, we now have a rich understanding of major historical events and trends which have shaped the business world of today, such as the Wall Street Crash, the divorce between control and ownership in large corporations and bank-industry relations.[1]

In recent years, the field has seen a series of calls for more engagement with the broader social science disciplines, including management and organization studies,[2] in an attempt to persuade business historians to move beyond descriptive case studies or industry analyses that simply present a chronology of events. For de Jong, Higgins and Driel,[3] business history needs to become a social *science*: wherein hypotheses can be tested, and rejected or refined, against objective empirical evidence. Business historians could, in their view, become like natural scientists, alike in methodology except for the fact that their 'objects of analysis' are not natural phenomena but social, cultural and political systems. Business history, for them, should not simply seek to *describe* what happened, but create general theories which can *explain* it, in the same way that physicists may use, say, the theory of gravity to predict the movement of objects in space.

This plea to develop business history as a positive science certainly mirrors the trend towards viewing business and management studies more generally as a budding, if somewhat underdeveloped, "science" that gains its value and legitimacy from its ability to generate reliable, objective and generalizable theories and models to explain how businesses and business systems work. A cursory glance over the leading international journals in business and management studies will also reveal the dominance of this positivistic logic in published research, with articles littered with variables, correlations and hypotheses. In this paper, we seek to lay out an alternative research agenda for the field of business history, grounded in ethnomethodology's alternative theoretical vision. Ethnomethodology – as we will go on to outline – seeks nothing short of a 'radical re-specification' of the human sciences[4], and offers

what we believe to be a rich source of theoretical insight for the development of new empirical and methodological perspectives in the field of business history.

The paper is structured as follows. We first outline what ethnomethodology is, its relationship to mainstream social science and, following Lynch[5], what an ethnomethodological approach to studying 'history-in-action' involves. Next, we outline how ethnomethodological history[6] differs from other approaches, drawing on illustrative excerpts from Lynch and Bogen's seminal book *The Spectacle of History*. In the main body of the paper, we lay out three distinct but related research directions for developing an ethnomethodological business history: (1) studying how historical events are recorded, (2) studying how versions of the past are assembled and used for practical reasoning and decision-making, and (3) opportunities for new forms of reflective practice and reflective methodology. We conclude by situating this research agenda within the field of business history and its implications for research methodology and theory development.

What is ethnomethodology? ... And what can it offer business history?

The field of ethnomethodology was founded by the work of Harold Garfinkel, an American sociologist, in the 1960s. Ethnomethodology is the study of the practical methods through which members of a particular social group accomplish social organization and generate social order. The term can usefully be broken down:

> "ethno" = a social or cultural group, whether as small as a family business or as large as an entire nation-state;

> "methodology" = the methods or procedures that competent members of that group use to go about their social life (such as the 'methods' used to form an orderly queue);

Ethnomethodology has been used to study a wide range of different social groups and settings, from classic early studies of coroners tasked with deciding the cause of death when presented with a dead body,[7] case-workers in a welfare agency,[8] to scientists at work in a laboratory.[9] Any - and indeed all - social practices can be studied, not just complex, professional or 'expert' settings such as these. Even apparently simple everyday actions such as crossing the road or forming a queue rely on member's use of 'ethno-methods' to make them happen and keep them 'orderly'.[10]

Ethnomethodology stands apart from its 'home' discipline of sociology in that it seeks to provide an alternative to mainstream functionalist sociology, specifically its assumptions about the social structures, facts and variables that are presumed to create social order. This applies both to the so-called 'macro' social order of the 'rules', 'norms' and 'values' purported to emanate from institutions such as the State, the family, the education system and religion, which are understood to govern society writ-large, and the so-called 'micro' social order of, say, a small number of people forming an orderly queue. Ethnomethodology addresses the same 'problem' or 'topic' as sociology – how social order is generated or transformed – but 'turns it on its head'. Rather than seeing people as 'judgemental dopes' or 'dupes' who are 'pushed and pulled' by social facts – such as a social rule, norm, or value – it views social order as the on-going, artful and knowledgeable *accomplishment* of members.[11] Functionalist approaches start with the premise that social facts exist as "objective facts" that have the same epistemological status as the facts and laws that natural scientists work with, then use them as an *explanatory resource* to explain how society 'functions' – as per the hypotheses about causal mechanisms that explain history sought by de Jong, Higgins and Driel's vision for business history. Ethnomethodologists, on the other hand, treat social facts as a *topic of study*. People are understood to employ their stock of social *knowledge* and *reasoning procedures* to produce the very 'social facts' that other sociological approaches treat as unproblematic.

Lynch and Bogen set out the analytical programme for an ethnomethodological perspective on history as follows:

> "If one assumes that no objective or historical knowledge can ever be "unconstructed", then to say that something held out to be a fact really is a social construction does not imply that the fact should be dismissed as an illusion or condemned as a product of political machinations ... We are more interested in the infrastructure of that construction, the practical methods through which the event was assembled, contested and stabilised."[12]

Two important notes are necessary here. First, this emphasis on the 'knowledge-ability' of actors must not be confused with claiming that members are always *conscious* of these ethno-methods. In fact, a central project of ethnomethodology is to explicate and document the typically *taken-for-granted* ethno-methods used by members. Hence, many insights can be gained from revealing the often taken-for-granted and typically un-explicated methods through which histories are compiled from diverse sources of evidence. Second, this

emphasis on the 'ongoing' and 'artful' accomplishment of social organization does not mean that 'anything goes': that any version of history will be accepted or ratified by others. Quite the contrary, ethnomethodology is centrally concerned with the more or less institutionalised and systematically unequal opportunities and rights of different social actors to produce accounts and have them accepted by others.[13] To paraphrase Mehan: while everyone presents their version of history as real, powerful people's versions are real for everyone in their consequences.[14]

Making Sense of Historical Events

How do historians make sense of historical evidence? How does this process of 'reading' inform the historical accounts they produce? As Tosh points out, sensemaking is a fundamental component of history, as historians attempt to not only describe but also *interpret* the past[15]. Box 1 provides an illustration of the equivocality of the kinds of historical evidence (oral testimony and documents) in Lynch and Bogen's analysis of the now infamous Iran-Contra affair of 1985-1987.

--- Insert Box 1 here ---

Taking Sides

Several analytical avenues are opened up when historians examine evidence such as that provided in Box 1. The first is to 'take sides': to explicitly (or implicitly) accept one party's version and 'ratify' it as the correct version, to be written into the historian's version of events. This is exactly what most histories of the Iran-Contra affair have done: North is depicted as either a calculating and manipulative liar, or an American hero and loyal servant of the state, or a combination thereof.[16] Cox follows this line of reasoning in his analysis of the financial scandal that engulfed the Royal Mail Shipping Group in the 1920s and the price fixing and market manipulation involved in the tin and pepper industries in the 1920s and 1930s[17]. Central characters such as John Howeson are described as calculating and manipulative individuals, responsible for false accounting and attempting to manipulate the market for tin for private financial gain. Any defence put forward by Howeson and others at the trial are not considered by the analyst, who effectively 'ratifies' the official version

produced by the judge at the trial. The events that took place in these business scandals (such as transfers of money, personal and political connections, investment decisions, secret deals, and so on), and the motives and vested interests underlying them, are treated as pre-existing social facts.

