Irony, Critique and Ethnomethodology in the Study of Computer Work:
Fundamental Tensions

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To broaden critical discussion in the field of information and communication technologies (ICT) beyond current approaches, we look outside the core management discourse and examine the critical implications of ethnomethodological research on computerized work environments in Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW). The revolutionary impact and continuing popularity of ethnomethodology in these fields suggests that this approach holds significant promise for the study of ICT in management research. Beyond the promise of applicability, our examination of ethnomethodology reveals an implicit critique that maintains a close alignment with the participant’s point of view, being informed by an in-depth understanding of research settings and participants’ practices.

Ethnomethodological accounts endeavour always to be respectful of the point of view of research subjects and seek to be above all without irony. Ethnomethodologists regard other theoretical positions as potentially ironic in that, through an act of theoretical fiat, they represent social actors as engaged in doing something other than what they claim to be doing. For Goffman, for example, social actors are playacting rather than engaging in conversation (see Watson 1998 for a more extensive discussion). In contrast, ethnomethodological accounts seek to remain closely aligned with the viewpoint of research participants. As Charles Lemert (2002) remarks, “Garfinkel recognized that first and foremost sociology is a work of mundane life that becomes disciplinary only secondarily (and then perhaps at a risk).” (p. xii). This commitment introduces fundamental tensions within ethnomethodological accounts and opens the way for an implicit critique that is a ‘showing’ rather than a ‘telling’. We argue that ethnomethodological accounts of human practices make available an implicit critique that is delivered from within a community of practice and in some cases contains concrete implications for praxis.

We begin with a presentation of Garfinkel’s (1967, 2002) ethnomethodological perspective, its attendance to the Wittgensteinian lessons on ordinary language use and its affinities with phenomenology and social construction. We review key concepts in ethnomethodology and illustrate these using examples from the CSCW and HCI literatures. At the heart of ethnomethodology is a concern with describing the background of normative or moral expectancies (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970) implicated in all forms of practical reasoning in local settings, including those inhabited by social scientists. In laying out the intertwining of moral expectancies and linguistic utterances in practical reasoning – a practice from which there is ‘no
time out’ (Garfinkel 2002) in the everyday world as well as within academic reflection – ethnomethodology displays a reflexive understanding of its own project, a characteristic it shares with other critical approaches. Yet, while ethnomethodologists cannot claim “to know better” (Garfinkel 2002), regarding all accounts as ‘versions’, ethnomethodology escapes the vortex of reflexivity and its immobilizing effects through an eminently practical orientation (Lynch 2000).

Ethnomethodological studies offer ‘adequate accounts’ of everyday activities in the form of ‘tutorials’ or ‘exemplars’ (Garfinkel 2002). This is a discipline that places a high premium on the researcher’s competence (his or her ‘membership’) in the particular area of practice under study. Descriptive precision requires the analyst to be a competent user of the language that is particular to a setting; in Wittgenstein’s terms, the ethnomethodologist must be able to adequately take part in the ‘language games’ of a particular ‘form of life’ (Wittgenstein 1968). In its empirical orientation, ethnomethodology emphasizes detailed and complete description of what is intersubjectively available for observation. It is committed to producing non-partisan accounts that make visible the methods employed by practical reasoners in accomplishing the social world within local settings (Bogen and Lynch 1990). This commitment to non-partisan accounts has often been misconstrued as a position of indifference to social issues. As Lynch (1997) clearly articulates, a commitment to avoid granting epistemic privilege to particular accounts (including sociologist’s own) does not imply a disinterested social science or indifference to the plight of individuals and groups in society.

In an attempt to clarify the ethnomethodological position and highlight its critical potential, we explore the ongoing debate about the critical element in ethnomethodology within the ethnomethodological community. This debate is centred on the distinction between ironic and non-ironic accounts (e.g. Sharrock and Anderson 1991). This exploration brings to light the fundamental tension between the ethnomethodological commitment to producing accounts that are not ironic and the potential for critique that is inherent in a perspective that, a) exposes the moral or normative accountability of all forms of practical reasoning, and b) reveals the social world as an ‘accomplishment’. This tension exists given that, in revealing the social world as constituted through reasoning practices that are inextricable from a local (and ongoingly renegotiated) moral order, the ethnomethodologist might disturb the participants’ perceptions of the world and produce an account that the members would not recognize as representing their reality. At the same time, ethnomethodological accounts show us that current social arrangements exist through the work that people do, visibly and methodically, to support and maintain these arrangements, drawing on a background of taken for granted moral expectancies. This basic tension in ethnomethodology makes possible a thoughtful form of critique: a critique that is produced from within a work setting, by the ethnomethodologist as a ‘member’ and for the ‘members’. Though most commonly only implicit in the ethnomethodological account, such critiques are grounded in the details of the situation and anchored in the competence of the members of the particular community such that they often hold a clear potential for praxis.

Though commonly associated with the interpretative research tradition, ethnomethodology displays a much stronger affinity with post-structuralism (Lemert 1979; McHoul 1988). The critique inherent in ethnomethodology can be heard most clearly by reading ethnomethodological accounts in the mode in which we might read any one of Foucault’s historical analyses: as a ‘showing’ rather than a ‘telling’. Thus much depends on the reader. Yet,
the ethical and moral orientation of the ethnomethodologist also plays a part, given that a truly disinterested description is not possible even in the ‘descriptivist moment’ (Jayyusi 1991). We propose that the potential for critique in ethnomethodology exists in the tensioned space between an ethnomethodological account that does not devalue the participants’ understanding of the world and the uncovering of a moral order that is irremediably implicated in the constitution of the social world.

Given the ethnomethodological opposition to grand theory (e.g. Lynch 1999), emancipation is not a stated goal of ethnomethodology, for what set of ideals could ethnomethodologists possibly recommend given that their own analyses are infused through and through with the very same practices of practical reasoning found in the common sense world? Nevertheless, in their practical orientation, ethnomethodological studies disturb the taken for granted status of our practices at local sites, opening a space for the possibility of thinking and acting along different lines. At times such accounts also suggest concrete alterations in our practices, pointing the way towards a different, if not unequivocally better, order.

Throughout our discussion, we point to exemplars of critique in ethnomethodology from a variety of computerized work environments, drawing from a large body of ethnomethodologically informed empirical research. Beyond ‘pure’ ethnomethodological research, we also represent the efforts of selected scholars to wed an ethnomethodological sensibility to more traditional perspectives within critical theory (e.g. Smith 1974).

References


