Influential Traditions
Ethnomethodology

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Introduction

What is ethnomethodology? Despite sounding a bit like one, ethnomethodology is not in fact a "methodology". It is not a research method, like semi-structured interviews or questionnaires. Nor is it really a 'theory' as such. It is probably best described as a different 'perspective' in sociology, or perhaps even a 'paradigm of enquiry' in its own right (Button, 1991). The term was coined by an influential sociologist called Harold Garfinkel. Let's break the term ethnomethodology down. "Ethno" comes from the Greek word *ethnos* and means 'people'. These people could be organized into a variety of different types of groupings, large or small, formal or informal: a crowd, a sports team, a large multi-national corporation, or even a whole network of professional organizations that make up a social institution such as the legal system. The key thing is that the people in the group share, recognise and employ similar "methods" to do whatever they do, such as playing a sports game, operating a global business or upholding the law. The term "methodology", then, refers to the methods or procedures that competent members of that social group use to go about 'organizing' themselves. Put simply, then, ethnomethodology is the study of the practical methods through which members of a particular social group accomplish 'organization'. The relevance for Business and Management Studies is now immediately obvious: businesses, and the people that manage them, are centrally concerned with getting a group of people *organized* to achieve some kind of common task or goal.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain what ethnomethodology is, how it differs from other qualitative approaches, what influence it has had on social science more generally and business and management studies more specifically, and its implications for questions of methodology and research design. The first section gives some background on the history and origins of ethnomethodology and explains some of its core concepts. The second section looks at what it means to study organizations – the usual focus of research in business and management studies – from an ethnomethodological perspective. The third section reviews the contributions that have been made from using ethnomethodology in a variety of business settings: starting with the early classic ethnomethodological studies of institutional settings such as law enforcement and public welfare institutions, moving on to more contemporary settings known as 'workplace

studies' and also more recent studies of market exchanges. The final section examines the promises, challenges and practicalities of the research methods associated with ethnomethodology – associated as it is with close empirical analysis of real-time interaction as it happens in real-life settings through observational methods of various kinds.

Garfinkel, ethnomethodology and the study of social order

Garfinkel was one of the most original – and controversial – thinkers in sociology. The publication of his book in 1967, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, divided academic opinion. Ethnomethodology attempts to rethink the fundamental premise of mainstream sociology: the existence of "social facts" such as rules, norms and values. Ethnomethodology takes these social facts used within mainstream functionalist social science to explain social action, such as 'social rules' or 'social norms', and instead treats them as endogenous accomplishments of knowledgeable members of a social group (Leiter, 1980; Handel, 1982; Button, 1991; Coulon, 1995; Francis & Hester, 2004; ten Have, 2004). In other words, what others take as pre-given external social 'facts' and 'forces' that make members of a social group 'orderly' and 'organized', ethnomethodology takes as things that people have to *produce* in an ongoing social process. Ethnomethodology is the term that the field's founding thinker Harold Garfinkel used to describe the study of "the work of fact production *in flight*" (Garfinkel, 1967: 79, emphasis added).

From its inception, ethnomethodology was never a unified field. Even today it is best described as a splintered set of related sub-fields (Button, 1991). One of the most significant relationships is that between ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA), the latter field emerging from the work of Harvey Sacks. Some people use the term EM/CA to highlight this link (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010).

Ethnomethodology emerged as a critique of the structural functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons – under whom Garfinkel studied at Harvard University in the 1940s. Functionalism sought to identify the social structures, facts, variables and forces that are presumed to create social order. The term social order refers to any kind of cooperative, predictable and stable set of social relations that exhibit some kind of orderliness. This could be the kind of social rules, norms and values that are presumed to emanate from so-called 'macro' institutions such as the State, the education system or religion, which are understood to govern society writ-large. It could also be the so-called 'micro' social order of forming a queue. However, for ethnomethodology, this distinction between micro and macro is a misnomer (Hilbert, 1990), as all social action is endogenously generated, and the classification of ethnomethodology as a 'micro' approach has been strongly rejected (Garfinkel and Rawls, 2002). Thus, ethnomethodology does not ignore social structure or indeed organizational structure; rather it re-specifies it as an ongoing accomplishment of members (Button, 1991) - what Boden (1994) refers to as "organization-in-action".

Ethnomethodology addresses the same 'problem' or 'topic' as sociology – namely, how social order and structure 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 (Garfinkel, 1967). Drawing on the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1953), Garfinkel was interested in how members used their stock of knowledge and reasoning procedures about the social world to produce the 'social facts' that other sociological theories treat as unproblematic. Systems of order and organization are of course how business and management practices of various kinds get done, but this order is now understood as "an ongoing achievement of member's methods for producing it – rather than the result of structures, cultures, habits, routines, power, or interests, as other theories assume" (Rawls, 2008: 709).