Ethnomethodology adopts a different stance, known as 'ethnomethodological indifference'. This does not mean being morally indifferent, but rather means remaining agnostic as regards to the adequacy or accuracy of members' versions and explanations of social phenomenon. Where more than one version exists, or indeed where the social group being studied uses versions which differ from their own, the analyst does not regard *any* version as impoverished, incomplete or inaccurate. For example, in Cox's analysis, Howeson's defence that his financial statements were true and fair and his financial dealings were 'honest trades' would not be dismissed by the analyst, as Cox does. Nor would the judge's verdict that Howeson was culpable of market manipulation and false accounting be 'ratified' by the analyst, as Cox also does. Rather, an ethnomethodological analysis would study what ethno-methods were used within the trial - or indeed by analysts thereafter - to establish which of these two versions would become 'social facts', and with what consequences for the individuals and industries so involved.

This does not make ethnomethodology an ethics-free or 'idealist' project. Analysts can, of course, have their own beliefs (e.g. about whether North was lying or Howeson was in fact heading up a cartel) and, moreover, their own ethical stance (e.g. about whether the arms dealing to Iran or price fixing in the pepper industry is morally defensible). The analyst can also be keenly interested in studying the inequalities, exploitation, power relations and sources of material gain that arise from the application of these ethno-methods. The focus is an *epistemological question* of how the social facts – the very facts that such material outcomes are founded on – are created: such as the social fact of whether Howeson is guilty of market manipulation or not. This involved two analytic steps. First, the analyst studies the methods through which *members themselves* handle issues associated with the veracity or reliability of versions – such as Howeson's defence. Second, they study how *members themselves* deal with the existence of more than one version – such as the methods through which the courts decided on a single version of the truth when faced with competing 'evidence' from different parties in Howeson's trial[18]. Pollner puts it simply: don't "argue" with the members (i.e. tell them they are wrong), study them.[19]

Meta-Explanations

Another analytic avenue for making sense of historical evidence is to remain agnostic with regards to the competing versions of past events, such as the competing versions of North's motives produced by Nields and North (versions (1) and (2) in Box 1), or the competing versions of Howeson's business dealings in Cox's analysis, and instead generate a 'meta-explanation' founded on an understanding of the wider political economy. Here, the analyst asks: which set of vested interests, or political ideologies, were being played out here? Box 2 illustrates how such explanations have been used in the case of the Iran-Contra affair analysed by Lynch and Bogen.

---- Insert Box 2 here ----

Schneider and Woolgar call these kinds of methods of explanation provided in Box 2 'technologies for ironic revelation':[20] systems through which certain versions are revealed as untrue, and 'hidden' truths or causal explanations are instead revealed. Neo-Marxist and psychoanalytic explanations are two good examples: what people say is true is 'revealed' as untrue and instead the product of false consciousness (in the case of Marxist explanations) or repressed desire or fantasy (in the case of psychoanalytic explanations). Foucauldian geneaological approaches also tend to follow this logic: members' versions are 'revealed' as products of normalisation by a power/knowledge regime, unbeknown to the people themselves[21]. The basic premise goes something like this: members do not really know what is going on and why things happen the way they do, but fortunately the professional social scientist does. The analytical (and, one could argue, ethical) implications of this method are profound: members' versions are simply replaced with the (supposedly superior) versions of the analyst.

Again, as members of society, ethnomethodologists can of course have their own explanations of what kinds of politics or vested interests act as "drivers" of history. In everyday life, apparently simple 'ironicising' reasoning procedures, such as the now infamous and well-used idiom from the 'Profumo affair', "He would say that, wouldn't he",[22] are powerful tools for discounting or dismissing versions as 'false'. Ethnomethodology does not forbid historians, nor anyone for that matter, from using these kinds of reasoning

procedures in their own lives. However, they do not form part of an ethnomethodological analysis.

As we highlighted above, ethnomethodology is not in the business of seeking to 'improve' members' own first-order accounts and explanations with more 'sophisticated' or 'complete' second-order academic accounts and explanations, such as the theories, hypotheses and causal mechanisms envisaged by de Jong et. al.[23] Rather, it is in the business of studying what methods the members of a setting use to produce, and settle on, their own explanations. In Cox's analysis of the pepper scandal, this would involve examining the methods through which the judge established the verdict that Howeson was guilty of financial manipulation: a feature missing from Cox's analysis.

The methodological challenge for an ethnomethodological history is as follows: rather than producing the analyst's version of 'what happened', the analyst studies how those involved in the historical events at the time, and those involved afterwards in "remembering" the past, handled questions of who or what should be credited as a reliable source to be ratified as the "truth", and who should be discounted as fabricating, falsifying, bending, twisting, spinning, or manipulating events, for whatever reason (e.g. political ideologies, material interests, etc.). Lynch and Bogen put it thus: "we want to investigate how the parties to the testimony employed the distinction between truth and lying, and how they articulated the opposition between politics and value neutrality".[24]

What documents can tell us: The non-transparency of evidence and 'applied deconstructionism'

Having touched on the way in which documents can be used to establish or contest histories and memories, specifically what the presence or absence of certain documents (e.g. absence-from-shredding – see Box 1) can be used to 'show', we can now illustrate the value of a central ethnomethodological principle: that any piece of 'evidence' does not have a singular meaning but relies on interpretation as 'indexing' or 'pointing' to part of some 'pattern': a process known as the 'documentary method of interpretation'. Box 3 shows how this applies not only to a document's presence or absence (see Box 1) but also its content.

--- Insert Box 3 here ---

In Cox's analysis of the pepper scandal, the judge was also faced with a similar task: establishing whether certain documents – in this case financial statements and accounts – were false. Records of the transfer of funds between various parties were subject to the exact same interpretative work: did they indicate perfectly legal trades and transfers, or illegal activities of a price-fixing cartel? While Cox opts for the latter in his analysis, an ethnomethodological analysis invites us instead to ask how this judgement was made and what 'documentary method of interpretation' (see Box 3) was used in this process. This is not a trivial matter, nor is it simply 'subjective judgement': the methods of interpretation used by practical historians (such as in courtrooms or inquiries) and professional historians (such as academic scholars or museum curators) are *methodical* reasoning procedures, which also have profound material and social consequences.

