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

Stream 5: Exploring the Meaning of ‘Critique’ in Electronically-Mediated Work

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Is ethnomethodology critical? Some ethnomethodologists have argued that ethnomethodology is ill equipped to serve the emancipative and interventionist aims of critique: ethnomethodology cannot change the world; it leaves everything as it is (Sharrock and Anderson, 1991). Bogen and Lynch (1990) have similarly suggested that strategies other than ethnomethodology, such as informing people of their legal rights, would prove far more effective in addressing the inequalities of the world. Yet, for some, ethnomethodology and critique would appear to be at least cautious allies. As Anne Rawls (2002) notes: “Ethnomethodology cannot be indifferent to political, ethical or theoretical critique because that is essentially what it is. Ethnomethodology seeks to reveal the way in which taken for granted social practices maintain the appearance of things” (p. 54).

We follow the thread of debate within the academic community and explore the critical potential of ethnomethodology in the context of research on computer-based work environments. The revolutionary impact and continuing popularity of ethnomethodology in these areas 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 participants’ 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 (Watson, 1998). 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.

Given these objectives, we begin with a presentation of Garfinkel’s (1967, 2002) ethnomethodology. We review key concepts in ethnomethodology and illustrate these with examples. 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, a debate that is centred on the juxtaposition of ironic and non-ironic accounts. This debate brings to light fundamental tensions in ethnomethodological accounts that open a space for the possibility of critique. Throughout our discussion, we point to exemplars of critique in ethnomethodology from a variety of computerized work environments.

1 Speaking as we do from inside the field of information systems, our interest is in relating human practices and information technology; unfortunately, our own field has engaged minimally with ethnomethodology, as a result of which we turn for our examples to the literature on Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW).
Beyond ‘pure’ ethnomethodological research, we point to the efforts of selected scholars to wed an ethnomethodological sensibility to more traditional perspectives within critical theory.

What is Ethnomethodology?

Ethnomethodology originated with the work of Harold Garfinkel in the 1950s and 1960s (Garfinkel, 1952; 1967). Starting from Talcott Parson’s interest in the “problem of order”, Garfinkel developed a fundamentally different sociological approach to address the classical Durkheimian question of “what holds society together” (Collins, 1994, p.186). Garfinkel’s original work has been extended and appropriated widely both within and outside classical sociology, resulting in a rich and diverse body of research that draws on a multitude of philosophical and methodological orientations. It is, in fact, misleading to regard ethnomethodology as an entirely unified and homologous field. Ethnomethodology can perhaps more accurately be characterized as a movement that has grown and evolved over time, rather than a single theoretical endeavor (Flynn, 1991). We offer a brief introduction to the principal ideas in ethnomethodology. More complete and extensive discussions can be found in a number of sources including Heritage (1984), Sharrock and Anderson (1986), Maynard and Clayman (1991) and Button (1991).

The Intelligibility of Human Activities

Ethnomethodology takes an interest in the intelligibility of human activities, from the most commonplace to the unusual. It inquires into just how people manage to make sense of the world, to know what is happening around them and what it is that they are doing (Heritage, 1984). Making sense is the most common and unremarkable activity. It passes unnoticed, part of the background of our daily lives, as an embodied competence that is nevertheless methodical. Attempting to step outside the taken for granted acceptance of everyday facts known in common, ethnomethodology reveals in fine grained analyses the remarkable and methodical organization of human activities which lends meaning to our words and actions and in the process constitutes the social order as we know it.

For ethnomethodology, the meaning of objects or actions does not simply come to us in the moment of apperception based on a system of typifications, given a priori (Husserl, 1982) or internalized through learning and socialization (Schutz, 1962; Berger and Luckmann, 1966), as we might expect from an approach that took phenomenology as its point of departure (Garfinkel, 1967). Rather, meaning is routinely “achieved” or “accomplished” through the embodied practices of knowledgeable actors, through language and actions as employed within the flow of everyday life. Thus, while ethnomethodology displays a phenomenological sensibility (Maynard and Clayman, 1991), taking an interest in how it is possible for us to constitute the meaning of objects and actions in the existential flow of our lives, it is not oriented towards consciousness as an internal (mental or cognitive) and private process. In concert with the Wittgensteinian view, ethnomethodology regards making sense of the world as a consensual and normatively grounded practice that is intersubjectively available and public, taking a non-essentialist, non-cognitivist,
non-mentalist and non-ironic approach to knowledge, consciousness and the self (Watson, 1998).\(^2\)