What is an "ethno-method"?
It might be useful to take a simple example. Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2010) use the example of customers forming a queue – a social practice commonplace in retail businesses and a very basic unit of social organization common-place across Western society[1].

> "As a basic form of social organization, the queue is only witness-able, and thus join-able, because people are able to recognise, and orient their conduct to, 'what queues look like' and 'what queuing practically involves'"
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> (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010: 4).

What are the ethno-methods we routinely use to recognise that a line of people is, in fact, a queue? And what are the ethno-methods we use to display to others that we have joined it? These ethno-methods involve all the taken-for-granted social *knowledge* and associated forms of *reasoning* that we have about queues, such as:

- Where the 'front' and 'back' is, and which to join,
- Whether to face other people's front or back,
- How to stand not-too-far and not-too-close to the person in front,
- How to signal to others you are waiting to pay and not doing something else,
- And so on.

In other words, we have our own 'social theory' of queues that we put to use in order to recognise and join one. In essence, the people that sociologists study are also sociologists of a kind: they are 'folk sociologists' (Wieder, 1974) or 'practical sociologists' (Benson & Hughes, 1983), using their knowledge of the social world to accomplish their practical tasks, such as queuing or running a business. Sociology – knowledge of the social world - is not just something that academics in sociology departments of universities know about. It is something that we are all competent in as members of society.

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[1] Queueing has also been subject to ethnomethodological study - see Ball and Smith (1986).

Ethnomethodology is interested in studying these 'theories-in-use' that constitute actual organizing processes (such as queueing, or running a business), not in replacing these with their own (supposedly more complete or accurate) academic theory. As an empirical programme of research, this means studying actual scenes as they unfold, in real time, in order to identify the kinds of knowledge and reasoning – the "ethno-methods" – that enable people to organize themselves to accomplish some kind of joint activity. The world of "business" is only possible because people have methods for accomplishing the activities involved – a sales pitch, a strategy presentation, a recruitment interview, a performance appraisal – and ethnomethodology seeks to study empirically what these methods are and how they are used to get that business activity done. It asks the deceptively simple question: How do members make sense of their social world? As Llewellyn (2008: 767) puts it, "the question of what should be inferred from specific expressions, utterances and bodily movements is a problem – not for analysts – but for members." The task for the ethnomethodologist, then, is to undertake systematic and fine-grained studies of how members solve these "problems" in order to produce order and organization in various social settings – including formal business organizations of different kinds.

Key concepts in ethnomethodology: Indexicality, reflexivity and the documentary method
The example of forming a queue illustrates a number of central ethnomethodological constructs (see Garfinkel, 1967): *indexicality* (developed from earlier uses in linguistics), *reflexivity* and the *documentary method of interpretation* (a concept first developed by Mannheim, 1952). The term *indexicality* originates in linguistics and, within linguistics, it is used to refer to certain words which mean different things depending on the context that they 'index' (think of how an index in the back of a book 'points to' a page location). The word "they", for instance, derives its sense from particular group that is being 'indexed' or 'pointed to' in that particular context. Ethnomethodology extends this by proposing that *any social action* – not just certain words but any utterance, any gesture, or indeed any kind of socially recognisable action - only 'makes sense' through inferences about what the action 'indexes' or 'points to' in that particular context. A cough is a good example: it can be taken to 'index' a (not socially meaningful) physical act of clearing one's throat or – done in a particular way by a particular person in a particular context – can be read as 'indexing' disagreement, a desire to interject, or a signal to stop what you are saying or doing for some reason.

The *documentary method of interpretation* refers to the circular process through which each 'appearance' of social action we encounter is made sense of as 'documenting', 'indexing' or 'pointing to' an underlying pattern or 'typification', the latter concept taken from the phenomenology of Schutz (1953). Think of the appearance as the "here and now" immediate scene you have just encountered (e.g. an utterance, a gesture or a cough) and the pattern as how this is connected to the "larger social scene" (Leiter, 1980: 171) – something that is an enduring, typical and recurring aspect of the social world (like a norm, rule, role, motive, social type, and so on). Moreover, because the 'pattern' itself is derived from collecting together these 'appearances', this is an ongoing cycle of 'pattern-making'. The term *reflexivity*, then, refers to the inherent circular nature of this process of making sense of particular appearances through

reference to wider patterns and simultaneously creating these self-same patterns through collections of appearances. In the queuing example, an appearance in a shop of a person standing still, standing close to another person (who is also standing still) and each person looking at the other person's back would routinely be made sense of as 'documenting' or 'indexing' the pattern "a queue". And we use the pattern "queue" to understand what we have just seen an 'appearance' of. Both elaborate each other. Reflexivity is the term used by ethnomethodologists for this process of mutual elaboration. Of course, should something about the immediate "here and now" scene change – the person turns around or walks off, for example - a different 'pattern' would probably be applied: namely, 'person shopping'.