By not only highlighting but *explicating* the 'non-transparency of evidence', ethnomethodology offers one fruitful route through which business historians can operationalize Taylor, Bell and Cooke's arguments based on Ricoeur that "the archive is socially constructed through the historiographical operation"[25]. However, while ethnomethodology may appear to share the 'deconstructionist' principles of post-modern and post-structural approaches to history,[26] a crucial difference exists. Rather than attempting to 'de-construct' texts or testimony to reveal the ideas, interests and ideologies that underpin it, ethnomethodology seeks to study the members' own methods for de-constructing and re-constructing texts and testimonies. In short, ethnomethodology is interested in studying the methods of 'deconstructionists' such as North or Howeson:

> "While it may seem perverse to call [North] and his allies "applied deconstructionists", it is clear that ... [they] all worked doggedly (and with success) to problematize the committee's treatment of particular documents as factual evidence. ... Consequently, deconstruction does not identify our own methodological agenda, but it is instead a perspicuous feature of the struggle we describe."[27]

Ethnomethodology thereby offers potential for business historians as an empirical research programme that operationalizes Horwitz's idea of the 'non-transparency of evidence', enabling us to study precisely how 'documents' are transformed into 'reliable evidence'. As

such, ethnomethodology's value lies in showing how "empirical evidence" - the very thing that de Jong, Higgins and Driel call for in order to 'test' hypotheses and build theories - is created from archival records.

The work of Popp and Holt[28] on the entrepreneurial activities of businessmen John Shaw and Henry Crane in the early 1800's illustrates the interpretative work – or what Llewellyn and Hindmarsh[29] call 'inferential labour' – brought to bear on historical archives to produce versions of the past. Popp and Holt provide two different readings of letters written by the businessmen, in order to illustrate the potential of their alternative processual analytic framework. Archives, therefore, do not simply 'reveal' the past to us. They rely on a variety of interpretative methods to assemble and establish credible versions of what happened and why: methods which are brought into the foreground of the analysis by an ethnomethodological history, not left as an un-explicated and hidden background analytic resource. However, in contrast to Popp and Holt, rather than attempting to 'settle' these kinds of debates about what happened by putting forward alternative explanations, ethnomethodology invites business history to study precisely *how* these debates are settled by examining how 'candidate versions' get transformed into 'definitive facts' about the past. The work of Popp and Holt, for instance, could be advanced by showing precisely *how* they drew conclusions about the motivations, aims, relationships and strategies of businessmen Shaw and Crane through inferences derived from what they term "close textual readings".[30]

The shared intellectual history of Popp and Holt's phenomenological approach, given the influence of phenomenology on Garfinkel, also has implications for business history. The emphasis on understanding the 'world view'[31] of those historical actors we study is crucial: to understand the meanings, logics and reasoning of those actors rather than replace those 'emic' views with the 'etic' logic of hypothetico-deductive positivism. Following Popp and Holt, the aim is to understand how historical actors *themselves* made sense at the time, rather than imposing post-hoc reasoning and assuming the classic linear trajectory of economic rationality.

Sequencing, storytelling and social facts

At a most fundamental level, business histories – like all histories - rely upon the creation of a chronology of facts about past events: what happened, when, why and to what effect. In the case of the Iran-Contra affair studied by Lynch and Bogen, a series of 'bare facts' were

assembled by the official report: facts about who did what and when, when missiles were moved and where, what transfers of funds took place, and so on. Box 4 shows the significance of which events are included, and how events these are sequenced, for the types of historical stories which can be told.

--- Insert Box 4 here ---

The point of the comparison of chronologies in Box 4 is thus: to show how the apparently 'trivial' details such as which dates and actors are included, in which order, and what forms of knowledge and intention are imputed, are loaded with assumptions and inferences about the events and those involved. As Hansen rightly points out, chronologies of 'facts' only make sense when given a certain 'plot structure' of who did what, when and why[32]. Ethnomethodology therefore offers a way of empirically operationalizing Hayden White's work on the stylistics of historical narratives:

> "... history consists of the provisions of a plot structure for a sequence of events so that their nature as a comprehensible process is revealed by their figuration as a story of a particular kind."

Historians therefore work by collecting together records, sequencing them and judging them (e.g. as factual or fictional), with a view to their inclusion in a developing narrative. The job of the ethnomethodological historian, then, is not to decide on the most compelling narrative, or to produce their own narrative, or to avoid the 'pitfall' of the fiction-genre by producing a more 'objective' account. Rather, it is to study *how* chronologies are pieced together into a meaningful and coherent narrative, *how* certain chronologies are ratified as 'factual', and *how* others are written off as 'speculation', 'spin' or 'spoof'. As such, ethnomethodology contributes to the questions laid out by Hansen concerning how certain narratives come to dominate and how the sensemaking process stabilizes around certain versions of events[33]. Lynch puts it as follows:

> "... the fact that the historian or sociologist faces a daunting task when trying to use documentary collections to reconstruct systematic and coherent temporal or organizational patterns, becomes less interesting than the constitutive *work* of assembling documentary materials into coherent historical accounts."[34]

Business histories, such as the analysis of the pepper scandal produced by Cox[35], also rely on the production of chronologies of events involving the movement of people, money, information, and so on. For example, Cox highlights the significance of knowledge of a Treasury letter being made available the day before the scheduled sale of the Boots Pure Drug Company, to which he attributes the subsequent U-turn and back-pedalling of the Treasury's authorisation of the deal. Which actors knew what, and on what date, was central to Cox's construction of a compelling story of the pepper scandal. Apparently trivial differences in what events are linked, and in what order, are far from trivial in terms of the historical narrative constructed. An altogether different story could have been told if the supposed U-turn had been presented as an outcome of the Treasury's ('rational economic') assessment of the financial risk of the deal. A different story again could be written if political motives had also been excluded from the story: as in Cox's reference to the Treasury's desire to avoid political "embarrassment", given their concern about the political implications of the deal in relation to the mounting war debt[36]. The point is not that Cox is wrong to sequence events in that way, or attribute events to particular personal, political or financial motives. The aim is not to produce a different sequence, or supplant this explanation with a different set of motives and causal mechanisms. The aim of an ethnomethodological history is to enrich our understanding of *how* the social facts used by Cox to produce his explanation were produced.

A final note is relevant here. Analysing which version is believed and which version prevails does not mean that the historian is expected to 'get inside the minds' of those tasked with assembling official histories. Nor are historians asked to judge whether they themselves trust the accounts of people like North (in Lynch and Bogen's analysis) or Howeson (in Cox's analysis). Ethnomethodology does not seek to speculate about private cognitive processes; it studies inter-subjective and observable *social* processes. This is different to the analytic path taken by mainstream history, in which motivations and intentions are used to perform interpretative work, such as when Cox describes actors at the Treasury as ultimately "concerned" about war debt repayments, or describes the Chancellor of the Exchequer as

only "reluctantly" accepting advice to prioritise avoiding a devaluation of sterling[37]. Rather, an ethnomethodological analysis would enable us to analyse how *accounts* produced by members containing what C. Wright Mills called 'vocabularies of motive'[38] (e.g. having a "concern", doing something "reluctantly") are consequential for the events being played out.

This emphasis on members' 'public' accounts of motives and intentions is justified as follows: (a) these public accounts are all that members at the time had available to them, (b) these accounts are what informed their actions and decisions at the time (because they also cannot read other people's minds), (c) hence, these accounts are constitutive of - and consequential for - the unfolding history-in-action. Many sources are available for doing exactly this kind of analysis: back-room meetings to edit official reports or corporate documents, debates about who should have authorship rights, procedures for resolving different versions, decisions about what press statements should be released and when, what evidence should be 'made public' and which should be withheld as 'classified': all of these interactions would present rich opportunities (access permitting) for studying the ethno-methods of practical historians.