It is in the course of acting and making sense of the events of our lives, as we interact with others, that we come upon or more accurately, participate in, the constitution of society and the social structures which sociology traditionally designates as micro and macro. Contrary to the way ethnomethodology has often been depicted, this is not a micro sociology, useful only in illuminating the dynamics of human interaction (Hilbert, 1990). Ethnomethodology gives equal consideration to both agency and structure (cf. Giddens, 1984; cf. Bourdieu, 1977). For ethnomethodology, social facts and social structures are not mere constructions existing in the minds of acting agents. Rather, following Durkheim’s injunction to “treat social facts as objects”, social facts are “material” or endowed with a certain “facticity” (Garfinkel, 2002); they are, for all practical purposes, “really there” (Rawls, 2002).\(^3\) Furthermore, in spite of its emergent and contingent quality, the constitution of the social world is not something that takes place invisibly or by accident. Ethnomethodology proposes that this process is both methodical and observable. It is this methodicity that gives ethnomethodology its unique focus.

We will return to the subject of the methodical accomplishment of the social world after we explore the normative foundations of sense making practices.

*The Accountability of Human Practices*

The profound insight of ethnomethodology, one which, in our view, has a critical import, has been to illuminate the consensual basis of human reasoning practices. 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). This moral ground is not composed of abstract ideals or agreed upon universal values (Jayyusi, 1991). Rather, it consists of an embodied morality, a set of mutual expectations that are taken for granted by the members of a particular social group and collectively sanctioned when breached. Such normative expectations are often unstated, being simply *what everybody knows* within a “form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1968).

\(^2\) While maintaining an ethnomethodological orientation, it is at this point that the work of Aaron Cicourel (e.g. 1973) diverges from the original formulation of ethnomethodology, reintroducing an interest in cognition and mental structures and in the process giving rise to a different and popular strand of ethnomethodology which Sharrock and Hughes (2001) label “distributed cognition”.

\(^3\) It should be noted that ethnomethodology is drawn reluctantly into the agency and structure debate and its related forms, i.e. the distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity, value and fact, micro and macro, etc. (Sharrock and Anderson, 1991). For ethnomethodologists, the distinction between agency and structure does not reflect a division in the empirical world. Rather, the polarity of agency and structure and the need to privilege one over the other arise from artificial divisions that have been drawn and perpetuated as analytical matters within social science (for an excellent discussion see both Sharrock and Watson, 1988 and also Latour, 1996).
In seeking to adequately describe the details of human practices in their actual use, ethnomethodology turns our attention to language, and particularly to language as used in naturally occurring talk. Garfinkel’s early work (1967) focused on making evident the “indexical” and “reflexive” properties of language. In line with Wittgenstein’s (1968) reformulation of linguistic philosophy, ethnomethodology stresses the indexicality or the “natural incompleteness” (Coulon, 1995 p. 17) and inevitable ambiguity of words: all explanations, no matter how detailed, contain within them the requirement for further elaboration. They always “leave something out, need fudging, or are replete with inconsistencies” (Maynard and Clayman, 1991, p. 397). Language is irremediably indexical. Members of a social group attempt to make sense of talk in conversation by reserving judgment prospectively and applying sense retrospectively (Garfinkel, 1967), continually solving new puzzles through meaning-in-use (Wittgenstein, 1968). This indexicality cannot be remedied because we would have to employ language to do it, and language is itself indexical.

Equally central to ethnomethodology is the notion of “reflexivity”. Garfinkel took an interest in Mannheim’s documentary method of interpretation which involves the search for “an identical homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning” (Mannheim cited in Garfinkel, 1967, p.78). Garfinkel noted that social actors routinely invoke a consensually accepted fact or pattern, such as for example a rule, to explain their activities, in the process reaffirming or reconstituting the existence of this same fact or pattern (a process which Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977) term reproduction). The particular and the pattern stand in a mutually constitutive or reflexive relation whereby the particulars of a pattern are invoked as evidence of the pattern’s existence and, in a reciprocal but always incompletely specified (i.e. indexical) relation, the pattern grants meaning to the particular. The same fact, pattern or rule may be used at different times as justification for different or even contradictory actions and statements (see, for example, Weider’s (1974) classic study of the telling of the code). Thus, the meaning of a rule or pattern is always embedded in the particulars of the situation and subject to a consensual process of meaning making. Ethnomethodologically speaking, rules and other social facts are “resources” (Garfinkel, 1967) which people employ reflexively and contingently in interaction.