The appearance of stability and orderliness, in everyday life as well as formal business organizations, is therefore built from the continuous use of member's common sense *knowledge* of what is happening and common sense *reasoning* about what they should do. Hence, ethnomethodology seeks to study the "stock of knowledge" and "reasoning procedures" - or what Cicourel (1973: 52) alternatively calls "interpretive procedures" - that makes social organization possible. Maintaining something as simple as a queuing system therefore requires constant, albeit largely imperceptible and predominantly unconscious, effort and activity. It is what Rawls (2008: 701) refers to as the "constant mutual orientation" to unfolding scenes of action. In short, what appears to the social scientist as a stable object of analysis – a 'rule' or a 'norm' – belies a continuous social process, and it is this social process that ethnomethodology seeks to study.

The ethnomethodological study of organization

What implications does an ethnomethodological perspective have on the approach to researching formal organizations – the topic of study for business and management studies? Ethnomethodology rejects the idea that organizations – or indeed any other social phenomenon – can be understood as 'entities' with various 'attributes' that are amenable to analysis with a cause-and-effect logic. Therefore, it does not see things like organizational structures, job attributes, rules, norms or values as 'input variables' that can be measured as predictors of organizational outcomes, such as employee engagement, firm performance, level of innovation or sources of competitive advantage. Within business and management studies, terms such as organizational structure or culture are typically listed as an 'attribute' of an organization, and typically treated as a variable that either causes other things to happen, or is itself a causal output of another variable. Sometimes these 'facts' and 'factors' are represented visually as a word in a box, with an arrow arising from it or pointing to it, as if to indicate that they are objects that have properties that do things, or can have things done to them - in the same way that, say, water has the property of being able to be heated in order to produce steam. The social process that is 'organization' is treated as a "thing", and presumed to have "attributes" like a structure and a culture, in the same way as an office block as a physical object can be said to have attributes like a particular height or number of floors.

Bittner (1974: 73) explains how ethnomethodology seeks instead to study how people's common-sense and taken-for-granted reasoning enables the rational structures (or what he calls the 'formal scheme') of bureaucracy to operate:

> … one is confronted with a rich and ambiguous body of background information that normally competent members of society take for granted as commonly known. … [This] information enters into that commonplace and practical orientation to reality which members of society regard as 'natural' when attending to their daily affairs.

Hence, it is through their "everyday mundane knowledge and reasoning procedures" that organizational members "'make sense of' and 'act on' the situations in which they are involved …" (Samra-Fredericks and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2008: 660). The formal schemes of organizations – their rules, hierarchies, guidelines, procedures, plans and instructions – do not simply push and pull members into compliance, as if working as invisible background forces. Rather, they rely on the knowledge and reasoning of members regarding when, and how, they should apply. Bittner uses the term 'gambit of compliance' to describe the ways in which competent members find in the formal scheme the means for doing whatever needs to be done, connecting an infinite variety of actual circumstances to instances of 'rule compliance', making rules do things that could never be predicted from their abstracted written form. As a result:

> *…problems referred to the scheme for solution acquire through this reference a distinctive meaning that they should not otherwise have.* Thus the formal organizational designs are schemes of interpretation that competent and entitled users can invoke in yet unknown ways whenever its suits their purposes. The varieties of ways in which the scheme can be invoked for information, direction, justification, and so on, without incurring the risk of sanction, constitute the scheme's methodical use.
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> (Bittner, 1974: 76, emphasis in original).

The point is not that organizational members 'misbehave', and should be more strictly controlled to comply with formal instructions. The point is that this is precisely *how* organizing is possible. Literal, grammatical readings of rules would threaten to bring organizations to a halt without the competence of members in supplying their "rich and ambiguous body of background information" (Bittner, 1974: 73). Those applying rules 'literally' could actually expect to be sanctioned for such behaviour.

For Bittner and other ethnomethodologists, then, "the task of deciding the correspondence between schemas and actualities is one that should be transferred from the sociological theories back to the workplace participants who operate with those schematics." (Sharrock, 2012: 22). As Gephart (1978: 558) argues, "members must work to define activities as falling within the organizational scheme. As members confront practical problems, they invoke the organization as a scheme furnishing solutions, but this scheme is reconstructed, modified and negotiated continuously to fit the practical problems at hand". This continuous *work* of making sense of organizational schemes of various kinds – both formal prescriptions and informal 'ways of

doing things', both 'macro' aspects of broad institutional fields and 'micro' aspects of immediate work groups – means that they cannot be understood as stable 'variables' but must instead be understood as *social and interpretative processes*.

Business and management studies: Ethnomethodological insights

This section will provide a brief overview of how ethnomethodology has been used to generate insights into how businesses and other kinds of formal organizations work – both in its 'home' discipline of sociology as well as in business, management and organization studies. It might be helpful to the reader who wants to delve into some existing studies that have drawn on ethnomethodology, to get inspiration for designing their own study.