An Ethnomethodological Research Agenda

What, then, does adopting an ethnomethodological approach to business history offer to the field? In this section, we outline a future research agenda for business history that addresses three research questions: how archives and records are compiled; how versions of the past are assembled; and how historians can learn from explicating their own historical ethno-methods.

1. Archives and records

Ethnomethodology treats any collection of records, however disparate, accidental or deliberately assembled, as products of the ethno-methods of the social groups who created and subsequently collected, organized and used them. This opens up some interesting avenues for business history. Two key insights and research directions will be considered here: studying members' ethno-methods for categorising, classifying and recording; and studying the meaning of the presence or absence of records themselves.

First, a fruitful line of research can be directed to studying members' practices for creating records. It is a well-established idea that archives do not tell us what went on in the past;

rather, they tell us what that social group in question deemed suitable for recording (and what to omit from the record) and in what format, for what audience, and so on[39]. Records of wars, laws and taxes were collected by sovereigns and governments because that is what was deemed necessary and useful to record: other things were deemed 'trivial' or lost forever because no records were kept. Other documents which did exist – particularly ones that were thought to threaten the preferred world-view of those in power in particular – are destroyed or edited. Some are copied and shared widely, others are kept hidden away.

The crucial question for historians who want to understand the meaning of archives, then, is to understand *how* this record-making, record-keeping, record-destroying, record-editing and record-sharing was undertaken. Ethnomethodology is therefore useful for understanding the methods through which members of a social group – such as a company, an industry or a government department – decide what is recorded, and how, why, when and by whom. Garfinkel's study of record-keeping practices in a clinic shows that records should not be seen as simply records of things that happened, but rather indications of the kinds of things their authors and users need them for, such as making (and sharing) inferences and decisions.[40] As a result, there may be 'good' organizational reasons for apparently 'bad' records.

In business, for instance, records of meetings are obviously not mere reflections of what was said, either because certain discussions are excluded from the minutes or because an arbiter decides on what ought to be recorded. Hence, business historians can benefit from understanding members' ethno-methods for deciding what is put in the official records or minutes (and what is 'off the record'), and how those records are shared and used subsequently. Organizations also actively 'create the past' by using records, such as corporate images, strategy documents or minutes of previous meetings.[41] The ethno-methods for studying the 'fossilization' of certain accounts into the organizational 'memory' would therefore also be a fruitful target for inquiry.

Meehan's ethnomethodological study of record-keeping practices by police officers showed that officers deliberately shared some records with other agencies, but deliberately withheld others, again for 'good organizational reasons'.[42] Some information contained in records was also deliberately designed to make it useless or unintelligible to outsiders, such as in court. Moreover, the recording and categorisation of certain charges – required for official statistics of different types of crime to be generated - was also manipulated in order to maintain relationships with particular sections of the community, improve relationships with other

government agencies, or increase the likelihood of prosecution. Understanding what records can tell us therefore requires an understanding of the meanings and purposes of those who created them: precisely what an ethnomethodological history seeks to uncover through understanding the reasoning procedures of the social group in question.

As Meehan's study shows us, numerical records are no different to written records, making ethnomethodology valuable for 'opening the black box' of numerical records such as accounting calculations or official statistics: the focus of histories by scholars such as Ezzamel, Harrison and Lampland[43]. In fact, some of Garfinkel's key insights arise from his studies of how numbers such as official statistics are generated[44] - a research programme now advanced by the field of study known as 'ethno-statistics'.[45] The value of an ethnomethodological history, then, lies in studying the ethno-methods through which 'official records' – whether written or numerical – are constructed.

2. *Assembling the past: practical procedures*

The task of the professional historian, as we noted above, is to piece together historical events through whatever records are at hand. However, other actors and groups are also 'practical historians': inquiry committees, lawyers, judges and juries, police officers, doctors, social workers, journalists, authors of biographies and auto-biographies, lay storytellers, and so on. These actors have their own distinct ethno-methods for assembling histories of past events from memories, artefacts, oral traditions and written records, and also their own distinct practical purposes and goals. Two future research agendas will be discussed here simultaneously: studying how versions of the past are assembled from diverse records; and studying the practical tasks and decisions for which those histories are used.

Ethnomethodological studies of the criminal justice system – including the work of police officers, coroners, lawyers, judges and juries[46] – are particularly illuminating for historians because these professionals also routinely deal with records of past events and have to – by *necessity* – assemble them into a meaningful version (account) of what happened and why. One of the key challenges faced by judges and historians alike is how to handle competing versions of the same past event. Pollner's study of traffic court judges offers a particularly rich theoretical resource.[47] Pollner examined the 'reasoning procedures' of judges dealing with competing accounts (what he called 'reality disjunctures') in written records and testimonies, between, say, defendant and police officer, or defendant and witness. Significant

judicial decisions – to convict or to acquit – rested upon the reasoning procedures judges used to assess who is lying and who is telling the truth, which records are accurate and reliable, and which fragments from the scene constitute sufficient 'evidence' to support one particular version. In the same way, governmental committees and inquiries, such as the Iran-Contra inquiry studied by Lynch and Bogen or the Danish Banking Committee studied by Hansen[48], also rely on a set of reasoning procedures for deciding what constitutes reliable and credible testimony, memory, records and evidence, in addition to methods for selecting between competing versions. Decisions not only about the fate of individuals but also entire industries – in the case of parliamentary inquiries into the banking crisis, for instance – rest upon the use of these reasoning procedures, making them important sites for business historians to study 'history-in-the-making'.

Harrison's analysis of false accounting in the Soviet Union in the 1940s to 1960s offers a good case in point.[49] Soviet courts and party investigation committees clearly employed a range of ethno-methods to establish where false accounting has taken place in the production quotas and plans submitted by factory or farm directors. Yet we do not know, from Harrison's analysis, what these methods were. Ethnomethodology therefore invites us to push Harrison's analysis further: how did these courts and committees decide which of the many reported cases to investigate? How did they distinguish between 'petty' fraud and 'marginal' tinkering and more serious false accounting? How did they establish whether multiple consistent accounts were evidence of corroboration of facts, or collusion, concealment, bribery or intimidation? Addressing these questions would lead to significant insights into how historical events play out, including pivotal moments of business success and failure. The case of the apparently 'falsified' prospectus produced to entice investment by Lord Kylsant, director of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company in the 1930s, shows how records and accounts treated as 'accurate' can be later deemed 'false'.[50] This transformation of social facts had consequences not only for the individuals involved (Kyslant was in fact jailed for misreporting) and the organization (the company was soon liquidated) but also wider reaching consequences for the whole business community (changes to the regulation and auditing of business in the UK later ensued). The ethno-methods used for interpreting documents such as accounts are therefore not a matter of 'subjective' or 'idiosyncratic' introspection, but rather constitute *methodical* and *consequential* procedures for establishing the 'facts of the matter'.