The reasoning practices used by members of a social group to render their activities intelligible are available for inspection in the “accounts” that people produce (Garfinkel, 1967). Accounts are descriptions that members provide for each other that tell what they and others are doing. In order to count as an account of the facts, such descriptions must be seen or heard as reasonable and relevant to the situation at hand – in other words, as “visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical purposes i.e. “accountable”” (Garfinkel 1967, p. vii) [Example 1]. In addition, the reasoning practices that people employ in their accounts display a visible methodicity. These methodical practices of practical reasoning are the central concern of ethnomethodology.
The Study of People’s Methods for Making Sense of the World

Ethnomethodology is the empirical study of the methods that people use to make sense of the world, in the process giving rise to society in its particularity and manifest orderliness. These methods are known as “ethnomethods” (Garfinkel, 1967). Anne Rawls (2002) offers the following explanation of the word ethnomethodology: “‘Ethno’ refers to members of a social or cultural group (or in Garfinkel’s terms, members of a local social scene) and ‘method’ refers to the things members routinely do to create and recreate the various recognizable social actions or social practices. ‘Ology’ as in the word sociology implies the study of, or the logic of, these methods. Thus Ethnomethodology means the study of members’ methods for producing recognizable social orders.” (p. 6).

As competent users of ethnomethods, ordinary members of society (for example, IT users, systems developers, customers who buy on the web and also ICT researchers) routinely...
display a complex and methodical knowledge of how to accomplish the activities they perform in the course of their lives, from the most commonplace – for example, taking one’s turn in a conversation (Sack, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974) – to the most complex and vital functions, like performing the technical or professional work required in coordinating the movement of trains in the London Underground to avoid collisions (Luff and Heath, 2000) or determining the appropriate response to calls to a police emergency line (Benson, 1993). Ethnomethodology seeks to uncover, through empirical observation, the embodied competence that people routinely employ, a competence which is methodical and observable even if it often remains largely unnoticed by those who perform it. It is a competence that occurs largely at a pre-reflective level, being “embodied” or “incarnate” (Garfinkel, 1967).

The methodicity of human practices should not, therefore, be equated with a calculus of performance such as is suggested by information processing theories (Simon, 1957) or with a system of societal norms that are learned or internalized and unproblematically applied, as Parsons proposed (Collins, 1994). Methodicity does not merely consist of the sequential application of norms or rules, perhaps in the form of very complex decision trees. As Wittgenstein (1968) and Garfinkel (1967) demonstrated, applying a rule is never simply a matter of achieving congruence with an unequivocal principle. Rather, rules as linguistic statements are irremediably indexical and used reflexively within the situation, taking their meaning from the particular contexts in which they are embedded even as they are reflexively reproduced as facts known in common [Example 2].

The routine use of ethnomethods by groups of individuals accounts for the orderliness and predictability of our lives. Yet, the order that emerges from our use of ethnomethods is not something we can count on without reservation. Though ethnomethods may operate in disparate local circumstances (for example, taking one’s turn in conversation at home or at work) and thus appear to be “context free”, they are always “context sensitive” (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). Our use of ethnomethods is always contingent on the circumstances of particular interactions, on the actions and accounts of others and on the material objects and structures we come upon within the flow of existence. This is one reason why ethnomethodology insists on producing contextually grounded case studies, which Garfinkel (2002) refers to as “exemplars” or “tutorials”, rather than predictive or generalizable theories. It is also the means by which ethnomethodology preserves the possibility of change, independent action and agency, as the outcomes of interaction are never totally determined a priori but rather responsive to local conditions.

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4 No particular activities are the privileged sites of the constitution of the social world. Rather, social order is inherent in every instance of interaction, including the most trivial. Conversation analysis is the branch of ethnomethodology that takes a particular interest in the manner in which mundane conversations are organized.

5 In an Austinian sense, utterances and gestures are performative acts that, being subject to the doctrine of the Infelicities, can be ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’ rather than merely ‘true’ or ‘false’ (Austin, 1962).
Without slipping into a naïve non-realism, ethnomethodology maintains an open endedness towards the future which admits the possibility of thinking and acting otherwise (Giddens, 1984). This open endedness, together with the recognition of the consensual nature of sense making and the role that people play in continually constituting and reconstituting the social order, opens a space for a reading of ethnomethodological studies as critical. In the next section, we explore this idea in the context of the debate within the ethnomethodological community.