Right from its very inception in the 1960s and throughout the decades that followed, ethnomethodologists have been interested in studying not only informal social interaction but also the work of, and in, formal organizational settings. Classic early studies of the 'business' of organizations include:

- Coroners deciding the cause of death when presented with a dead body (Garfinkel, 1967: 11-18),
- Police officers detecting crimes and dealing with criminals (Sudnow, 1965; Bittner, 1967; Meehan, 1986),
- Case-workers in a welfare agency assessing benefit claimants (Zimmerman, 1969),
- Staff in a half-way house for rehabilitating offenders working with ex-convicts (Wieder, 1974),
- Jurors, lawyers and judges doing their work of upholding 'justice' in the criminal justice system (Garfinkel, 1967: Ch. 4; Cicourel, 1968; Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Pollner, 1987)
- Scientists at work in a laboratory (Garfinkel, Lynch & Livingston, 1981; Lynch, 1993).

Interestingly, almost all of the early studies were in formal 'organizations' of some sort, with some kind of 'business' to conduct (whether for-profit or not) and formal structures, regulations and rules concerning how they should operate.

More recent work has set about explicating the ethno-methods employed to accomplish all kinds of business operations and work tasks. The collection of studies in the book edited by Garfinkel (1986) entitled *Ethnomethodological Studies of Work* began to unpack the locally produced orders of work that existing studies of work all relied upon, but ignored. The term 'Workplace Studies' began to be used as a label to describe ethnomethodological studies that sought to reveal the methods that organizational members use to make coordinated action possible by interacting with other people, spaces, artefacts and machines of various kinds. Many of the influential studies involved technological artefacts of some kind, and work in this field often focused on 'computer supported cooperative work'. Suchman's (1987) work on human-machine interaction challenged the dominant thesis that plans - or for that matter any formal system of instructions or rules – are what guides conduct, using the example of an expert

system designed for a photocopiers. Julian Orr (1996) also draws ethnomethodological inspiration in his study of photocopier repair technicians, showing the inadequacy of even the best instruction manual given the tacit knowledge required to 'read' the machines. Button and Sharrock's (1998) study of a large-scale technology project in a multinational company shows how members of the project team designed their actions to be organizationally accountable.

Suchman (1993) later went on show how various digital displays and controls in air-traffic control centres are used to accomplish the organization of flight paths. Christian Heath, Jon Hindmarsh and Paul Luff took up a similar project in their study of the use of information systems in a variety of organizational settings, most notably the work of London Underground control rooms (Heath and Luff, 2000) and train drivers (Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff, 1999). More recently, Neyland (2006) explored how CCTV operators make decisions about what the images on screens mean and what actions should be taken – such as calling the police – based on their reasoning about the motive, intent and moral standing of different categories of person. This body of work within 'Workplace Studies' has also found many practical applications, particularly in the design of human-computer interfaces and information systems (Luff, Hindmarsh and Heath, 2000). In addition to technological artefacts and material environments, ethnomethodological studies have also shed light on how business gets done with texts, graphs and documents of various kinds. One of Garfinkel's original studies was of clinical records in an outpatient psychiatric clinic and how seemingly 'bad' records may fulfil other 'good' organizational functions because of the way they were created for potential future readers (Garfinkel, 1967: Ch 6). Zimmerman's (1969) study of document-use by welfare claim assessors also showed how documents come to make sense – and serve as a basis for inference and decision-making - through the bureaucrat's social knowledge of who or what created them and for what purposes.

For ethnomethodology, organizing occurs through the production of "accounts" of various kinds, whether these are oral or written, linguistic or numerical, verbal or non-verbal. Accounts do not describe 'the facts of the matter', they produce them. Documents of various kinds, such as strategy texts, management accounts or financial reports, therefore require study within the *social interactions* through which they are made to make sense (Watson, 2009). Heath and Luff (1996) show how medical records relied upon the background reasoning shared by doctors to make inferences about the 'facts' concerning the patient. Recent work in Rouncefield and Tolmie's (2011) book *Ethnomethodology at Work* considers how people in organizational settings produce numbers that transform the organization into a 'calculable' entity (Hughes, 2011), how activities are rendered intelligible in relation to formal plans (Randall and Rouncefield, 2011), how meetings are organized around documents and artefacts such as agendas, projectors and spreadsheets (Hughes, et. al., 2011), how documents – both paper-based and digital – are used for mundane coordination and decision-making (Hartswood et. al., 2011), and how various texts are 'read' and made sense of in situ (Rooksby, 2011). Documents of various kinds are also important in the collection of studies in Llewellyn and Hindmarsh's (2010) book *Organization, Interaction and Practice*. Samra-Fredericks (2010) shows how strategic plans are put to work in business meetings and Moore, Whalen and Hankinson

Gathman (2010) examine how apparently simple order forms enable the coordination of dispersed organizational activities.