The insights from ethnomethodology reside not only in how individual records are made sense of by various social groups, but crucially how collections of records are made meaningful through the use of the 'documentary method of interpretation' discussed earlier. This concept refers to the way interpretations are made of individual 'instances' – such as a single account or record – by viewing it as 'indexing' or 'pointing to' a wider 'pattern' (see Box 3). The method is important because the same 'instance' (e.g. a record) can be made sense of in different ways by interpreting it as an instance of a different 'pattern'. What this means for business history is that historical records therefore do not 'contain' their meaning; their meaning is generated through their interpretation as part of some 'pattern', a point that links to Horwitz's idea of the 'non-transparency of evidence' discussed earlier.

An ethnomethodological history invites us to pose two simple but powerful questions: what documentary method is used by various 'practical historians' when assembling 'patterns' that connect past events? And, most importantly, what difference does the method thus used make to the people and institutions involved? Cicourel[51] and Sudnow[52] show how judges and police officers used the documentary method of interpretation in decisions about young offenders. The self-same evidence – such as a knife found in the defendant's pocket by the arresting officer – could be used by the prosecution to put forward one 'pattern' (e.g. intentional act of criminality), and by the defence to put forward an alternative 'pattern' (e.g. what all gang members do). Significant material outcomes flowed from which 'pattern' was used: kids were either locked up, sent to a psychiatrist or let off with a caution.

Box 3 showed how Oliver North challenged the 'pattern' used by the Iran-Contra committee members to make sense of historical records (namely, that certain documents 'proved' his involvement in key events), and attempted to supplant it with his version of the 'correct pattern' through which to interpret that same 'evidence'. Significant material outcomes also flowed from this historical 'pattern-making': North was not prosecuted for his role in the events (and was instead transformed by some into a 'national hero'), ambiguities about 'what really happened' remained, and the President was largely unscathed by the scandal. Ethnomethodology thereby directs attention to a new set of questions: not which pattern is 'correct' and should be used by the historian to piece together the evidence themselves, but rather which patterns were used by the members of the social group themselves: and with what consequences.

3. Reflective practice and the explication of ethno-methods

One of the most basic questions for a historian looking at a historical record is 'what does this record mean?', or more specifically 'what can it tell us about the people, events or time in which it was created?' Ethnomethodology directs us to understanding meanings-in-situ: what the document meant, and was used for, by the people who create and use it. Interpretations of 'what a record tells us' must be grounded in this understanding of what the record meant for members (and was used for) at the time, not a retrospective reconstruction or rationalisation. While historians cannot 'go back in time' to study the people who create and use them, they nonetheless have to make certain *assumptions* about what the record 'means' in order to piece together a meaningful version of history.

The crucial element for a more reflective[53] business history is the *explication* of these usually hidden assumptions, or 'reasoning procedures'. Two illustrative examples may be useful here. Ethnomethodological studies of doctors[54] have shown that medical records 'make sense' not through the inscriptions themselves (words, symbols, numbers, etc.). Rather, it is their sequential placement down or across the page (i.e. in the sequence 'patient presentation of symptom' – 'medical diagnosis' – 'prescription/recommendation'), that gives them their meaning. Indeed, the same words, but in a different sequential order, mean something very different. Apparently innocuous and meaningless elements within the records, such as quotation marks, means something very different to doctors: rather than quoted speech, it denotes a medical judgement of diagnostic scepticism towards what the patient has reported.

Meehan's study, discussed above, illustrates another crucial point[55]. Meehan showed how police officers used unofficial 'running records' to make sense of the appropriate actions for dealing with 'juvenile offenders'. These records were not 'officially' supposed to be used, and were only 'decipherable' by those knowledgeable in the police sub-culture and language, but were nonetheless regarded by officers as an authoritative source of information for making decisions – such as whether an arrested youth should be released without charge, cautioned or prosecuted.

Historians examining archives of these kinds of police records and medical records could easily 'miss' the practical meaning of such records that they had for their creators, and 'read in' a different meaning altogether. Medical records could be taken as a random series of medical notes, not a meaningful sequence in which it was the sequential placement, not the words themselves, which mattered most. Quotation marks could be understood as simply

reports of what a patient said, not a display of professional scepticism. Similarly, a historian faced with the apparently 'meaningless' and 'unofficial' notes shared between police officers could easily put them to one side, and focus instead on the apparently more 'important' and 'official' records in each file. Hence, the reasoning procedures of the historian – how they reasoned which records were most 'reliable' (in the police officer's case), and what the record 'means' and 'tells us' (in the doctor's case) – need to be made explicit for others in the field to know (or perhaps even challenge) the 'readings' made by the researcher.

Our discussion of Lynch and Bogen's study has also showed us that it is not only the content of records that are used by historians ('professional' or 'practical') to assemble histories; it is also their very presence or absence. The *absence* of records that the Iran-Contra investigators expected to find was also subject to different 'patterns': was the absence of records to indicate a pattern of deliberate acts of shredding to avoid culpability, a pattern of routine and legitimate shredding, a pattern of poor recall, or a pattern of no such document existing in the first place (see Box 1)? These are central questions for historians: what can the presence or absence of an object or record 'show'? This question is all the more pertinent when the archives that business historians use are partial or fragmented. The threat to valuable archives posed by events such as the potential private sale of the collections of the Wedgewood Museum and the proposed takeover of EMI Music are very real. Should these archives be split up, destroyed or distributed across various private collectors, business historians trying to piece together the story of these important companies would face a difficult task without the records and objects being kept together, to enable a 'pattern' to be discerned from seeing them in their original context.

Ethnomethodology shows that establishing a 'pattern' relies on interpretative procedures for deciding what the presence or absence of an object or document tells us about historical events. Zimmerman's[56] ethnomethodological study of a public welfare agency showed how welfare application assessors did not always view the absence of a record (such as a record of a job application being made) as evidence that an event *did not* take place. Nor did they always view the presence of a record (such as a written record of a job application) as evidence that an event *did* take place: their reasoning procedures of 'professional scepticism' led them on occasion to question whether documents had been falsified. And all for another practical and highly consequential task: distributing scarce funds to 'legitimate' rather than 'dishonest' claimants.

What does this mean for the development of a more reflective business history? Ethnomethodology directs us towards explicating the often hidden or taken-for-granted ethno-methods through which business historians, faced with an archive of records and evidence, decides what the presence or absence of certain pieces means. Only by knowing what procedures the historian used to make sense of the absence of a record (e.g. as evidence that the record was accidentally misplaced, deliberately removed or never created in the first place) can other scholars in the field have the opportunity to put forward alternative 'readings' of the same absence. These insights can also be used to inform pedagogy, to teach students of business history the methods through which histories are produced.