**Ethnomethodology and Irony**

Ethnomethodologists seek to maintain a close alignment with the member’s point of view and produce research reports (ethnomethodological accounts) that are not ironic, that is, that do not privilege a particular version of reality. According to Watson (1998), irony is characteristic of both the hypothetico-deductive epistemology of functionalism and non-functionalist methodologies such as symbolic interactionism or dramaturgy. Ironic treatments accord a privileged status to the analyst’s scheme of knowledge, inevitably downgrading local schema, to a greater or lesser extent, through various strategies; by relegating them to the realms of the subjective or belief, for example. Through an act of theoretical fiat, ironic accounts represent social actors as engaged in doing something other than what they claim to be doing – as, for example, in Goffman seeing social actors as playacting. Objecting to an ironic stance, Watson and the ethnomethodologists align themselves with members.

Taking serious notice of the member’s point of view, however, should not be misconstrued as an attempt to promote a form of “epistemic egalitarianism” (Lynch, 1997) that assigns value to local, common sense or marginalized forms of knowledge. The telling point in Watson’s argument, which he adopts from Garfinkel’s deconstructive reading of traditional sociology, is that a priori schema (or theories) applied in concert with certain kinds of methodological operations which obscure the indexicality and reflexivity of language while implicitly relying on them, effectively reduce or bracket the intersubjective procedures of social

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**Example 2 – Information Technologies and the Rule of Law**

In agreement with the classic ethnomethodological studies of the police conducted by Egon Bittner (1967), Benson (1993) points to the role of police discretion in enforcing the law and maintaining order even in the presence of information technologies that aim to systematize and streamline police work. As Bittner also showed, the application of the law cannot be equated to the unequivocal and pervasive application of a set of rules. “Police officers do not simply enact the law of the land as though they were pre-programmed automata wandering the streets of cities and towns arresting anybody and everybody who could be seen as having broken the law.” (p. 87). Police discretion is not a nuisance to be remedied through stricter policies or codification of procedures in computerized systems. It is “an essential feature of practical policing” (p. 89). The application of the ‘rule of law’ is inevitably indexical and reflexive. The law is not applied but rather enacted in the everyday work of police officers according to the particular circumstances surrounding incidents.
agents (see Cicourel, 1964 for an illuminating explication). Ironic analyses lose sight of the phenomenon in its embodied detail. If we accept the ethnomethodological view of sense making practices as irremediably situated and consensual, this is equivalent to losing the phenomenon in its entirety.

Watson (1998) argues that an ironic perspective “works to falsify the phenomenological integrity of that which it is designed to force into view” (p. 206). Attempting to force the taken for granted into visibility has been one of ethnomethodology’s principal concerns. Ethnomethodologists attempt to produce “adequate accounts” (Garfinkel, 2002) of human activities and reasoning practices, relying on the analyst’s competence (“membership”) in the use 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 accordance with the overall project of avoiding irony, ethnomethodologists bracket the taken for granted authority of professional versions, a policy known as “ethnomethodological indifference” (Garfinkel, 2002). Analysts must also refrain from assigning privileged status to any particular version of reality, producing accounts that are non-partisan (Bogen and Lynch, 1990). These practices are meant to direct analysts towards the “unique way of investigating social order” (Lynch, 1997) that is essential to conducting ethnomethodological studies.

A commitment to non-partisan accounts, which follows from the methodological considerations discussed above, has often been misconstrued as laying claim to a disinterested or value free social science or as a position of indifference to social issues. Both these depictions of ethnomethodology are misleading. Ethnomethodology displays a reflexive awareness of its own project, a characteristic it shares with various critical approaches. Practiced in the shadow of a radical referential reflexivity (Pollner, 1991), ethnomethodology identifies all accounts as versions, including its own. Yet, while ethnomethodologists cannot claim “to know better” (Garfinkel, 2002), they seek to escape the vortex of reflexivity and its immobilizing effects through an eminently practical orientation (Lynch, 2000).

Michael Lynch (1997) has effectively argued against a reading of ethnomethodology as an indifferent discipline. As he clearly articulates, a commitment to avoid granting epistemic privilege to particular accounts does not imply a disinterested social science or a value free sociology, nor does it indicate the absence of social concern or callousness on the part of the analyst. This is not to say that Lynch is proposing that ethnomethodology could be actively employed as a tool for social advocacy on behalf of marginalized or powerless groups. To do so would be to privilege a particular version of reality over others and slip into irony, inevitably risking the integrity of the phenomenon. Rather, Lynch argues that, through its policies or maxims, ethnomethodology directs our attention to the manner in which “humble accounts” (p. 372) as well as official ones relentlessly constitute the social order. The relentless quality of this process, however, does not entirely preclude the possibility of change. In fact, ethnomethodology, refusing to take the theoretical leap from situated description to predictive or generalizable statements, would seem to insist on the eternal presence of just such a possibility.