Ethnomethodology has influenced studies of how those formally tasked with managing or leading organizations get their job done. An early paper by Gephart (1978) studied how a sense of 'crisis' was constructed during a committee meeting that enabled the 'status degradation' of a current leader and succession to a new leader to be accomplished. Housley (2003) examined how critical decisions about social care and welfare are made when 'expertise' from different professionals are brought together in multi-disciplinary teams. Work by Samra-Fredericks on strategic decision-making and leadership has shown how board-room influence is accomplished (Samra-Fredericks, 2000), how managers attempt to shape strategic direction (Samra-Fredericks, 2003), how emotions and rationality are intertwined in leadership talk (Samra-Fredericks, 2004), and how power effects are constituted through everyday interaction (Samra-Fredericks, 2005). Iszatt-White (2010, 2011) has developed insights into how leaders go about influencing others at work. Bolander and Sandberg (2013) draw on ethnomethodology to examine the reasoning procedures used by managers and HR professionals to make recruitment decisions following job interviews. Llewellyn and Spence (2009) and Llewellyn (2010) have delved into the job interview itself, exploring how the interviewer and interviewee mutually oriented to, and thereby produced, the 'recruitment interview'. As an approach to studying 'sense-making', ethnomethodology is also one of the key influences in Karl Weick's (1969, 1995) influential theory of organizational sensemaking. Bob Gephart's work in particular has been influential in advancing the more ethnomethodological 'version' of sensemaking in business and management studies, through studies of sensemaking in a succession battle (Gephart, 1978), crisis sensemaking following environmental disasters (Gephart, 1984; 1993) and how statistics are made sense of in and by organizations (Gephart, 1988; 2006).

Finally, a small but growing body of ethnomethodological work has started to emerge examining the accomplishment of market exchanges. Here, the "material" consequences of member's ethno-methods for coordinating action is often most visible, as studies trace the consequences of interactions for the exchange of money for goods or services. These studies pose questions such as: how are markets constructed through interactional practices of displaying, recognising, evaluating, comparing and valuing goods and services? Clark and Pinch (2010) show how shoppers in a retail store attempted to elicit, or evade, the attention of salespeople, even before a conversation about a 'sale' had begun. Heath and Luff (2010) demonstrate how deceptively simple actions, such as the nod of a head, are produced and recognised to accomplish the order of bidding in a fine art and antiques auction. Llewellyn (2011) examines how a 'gift exchange' is established when people offer to 'pick up the bill' for another person, such as a friend or family member. Another study by Llewellyn of a street salesman showed how, in a matter of seconds, a market exchange was transformed into a gift exchange through the use of speech, gesture and bodily position (Llewellyn, 2011a). Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2013) also coin the term 'inferential labour' to describe the importance of the taken-for-granted but essential work that service workers undertake in 'sorting' their customers

of various kinds according to establish relevant 'facts' about them, such as their age or employment status. This emerging body of ethnomethodological work on economic exchange shows great potential for recovering the activities that are 'glossed' in disciplines such as marketing, finance and economics, which trade on the idea of "facts" such as 'markets', 'buyers' and 'sellers' without seeking to uncover the social practices ('ethno-methods') through which these processes are created *as* facts.

Implications for research methods

What are the "research methods" best suited to studying these "ethno-methods" used in business and management settings? For researchers studying 'organizations' of various kinds, ethnomethodology invites us to look for very different things compared to conventional, positivistic styles of research. Ethnomethodological studies of organization do not seek to measure 'variables' relating to the organization or its members. Even the term 'organization' itself is viewed as an unhelpful abstraction, as it treats a social process as if it were a stable "thing" (Rawls, 2008). An ethnomethodological analysis would examine how the appearance of stability of 'an organization' relies upon ongoing organiz*ing* work: the "constant attention and competent use of shared methods of organizing action for its achievement" (Rawls, 2008: 702). In methodological terms, studying this organiz*ing* process should involve *close observation of people going about their everyday work*, perhaps with the aid of some kind of recording technology that would enable these organizing processes to be slowed down and subject to repeated analysis (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010). Hence, observation is the central 'research method' used in ethnomethodological studies. This can involve gathering *primary* data – your own records of what happened in the form of field-notes or recordings, or, particularly where this is not possible or practical, gathering *secondary* data - existing records produced by the organization being studied (documents, websites, data records, etc.). Gephart's (1984, 1993) studies of publicly-available data, such as transcripts of official hearings and reports by investigatory bodies following an environmental disaster, is a good example of the latter approach.

What do the myriad of ethnomethodological studies detailed in the previous section have in common in terms of research methods? What they have in common is the close attention to the details of how social reality is produced as members generate and exchange accounts (oral or written, linguistic or numerical, verbal or non-verbal) of their social reality. This means studying organization "as it happens" (Boden, 1990), not as it is retrospectively recounted or rationalized, or how it is translated into inscriptions designed for the researcher (interview accounts, survey questions, diaries, etc.). As a basic methodological requirement, then, an ethnomethodological study needs to use research methods that enable the researcher to identify how a particular sequence of real-time organized action is accomplished by observing it in some way *as it unfolds*. It would also ideally be informed by deep immersion in the field site(s) that enables "an embodied experience of the work in question" (Rawls, 2008: 711).