Letting go of the idea of a single, definitive and objective "truth", and following Hayden White in viewing history as a 'narrative'[57], does not mean that 'anything goes' and any version of the past can, or should, be supported by the academic field. As ethnomethodology has shown, all social groups have their own more or less institutionalised procedures for deciding a version is to be treated as 'good enough for all practical purposes' and when to stop the process of deconstruction because it is time to 'settle' upon a version (or set of versions). This process could be enabled, we propose, by taking the often hidden and private reasoning procedures of business historians and making them public for other scholars to see and reflect upon. In contrast to Popp and Holt's idea that the intentions, thought-processes, motivations, strategies and objectives of actors can be "inferred through close textual readings",[58] we propose that business history can instead benefit from revealing how its scholars made those 'readings' in the first place. In short, what Lynch and Bogen have done for the 'practical historians' of the Iran-Contra committee, we propose can also be done for the 'professional historians' of the field of business history.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to develop a research agenda for business history that is informed by ethnomethodology's 're-specification' of sociology as a "science", in light of the plea by de Jong, Higgins and Driel to develop business history as a positive science underpinned by objective evidence-based theory development.[59] Ethnomethodology rejects the idea of studying society using the positivistic methods of natural science in favour of studying the underlying practical methods through which social facts are produced. For the field of business history, ethnomethodology directs us to studying the methods through which

'histories' are produced through the organization of diverse sources of evidence and inference about past events.[60] As such, this paper contributes to a wider body of work that seeks to move away from objectivist and empiricist approaches towards a social constructionist agenda that recognises the 'epistemological work' involved in the crafting of histories and sensemaking about the past.[61]

In what follows, we will conclude by discussing how an ethnomethodological history can be taken forward in three ways: (a) as an empirical programme of research, (b) as a source of theory development, and (c) as a methodological resource for engaging in reflective practice. As an empirical programme of research, ethnomethodological history invites empirical investigation into *how*, and *to what practical purposes*, history is produced and used by different actors in different settings. Recent work on the genre of corporate history in written texts[62], interview-based studies of corporate historians[63] and ethnographic investigations of the use of history during periods of organizational change[64] illustrate how "history-in-action" could be studied empirically. Recent theoretical work on the role of history in institutional theory[65], and the notion of corporate history as a strategic resource[66], also provide fertile ground for theoretical connection with our argument here, particularly in relation to the argument that history is a "malleable construct"[67] that is both a medium and outcome of interpretative processes.

Ethnomethodology has informed some important theoretical advancements in business history already, even though it is rarely mentioned, through its intellectual influence on the field of science and technology studies, actor-network theory and performativity[68], strategizing and strategic sensemaking[69] and the study of accounting and accountability[70]. This literature has opened up the 'black box' of accounting, management and business to study how 'facts' of various kinds are assembled. Just as MacKensie seeks to develop 'ethnoaccountancy' to study the methods through which financial markets and accountancy calculations are assembled[71], our aim here is to invite business historians to develop an ethnomethodological approach which studies how business histories are assembled. Following Deidre Boden's contribution to organization studies and her approach to studying 'organization-in-action'[72], we propose that a core contribution to business history can be made through explicating the practical actions (ethno-methods) through which versions of past events are worked up, worked on and eventually 'settled'. As ethnomethodology involves the study of how people "make sense" through the methodical deployment of 'reasoning procedures', the ethnomethodological history we propose here thereby offers a

complementary (but distinct) framework which advances existing approaches to studying historical sensemaking founded in the social psychology of scholars such as Weick and the narrative approach of scholars such as White.[73] That said, much potential also exists for cross-fertilisation between these distinct approaches. Another fruitful avenue for future work lies at the interface between ethnomethodology and discourse analysis, to study how talk and text are employed in processes of meaning-making and practical reasoning.[74]

What kinds of research methodology are appropriate for the ethnomethodological agenda we are advocating here? Ethnomethodology is not a research 'method' within sociology, akin to, say, using interviews or examining documents. However, it does have clear preferences for certain types of methods and certain types of data. Given its aim to recover and reveal the ethno-methods used in a particular setting, ethnomethodology has a strong preference for naturalistic data (that is, data collected from events and settings which would have occurred without the researcher being there), coupled with close observation of the setting, through ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography[75] and/or records of real-time interaction using audio- or video-recording. These methods are particularly useful for studying the work of 'strategic historians' of various kinds, such as senior managers who seek to remember, forget, invoke or suppress memories of the past strategically - to legitimate particular courses of action[76], or corporate historians who create versions of the past strategically - to sell products, manage the corporation's public image or to motivate employees[77].

Ethnomethodology rejects, and seeks to "re-specify", not only the kind of quantitative positivistic variables-and-outcomes types of methodology, based on sampling techniques and correlations between statistics of various kinds, as advocated by de Jong, Higgins and Driel, but also many forms of qualitative enquiry aimed at uncovering 'meanings' embedded in letters, diaries, artefacts and documents. By "re-specify" what is meant is to take the second-order constructs generated by social scientists – which purport to 'improve' the theories that members themselves use by making them more sophisticated, more scientific or more complete – and replace them with a careful and detailed study of the first-order 'theories-in-use' that members themselves use to accomplish what they are doing. The reason is simple but powerful: if the theories produced by social scientists (e.g. Marxist theory, psychoanalysis, Foucauldian genealogy, post-colonial theory, and so on) are not the ones that members use, then they are not constitutive of, and consequential for, the setting itself. Hence, an ethnomethodological history invites us to the theories-in-use deployed by historical

actors – their assumptions about what exists in the world, and how various elements relate to one another – because it is these that make up the very phenomena we seek to study.

Pollner calls for a 'non-ironic' sociology[78] which seeks to treat members' own accounts, reasoning and explanations in their own right, and on their own terms, without 'ironicising' them as somehow limited, incomplete or inadequate when compared to the 'complete', 'objective' and 'sophisticated' versions produced by professional social scientists – of the kind advocated by de Jong, Higgins and Driel. In the case of an ethnomethodological history, this means studying the accounts, reasoning procedures and explanations of historical actors in their own terms, as they produced them and as handled by them, rather than seeking to 'replace' them with the historians own version of what happened and why. For example, rather than seeking to identify the underlying motives, allegiances and interests of various actors involved in a significant historical event, an ethnomethodological history would study the accounts and explanations about their motives, allegiances and interests produced during the course of events themselves, as present in various sources (e.g. company statements or reports, autobiographies, journalistic reports, political debates, witness interviews, etc.). Moreover, as we have argued, ethnomethodology can also be 'turned on ourselves' to study the methods that we, as professional business historians, use to make official histories. As such, ethnomethodology invites a more reflective form of inquiry which reveals precisely *how* the business histories we produce were produced: not with a view to 'conceding' the influence of our own interpretive procedures in order to overcome the influence of 'subjectivity' and in so doing develop a more 'objective' historical science, but rather with a view to explicating the 'methodical' foundations of our field.

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Box 1. Making Sense of Historical Evidence: The Case of the Iran-Contra Affair.

What does doing ethnomethodological history involve? And what insights can it bring to the field of business history? Lynch and Bogen's book *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text and Memory at the Iran-Contra Affair* offers an exemplary case study of the practices and procedures (ethno-methods) of the interrogators and witnesses at the hearings of the Joint House-Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaragua Opposition held in 1987. The historical import of the Iran-Contra affair is not in doubt: it threatened to bring down the President of the United States, and was a televised 'spectacle' of interrogation involving not only the witnesses and 'accused' but also the entire organizational system of security and surveillance and the political and military apparatus of the whole country.