Ethnomethodology shows that all of us, as producers of official, authoritative or simply humble accounts, are inevitably implicated in the production and reproduction of social
structures including the institutional and political order. As Anne Rawls (2002) notes in the introduction to Garfinkel’s latest book: “The fact that persons may be required to reproduce the very social forms that oppress them is a much more powerful and frightening vision of tension and inequality than the idea that independent individuals exist in some sort of primeval struggle against society” (p. 56). For Rawls, ethnomethodology is far from indifferent: “Ethnomethodology cannot be indifferent to political, ethical or theoretical critique because that is essentially what it is. Ethnomethodology seeks to reveal the way in which taken for granted social practices maintain the appearance of things” (Rawls, 2002, p. 54) [Example 3].

Ethnomethodology, functioning in a revelatory mode, must nevertheless seek to avoid irony. In the next section, we explore the fundamental tensions in ethnomethodological accounts that arise from the commitment to avoid ironicizing member’s accounts while revealing the consensually grounded and relentless constitution of the social order. These fundamental tensions give shape to ethnomethodological critique and account for the implicit form it often takes.

**Fundamental Tensions**

Garfinkel (1967, 2002) has repeatedly emphasized that ethnomethodological studies are useless when done as ironies. A constant vigilance is necessary as an analytical device that guides the ethnomethodologist in trying to achieve descriptively accurate accounts that adequately reflect human practices. Yet, vigilance may also be needed for a second reason.

As an act of revelation, ethnomethodology must be carried out in constant tension with the potential for irony that is inherent in a perspective that, a) exposes the consensual grounds upon which the accountability of all forms of practical reasoning relies, 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. As Michel de Certeau (1984), among others, has pointed out, the ‘reader’ is not a passive recipient. 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 (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979), 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, as acknowledged by ethnomethodologists themselves, 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 morally grounded practices that are irremediably implicated in the constitution of the social world. This critique is most commonly only implicit in ethnomethodological accounts. Yet, given that such critiques are grounded in the details of the situation and anchored in the competence of the members of the particular community, they may point the way to practical alternatives to current practices.

Ethnomethodology as Critique

Sharrock and Anderson (1991) have argued that ethnomethodology cannot change the world. It leaves everything as it is. Bogen and Lynch (1990) have similarly suggested that strategies other than ethnomethodology, such as informing people of their legal rights, would

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**Example 3 – Professional and Routine Work**

In organizations knowledge work is routinely classified as professional or clerical. Ethnomethodological studies of work (e.g. Garfinkel, 1986) have problematized this pervasive distinction by highlighting the routine nature of professional work and the reasoning practices employed in routine (or ‘invisible’) work.

Suchman (2000) explores the everyday practices involved in document production in a legal firm in the work of professional lawyers and temporary workers employed to support professional work by coding documents and managing a computerized indexing system. In an analysis of material practices (the way work is conducted in everyday activities) and accountability (the production of accounts that can be seen as sensible and responsible), Suchman makes visible the co-presence of activities that the organization deems subjective (requiring professional interpretation and judgment) and objective (acts of recording of information that is given) in the work of both lawyers and coders.

Through a detailed analysis of human practices and artifacts, the distinctions that are perpetuated by the classification of labour into knowledge and routine work are shown to rely on differences in identity and reward rather than differences in the material practices of the two groups. The critical import of this analysis is accompanied in Suchman’s account by the recommendation that an organization “interested in identifying more effective working orders … abandon simple distinctions in favour of an appreciation of the specific requirements and possibilities that the work, and the heterogeneity of organization members, actually presents.” (p. 45).
prove far more effective in addressing the inequalities of the world. There is certainly merit in both these statements. Yet, as we see it, neither one of these viewpoints negates the revelatory function of ethnomethodology, which is in itself an act of intervention in the world.