Such deep immersion could mean *participant* observation – quite literally training to become competent in doing the business activity and then actually taking part in the activity with those you are studying. Particularly where the knowledge and reasoning procedures are more specialised and technical rather than "common knowledge", this enables the researcher to *identify* and *understand* the ethno-methods that are used to "do business" in that setting. Ethnomethodologists sometimes refer to this as the 'unique adequacy requirement', in which the researcher must have "adequate" mastery of the setting under study "as a precondition for making ethnomethodological observations and descriptions" (Lynch, 1993: 274; see also Rawls, 2008; Rouncefield and Tolmie, 2012). The study would also ideally - should access be possible and practical - be accompanied by audio- and/or video-recording that enables activity to be later 'slowed down' and 'repeated' during the analysis process (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010). Social interactions often happen so quickly, and in such 'un-noticed' ways, that a researcher has little time to notice or capture their detailed features in a note-pad, so technology can help by making a permanent record that can be scrutinised and replayed multiple times. As a "qualitative" approach, ethnomethodology does not mean shunning all interest in quantification *per se*. However, the ethnomethodological researcher does not seek to turn their various forms of data – tape recordings, video recordings, field notes, documents, etc. – *into* numbers. Rather, an ethnomethodological researcher would seek to study how forms of quantification and calculation are *used* by members of a social group or formal organization to accomplish some business or management activity, such as producing an accounting spreadsheet (Hughes, 2011) or conducting a customer satisfaction survey (Gephart, 1988).

The scope of empirical settings that can be studied using an ethnomethodological approach is vast. No setting is in principle 'out of bounds', providing sufficient access can be granted to study the ethno-methods being used in real-time as it unfolds. Researchers in the field of business and management studies could use ethnomethodology to study how businesses design and sell their goods and services to customers, whether through traditional retail settings or through the Internet, thereby contributing to knowledge in the field of **Marketing**. Research could be conducted on how materials or information flow within the organization during the production process, and how goods or services are 'shipped' to customers or end users, thereby contributing to knowledge in fields such as **Logistics**, **Operations Management** and **Information Systems**. Studies could also be conducted of how leaders and managers get their job done – hiring and firing, making strategic decisions, managing change and innovation, gathering and using management information, and managing people and processes – thereby generating contributions to **HRM**, **Leadership** and **Strategic Management**. The social process through which businesses are created, how they grow and how they innovate would also enable insights into **Innovation** and **Entrepreneurship**. **Accounting** and **Finance** are also ripe fields of inquiry, given the potential to study how financial data and accounting information is created and used in business settings. Indeed, studies in many of these fields have already been listed in the previous section above.

Like other qualitative approaches such as ethnography[2], ethnomethodology is interested in studying the phenomena in the environments in which they naturally occur (Gephart, 2004). That means avoiding "artificial" or contrived set-ups, which do not happen as part of the normal activity of that organization, such as interviews, surveys or experiments designed purely for the purposes of research that the organization does not normally undertake themselves[3]. This means a different approach to research methods, such as semi-structured interviews, life history interviews, focus groups, visual methods, open-ended questionnaires, or diary studies. Other 'mainstream' approaches to research typically get their participants to undertake these things as a way of gathering 'data' about them and the organizations they work for. Ethnomethodologists think this tells us little about the ethno-methods used to undertake the actual practices ("ethno-methods") used by the participants to accomplish "doing business". These methods are more likely to tell us about the ethno-methods – the common-sense stock of knowledge and reasoning procedures – that people use to accomplish "being interviewed by a researcher about my business" or "selecting a Likert scale response on a questionnaire survey about my business". Instead, the ethnomethodological researcher would study where, how and when these various kinds of "research methods" are used in organizations as part of their ordinary business practices, in order to get some kind of 'business' done. For example, earlier I described how ethnomethodologists have studied how recruitment interviews (Llewellyn, 2010) or welfare claimant interviews (Zimmerman, 1969) are accomplished. The researchers did not conduct qualitative interviews with the people involved *about* their experiences of going for job interviews, or applying for welfare benefits. Rather, the researchers *observed the real-time practices ('ethno-methods')* used to accomplish the organizational activity of job interviews and welfare claim assessments.

Having collected their data through various forms of observation of social practices, what kinds of claims do ethnomethodological researchers make from their data? It might be useful to finish this section with some key points about what "doing an ethnomethodological study", as a research perspective or paradigm, means for researchers – and crucially what it also does *not* mean.