The ethnomethodological approach of Lynch and Bogen studies the methods through which oral testimony and written documents were solicited, located, verified, interpreted, challenged, certified, rejected and stabilized by the parties involved. Rather than attempt to produce their own version of what happened and why, as most conventional historians do, the authors instead examine the ethno-methods of the 'practical historians': the politicians who served as members of the bi-partisan Select Committee charged with the task of producing a final, definite version of "what happened". Understanding these ethno-methods is important because it was this 'definitive' version which was subsequently taken up in the history books as *the* history of the affair. Thus, from learning about the methods used by these 'interrogators', we can learn much about the work of business historians who are charged with the task of producing histories of business organizations and systems.

Like all professional historians, the committee's challenge was not only to make sense of the documents retrieved, but also what the *absence* of certain documents they would have expected to find reveals about the events in question. Piecing together a history involves not only compiling a chronology of key events and key actors, but also some form of explanation or meaningful narratives about who did what, and why. For example, two different versions were put forward to explain the absence of certain key documents by committee counsel John Nields and Oliver North, the White House National Security Council (NSC) staff member implicated in the scandal. According to Nields, the absent documents were shredded the day before the investigators' raid in a deliberate criminal act of evidence concealment. According to North, however, no such conspiracy took place, and shredding was undertaken as a routine matter and on a daily basis, and for legitimate motives: namely, protecting the interests of the country and its overseas agents. North also goes on to attribute a set of motives to his interrogators by accusing Nields and the whole committee of conducting a political "show-trial" designed to undermine the Republican party, create a convenient scapegoat, and put the security of the United States at risk. In short, two versions of politics are in competition here:

(1) Nields version: North is lying about his knowledge of shredding the documents to protect himself (personal motive e.g. avoiding a jail-term) and/or others (party-political allegiances e.g. protecting the Republican party).

(2) North version: He is not lying; he cannot remember shredding because he shredded daily and routinely and for good reasons, and the interrogation itself is part of a political conspiracy to undermine public confidence in the President.

An ethnomethodological history would study ethno-methods used by the various parties involved to establish a single definitive 'social fact' about key events such as this. An ethnomethodological history would ask: how do

some versions get discredited and others get credited with the status of 'facts'? This task is not only of scholarly import but of very practical import, because it was not only the moral standing of the characters written into the history books which was at stake here, but also a possible impeachment of the President or a prison sentence for North. Hence, an ethnomethodological history is also able to trace the material consequences of the social facts produced by 'practical historians', including its effects at the level of individuals, groups, institutions and even entire nation-states.

Box 2. Making Sense of Historical Evidence: Ironicising and Meta-Explanations.

What meta-explanations could be provided by historians to explain the events of the Iran-Contra affair analysed by Lynch and Bogen? Many avenues are available to historians using this explanatory path. Nields could be portrayed as secretly allied to a Democratic campaign to oust the Republican President (Reagan), using his questioning to undermine faith in the current government and prove a 'conspiracy' to protect the presidency from association with illegal acts. North could also be presented as a pawn in a Republican mission to covertly approve covert arms sales, evidence of their all-too-close relationship with big business and private arms companies and their anti-communist campaign to overthrow 'unfavourable' regimes. This avenue may not involve 'taking sides' or 'arguing with the members' explicitly, rather it supplants members' versions with the historian's preferred explanation of who did what and why. Written records and reports, as well as oral testimony, can also be interpreted and 'explained' this way. Compare, for example, this apparently trivial but important difference in these two descriptions of a historical report:

"The Congress report of 1987"

"The Democratically-controlled Congress report"[79]

The latter does what Pollner calls an 'ironicising' of the account contained within the document, by claiming that the account should not be taken as a literal, faithful, neutral or reliable reflection of what really happened, but rather treated 'ironically' as a politically-laden and biased account. (The ironicising premise being that Democrats had a vested interest in undermining and ousting the Republican President, Reagan, making their report unreliable as evidence).

Box 3. What can documents tell us about historical events? Indexicality and the documentary method of interpretation.

What can an ethnomethodological history tell us about how historical documents are interpreted and transformed into social facts? Lynch and Bogen's analysis reveals the ethno-methods used to scrutinise documents in the Iran-Contra affair, such as internal memos and communications, in order to establish stable social facts about what happened. The committee faced a practical challenge: to decide which documents were to be treated as evidence of actual events that happened and which were 'faked' or 'planted', for reasons such as providing a 'decoy' and 'false lead' during covert military operations, or avoiding 'giving the game away' if classified documents should be leaked to 'enemy states'. Each document was methodically scrutinised, and witnesses interrogated, to assess its 'authenticity'. Once this process was underway, and certain documents were ratified as not-faked, or not-deliberately-misleading, these would then be used to ratify future documents through cross-referencing of dates, locations and persons, in an on-going process of 'working up' the facts-of-the-matter.

For example, when presented with documents that stated he had authorised certain transactions, North produced an alternative 'reading' by claiming they were fakes designed to enable 'plausible deniability': the deliberate crafting of documents to enable officials such as the President to 'plausibly deny' knowledge of certain questionable (and possibly impeachable) activities. North used the 'plausible deniability' method to great effect, leaving much ambiguity and uncertainty about whether the supposedly 'cast iron' evidence of events was even evidence that those events had in fact taken place. Like the 'ironicising' that social scientists and historians often undertake when faced with versions produced by members, North also applied this same 'reasoning procedure' here by claiming that documents do not 'literally' describe events that took place and actually conceal the real events, and thus should be treated 'ironically':

> "... witnesses can further destabilize the documentary record by formulating the possibility that the evidentiary documents at the interrogator's disposal were left behind under the auspices of a hidden ironic design. The suggestion that "original" documents may have been designed ironically furnishes what is at best an equivocal archive that, when uncharitable interpretations are raised, can readily be denied by suggesting alternative readings of the same evidence."

Interpreting what a document 'tells us' thereby relies upon a version of the circumstances of its production: who produced it, for what purpose, with what future scenarios in mind, and so on. The ethnomethodological concepts of 'indexicality' and the 'documentary method of interpretation' are particularly valuable for studying the production of history: through the production of alternative versions of these "contexts" or "circumstances of production", the self-same document can be 'read' as '*documenting*', 'pointing to' or '*indexing*' different social facts.

Box 4. Emplotment, fact sequencing and historical storytelling

Lynch and Bogen analyse how histories of the Iran-Contra affair vary in apparently minor but significant ways in their chronologies of 'basic facts';[80] which dates and events were significant enough to be included, the sequential placement of events (what followed what), the naming of certain organizations or individuals involved, details of which decisions were attributed to which actor, and so on. Even the actors themselves, not only the historians piecing together the story after-the-fact, took a great interest in the details of the chronology being assembled. North, for example, is reported to have insisted that an initial CIA document that contained the phrase "We in the CIA ... [did not know that Hawk missiles had been shipped to Iran]" was changed to "No-one in the U.S. Government ...": enabling the NSC (the organization he worked for at the time) to 'plausibly deny' knowledge of the activity.

An illustration may be useful here. Compare the following accounts, which could all more-or-less plausibly have been written about the "shredding affair" discussed in Box 1:

"The investigators visited NSC head-office on 21st November 1986 to collect documentary evidence."	No implication of criminality or culpability.
"North shredded a series of important documents on 20th November, the day before the investigators arrived on 21st November."	Implication of criminality or culpability attached to a single individual
"Documents were shredded before the investigators arrived."	Agent/agency responsible for shredding is omitted,[81] diffusing or removing culpability.
"Certain documents the committee expected to recover could not be located during the investigation."	Intentional destruction through shredding not mentioned, leaving open the possibility of being lost, stolen, or never in existence in the first place.
"The President ordered the shredding of the documents in a secret meeting with NSC staff."	Naming of individual – President - implicated as responsible, but whole organization NSC rather than North personally also culpable.
"The President's advisors approved the NSC's shredding of the documents."	Culpability of President left ambiguous – dependent on further interpretation of President's personal responsibility for actions of his staff.

Notes

[1] Kobrak & Wilkins, 2011; Chandler, 1990; Capie and Collins, 1999.

[2] Clark & Rowlinson, "The treatment of history in organization studies"; Kieser & Üsdiken, "Introduction: History in Organisation Studies"; Jacques, "History, historiography and organization studies".

[3] de Jong, Higgins and van Driel, "New Business History?"

[4] Button, *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences.*

[5] Lynch, "Ethnomethodology and History".

[6] We use the term 'ethnomethodological history' rather than 'ethnohistory' to differentiate between the use of the latter term as an established sub-discipline for the anthropological study of culture from a historical perspective, as found in established journals such as *Ethnohistory* and *American Society for Ethnohistory* (see Lynch, 2009, p. 88 for a discussion).

[7] Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.

[8] Zimmerman, "Record-keeping and the intake process".

[9] Lynch, *Art and Artifact in Laboratory Science*.

[10] Rouncefield & Tolmie, *Ethnomethodology at Work*.

[11] Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.

[12] Lynch & Bogen, *The Spectacle of History*, 7.

[13] Molotch & Boden, "Talking Social Structure".

[14] Source: Potter, *Representing Reality*, 57.

[15] Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, see also Hansen, "Making sense of financial crisis and scandal".

[16] Cf. Draper's 1991 monograph *A Very Thin Line*, the Congress report (published 18/11/87), the 1987 U.S. News & World Report, and the Tower Commission Report (published 02/12/87)

[17] Cox, "Business on Trial".

[18] Pollner, *Mundane Reason.*

[19] Gubrium & Holstein, "Don't argue with the members".

[20] Schneider & Woolgar, "Technologies of ironic revelation".

[21] See e.g. Peci & Vieira, "The discursive formation of a scientific field".

[22] See Edwards & Potter, *Discursive Psychology*, 118, 158.

[23] de Jong, Higgins and van Driel, "New Business History?"

[24] Lynch & Bogen, *The Spectacle of History*, 23.

[25] Taylor et al, "Business history and the historiographical operation", 156.

[26] Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*.

[27] Lynch & Bogen, *The Spectacle of History*, 14.

[28] Popp & Holt, "The presence of entrepreneurial opportunity"; Popp & Holt, "Entrepreneurship and being".

[29] Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, "The order problem".

[30] Popp & Holt, "The presence of entrepreneurial opportunity", 11.

[31] Op cit.

[32] Hansen, "Making sense of financial crisis and scandal".

[33] Hansen, "Making sense of financial crisis and scandal", 676.

[34] Lynch & Bogen, *The Spectacle of History*, 23.

[35] Cox, "Business on Trial".

[36] Cox, "Business on Trial", 828.

[37] Cox, "Business on Trial", 827, 828.

[38] Mills, "Situated Accounts"; see also Whittle & Mueller, "The language of interests".

[39] Tosh, *The Pursuit of History.*

[40] Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology,* Chapter 6.

[41] See e.g. Foster et al., "Giving voice to the archives".

[42] Meehan, "Record-keeping practices".

[43] Ezzamel, "Order and accounting"; Lampland, "False numbers".

[44] Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, *Ethnomethodology's Program.*

[45] Gephart, "Ethnostatistics".

[46] See e.g. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology;* Pollner, *Mundane Reason;* Sudnow, "Normal Crimes"; Meehan, "Record-keeping practices".

[47] Pollner, *Mundane Reason.*

[48] Lynch & Bogen, *The Spectacle of History;* Hansen, "Making sense of financial crisis and scandal".

[49] Harrison, "Forging success".

[50] Davies & Bourn, "Lord Kylsant".

[51] Cicourel, *Method and measurement in sociology*.

[52] Sudnow, "Normal Crimes".

[53] We use the term 'reflective' rather than 'reflexive', following Housley and Fitzgerald (2000), given the specific meaning of the latter term in ethnomethodology.

[54] Heath & Luff, "Documents and professional practice".

[55] Meehan, "Record-keeping practices".

[56] Zimmerman, "Record-keeping and the intake process".

[57] White, *Metahistory*.

[58] Popp & Holt, "The Presence of Entrepreneurial Opportunity", 11.

[59] See Cicourel, *Method and measurement in sociology*; Button, *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences.*

[60] Coulon, *Ethnomethodology*.

[61] See e.g. Hansen, "Making sense of financial crisis and scandal"; Rowlinson et al., "Social remembering and organizational memory"; Rowlinson & Delahaye, "The cultural turn in business history"; Delahaye et al., "The genre of corporate history"; Suddaby, Foster & Trank "Rhetorical history".

[62] Delahaye et al., "The genre of corporate history".

[63] Foster et al., "Giving voice to the archives"; Suddaby, "Institutions and history".

[64] Ybema, "The invention of transitions".

[65] Suddaby, Foster & Mills, "Historical institutionalism".

[66] Suddaby, Foster & Trank, "Rhetorical history".

[67] Suddaby, Foster & Trank, "Rhetorical history", 147.

[68] MacKensie, *An Engine, Not a Camera*; Lampland, "False numbers"; Peci & Vieira, "The discursive formation of a scientific field".

[69] Mueller et al., "Politics and strategy practice".

[70] For example, Ezzamel, "Order and accounting".

[71] MacKensie, *An Engine, Not a Camera*; "Opening the black boxes of global finance".

[72] Boden, *The Business of Talk*.

[73] For an overview of narrative and sensemaking see Hansen, "Making sense of financial crisis and scandal".

[74] See e.g. Mueller et al., "Politics and strategy practice"; Bolander & Sandberg, "How employee selection decisions are made in practice".

[75] Randall & Rouncefield, "Ethnography".

[76] Schultz & Hernes, "A temporal perspective on organizational identity"; Ybema, "The invention of transitions".

[77] Suddaby, Foster & Trank, "Rhetorical history"; Foster et al., "Giving voice to the archives".

[78] Pollner, *Mundane Reason*, see also Schneider & Woolgar, "Technologies of ironic revelation".

[79] Interestingly enough, this latter version is found in the Wikipedia history of the affair, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Contra_affair.

[80] Lynch & Bogen, *The Spectacle of History*, see in particular 79-88.

[81] See Lynch & Bogen, *The Spectacle of History*, 41.