1. Ethnomethodology's emphasis on 'knowledge-ability' 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, study and document the typically *taken-for-granted* ethno-methods used by members. Samra-Fredericks and Bargiela-Chiappini, (2008) use Garfinkel's phrase "seen-but-unnoticed" to describe this taken-for-granted nature of commonsense reasoning. Rawls (2008: 711) describes it as the "normally thought-less" character of ordinary activity: citing Garfinkel's infamous "breaching experiments" as exercises designed to help us "see" the constant mutual orientation that makes social

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[2] Wieder's (1974) book *Language and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code* provides a useful guide to the differences between ethnography as commonly conducted in anthropology and sociology (Part 1 of the book) and its ethnomethodological variant (Part 2 of the book). See also Rouncefield and Tolmie (2012) for a more extensive exposition of what they term "ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography".

[3] Businesses often do forms of 'research' themselves, such as R&D or market research, and these activities – where they occur - are perfectly suited to ethnomethodological study.

organization possible. These breaching experiments showed that taken-for-granted 'facts' are only topicalized when they become problematic in some way. The fact that it is "obvious" and "just common sense" to competent members of society that a particular person is in a queue – just as most business activities like buying goods in a shop or phoning a call centre also seem common sense to us – is precisely the point. It is our common sense knowledge that makes it these activities happen without us noticing the *work* we do to make them happen. Only when the person in front of you in the "queue" does not move forward when the queue moves forward, or suddenly turns around and faces you, or starts to wander off, does this activity become 'problematic' and therefore noticed.

2. Ethnomethodology's emphasis on the 'ongoing' and 'artful' accomplishment of social organization does not mean that 'anything goes': that any social action is viewed as sensible or that any account will be accepted or ratified by others. It also does not mean "free to do what they like" in social situations (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis, 1992: 174). Quite the contrary: ethnomethodology is centrally concerned with uncovering the more or less institutionalised and unequal opportunities and rights of different social actors to produce accounts and have them accepted by others and the extent to which members are socially sanctioned in their attempts to deviate from expected or required types of behaviour (Watson and Goulet, 1998). It is an *empirical* question precisely how much "room for manoeuvre" people have in particular situations (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis, 1992: 174).

3. Ethnomethodology does not seek to use its "data" to make claims about what an event or activity "really is" – either by ratifying an explanation given by one particular member as the most accurate or reliable version of reality, or by replacing all of the member's explanations with the analyst's own version of "the reality". It is most certainly not about judging whether members are right or wrong in their understandings and explanations of their social world. The point is not to criticize, undermine or expose as "false" how members make sense of their reality. Rather, the point is *to study empirically* how they produce and use these understandings and explanations. As Cuff, Sharrock and Francis (1992: 177) explain:

> "In order to investigate members' understandings as practical accomplishments, ethnomethodology abstains from taking any position on what an action or event 'really is'. Its central interest is in how members decide such matters. … Ethnomethodology, as a form of sociological inquiry, does not depend upon giving final or definitive descriptions of actions or events, far less upon giving unchallengeable explanations."

4. So what? What is the point of finding out about these ethno-methods used to accomplish business? Isn't it just "obvious" – just "common-sense"? The point of studying what members take as "obvious" – and more importantly how they produce that "obvious-ness" – is that this common-sense is what is *constitutive of*, and *consequential for*, the unfolding scenes of social action they are involved in, such as conducting a recruitment interview (Llewellyn, 2010) or a conversation about business strategy (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). It

is through their talk (and other social actions) that these business activities, processes and activities get done. Members' methods are what is used to 'get the task done'. For example, Zimmerman (1969) shows how case workers in a public welfare agency used their common sense knowledge and reasoning procedures about the welfare claims they received to make the decisions about which claims should get approved and which claims should be rejected. It was this knowledge and reasoning that *constituted* their "decisions", and these decisions were clearly *consequential* for those people who made the claims.

5. This takes us to the fifth and final point. Ethnomethodology is not concerned with just 'talk', or even just 'interpretation', understood as separated from so-called wider 'material structures'. Material outcomes most certainly flow from the ethno-methods used in various institutional settings. Forms of unequal power, domination, inequality and exploitation are also thus implicated. The ethno-methods used in institutions such as the education system and the judicial system *are* what produce the unequal outcomes according to gender, race or class, as illustrated by studies of school classrooms (Leiter, 1976, Mehan, 1979), high school counsellors (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963), and the policing and prosecution of juvenile offenders (Cicourel, 1968, Meehan, 1986). Hence, ethnomethodology is not 'silent' on the 'big issues' of structural inequality in society, even though the commitment to so-called "ethnomethodological indifference" means it deliberately does not 'take sides' and privilege or ratify certain versions over others (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012) (see point 3 above).

Before concluding this chapter, it is worth considering some of the challenges that can often be encountered by researchers using an ethnomethodological approach. The first and most obvious challenge is one of *access* to the setting being studied. Unlike surveys, experiments and interviews, which are typically understood as relatively low-risk and low-commitment by participants (usually just a few hours of their time and with a guarantee of anonymity), ethnomethodological studies tend to require either deep immersion in the setting over a long period of time in the form of participant or non-participant observation - what Crabtree et al. (2000) refer to as ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography - and/or the use of video or audio recording technology to capture the details of social interaction as it happens. Both of these methods rely on participants trusting the researcher enough to let them in to observe them and/or record them. These methods can also pose a form of distraction or disruption to their everyday activities – especially if they are aware of being recorded. As the infamous Hawthorne Studies showed, recording or observing people can effect their behaviour and this needs to be taken into account.

Some *ethical approval* procedures employed in universities these days also stipulate informed consent procedures that prohibit the recording of people without their explicit signed consent – something that would scupper any attempt to record people in their naturally occurring environment. To this end, researchers have made good use of existing recording that are generated as part of the normal workplace activities, such as the recordings routinely in call centres or for webcasts. Other researchers have placed video cameras in public places where

people expect to be filmed for other purposes (e.g. by CCTV on the high street and in museums) and used information posters to inform people that they are being recorded for research purposes, coupled with pixilation of faces and voice disguises on audio recordings to give additional anonymity (e.g. Llewellyn, 2001, 2011a; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013). The availability and placement of the technology is also a consideration and a potential drawback. Cameras must be strategically placed to capture the 'action' and often cannot capture every angle, an important consideration for ethnomethodological studies given the focus on how non-verbal behaviour such as gesture, gaze and bodily position are used to accomplish turn-by-turn organization.

There is also the issue of how to analyse the data and write up the findings. There are two related challenges here: the *analytic* challenge of deciding how to carve up the data for analysis and the *technical* challenge of presenting the 'raw material' of the video or audio data in a read-able format for a written output. The analytic challenge is distinct for ethnomethodologists because they do not 'code' their data in the same way as other qualitative researchers. Two main strategies can be employed (see Francis & Hester, 2004: Chapter 2). Extended case analysis looks at a sequence of social action (for example, a manager giving instructions or an employee selling a product) and studies how it unfolds over time within its naturally occurring setting in order to identify the ethno-methods used to accomplish it, often embedded in a rich description of the field setting. This approach is particularly valuable when the activity being studied is non-routine in nature and cannot therefore be naturally 'grouped together' with other such instances to form a 'collection'.

A 'collection' refers to the grouping together of similar social actions (for example, managerial instructions to subordinates or sales pitches to customers, to continue the examples used earlier) to examine patterns of similarity and difference in how those social actions are accomplished and responded to. This latter approach of creating collections is typically used in the 'sister' field of ethnomethodology known as conversation analysis (CA), developed from the work of Harvey Sacks who was himself inspired by Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. CA uses these collections to develop systematic studies of how interaction is organized and accomplished, including applied studies of how talk is organized in institutional settings such as businesses (see e.g. Antaki, 2011).

The technical matter of how to present the video and audio data is the final challenge. Some ethnomethodologists capture 'stills' of the video to present alongside the transcript at various points when noteworthy social actions are being accomplished non-verbally. Transcripts are normally presented in the so-called Jeffersonian transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson (see Antaki, 2011: xii for a simplified version of Jeffersonian transcription notation) – a system alien to many editors, reviewers and readers that poses a challenge in itself. Some journals nowadays will allow video or audio clips to be uploaded with the written paper – subject to ethical consent from participants – a move that would certainly alleviate the challenge of trying to translate the raw data into a read-able text-based format.

Conclusion

Ethnomethodology offers a way of studying "the flow of 'real-time' or 'live' conduct within organizations" (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010), which sets it apart from other 'theories' and their approach to research methods. Where other perspectives take the accomplishment of organized action for granted, or merely provide a brief description of this work in order to get on with the business of 'analysis', ethnomethodology turns its analytic attention to this very fundamental activity that makes organization possible. As Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2010: 4) argue: "It is only possible to witness, as seemingly objective and concrete phenomena, a business presentation, a recruitment interview or an action because they are continually being built and reproduced that way by members."

According to Garfinkel and Rawls (2002), if we look at organizations such as firms and see that they manifest some kind of stability over time, some kind of "patterned orderliness" to use their term, then we must therefore assume that, firstly, this is something that people must work constantly to achieve and secondly, that these people must therefore have some shared methods for achieving it. In other words, while other approaches to business and management studies start with the assumption that 'an organization' exists with various 'attributes' or 'variables', ethnomethodology provides a radically different approach to business research by inviting us to study the activities through which these 'facts' are produced. The point is not to judge whether these facts are right or wrong: to prove or disprove their 'factual' status. Nor is it to replace them with the analyst's own version of what the facts really are. Rather, the point is to study the *activities* ('methods') that are used to make them 'fact-like'. This aim of this chapter has been to provide an overview of the main tenets of ethnomethodological thought, show how it approaches the study of formal organizations, provide an overview of existing ethnomethodological studies of business and management settings, and provide some guidance for researchers wishing to take up an ethnomethodological approach in their own studies.

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