Lynch (1997) has suggested that humble accounts “alert us to possible alternative rationalities” (p. 375). We would like to suggest that ethnomethodological accounts, as humble accounts that re-enter the world through publication, may also have this same quality of alerting their readers, both members of the local setting and members of the academy, to alternate rationalities. If this is so, ethnomethodology could in itself be a form of critical intervention in the world in line with an expanded understanding of critique that moves beyond an explicitly emancipative project tied to universal values. Ethnomethodology can be critical if conceived within a broader conceptualization of critique which includes “act[s] of revelation” (Doolin and Lowe, 2002) that are not necessarily accompanied by an overarching prescription for a better world but may include no such prescriptions or merely modest suggestions for different local organizations of the social order.

The critical import of ethnomethodology is evident in a plethora of ethnomethodological studies, including much early work conducted in institutional environments by Garfinkel (1967) and his followers (e.g. Bittner, 1967; Sacks, 1972; Pollner, 1974) and, more recently, in applications of ethnomethodology to IT enabled environments (e.g. Suchman 2000, Benson 1993) [Example 4]. The critical potential of ethnomethodology has also captured the attention of members of the academy who have attempted to link ethnomethodology to other critical approaches.

McHoul has sought to extend the ethnomethodological position in the direction of deconstruction (McHoul, 1984) as well as a political linguistics (McHoul, 1988). Similarly, Chua (1977) has argued for a Marxist appropriation of ethnomethodology based on the value that ethnomethodology brings to a Marxist view by laying bare the process by which ideology is constructed and maintained in society. Dorothy Smith’s (1974) work on the social construction of documentary reality by government and other ruling bodies is deeply influenced by an ethnomethodological perspective that links the reporting and accounting procedures of formal organizations to the obviousness of social phenomena. The transformation of ethnomethodology into a critical theory in the traditional sense in which critical theory is understood, however, is likely to provoke rebuke from ethnomethodologists who perceive theoretical efforts that are articulated outside the context of particular settings as crossing the line between non-ironic and ironic accounts (e.g. Bogen and Lynch, 1990). Nevertheless, as Jayyusy (1991) notes, to deny that ethnomethodology can be heard that way is “paradoxically to defend the descriptivist stance in the process of abandoning it”.

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Conclusions

Ethnomethodology is a research tradition that, in its practical orientation, has much to offer a critical social science. Yet, the passage from a descriptivist project to critique must be undertaken with caution in order to preserve the analytical orientation that allows ethnomethodology to produce rigorously empirical accounts that offer an outstanding opportunity to make sense of human practices and their far reaching consequences, whether intended or unintended. In its insistence on a contextually grounded analysis that eschews a discourse based on universal values or totalizing schema, ethnomethodology turns our attention to “standards of practice and methods of judgment that are endogenous to the lived-and-used orders of everyday life” (Bogen, 1999), in other words to the very sites where embodied values and morality are woven into the relentless constitution of society (Jayyusi, 1991).

The debate about the critical potential of ethnomethodology reflects the tensions inherent in the ethnomethodological project as well as a rather narrow understanding of what counts as critique. In our own humble account, which is merely a version, we have attempted to shed some light on a research tradition that is little understood and, in our view, offers a fruitful avenue to critique and praxis. Informed by an in-depth understanding of research settings and participants’ practices, ethnomethodology gives rise to a sympathetic critique of human practices that does not fail to take into account the considerable competence of members of society. As the existing

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Example 4 – Using Statistics for Command and Control

Benson (1993) examines the conduct of police work and the practices that give rise to computer generated measures of crime and police activity, measures which are subsequently used as the basis for policy development and for enhancing systems of managerial control to make efficient use of resources.

Benson is critical of the use of computer generated statistics for command and control of police activities and for the development of policy. The compilation of police statistics relies on the unnoticed work of everyday practice that transforms police activities into official reports. Using conversation analysis, Benson analyzes a citizen’s complain reported by telephone to the incident room of the police. This analysis reveals the work of interpretation that must take place in achieving a categorization of the call and determining appropriate action. As Benson notes, “events, actions and personages of social life do not come precoded for data processing” (p. 81) and the official reports that are logged at the time and resurface later as measures of police activities bear an unknown relation to the activities that were undertaken.

The difficulties that the police force has encountered in introducing and making use of information technologies in command and control activities should not be blamed on the “intransigence” of police officers or problems of coordination between units. Rather, Benson calls for an informed understanding of the way in which the formal logic inscribed in databases collides with the informal logic of everyday police activities, concluding by advocating the allocation of scarce resources to “more tractable problems” (p. 96).
literature on IT enabled environments demonstrates, ethnomethodology at times may also make available concrete suggestions for change and the amelioration of existing practices towards a more equitable order.
References


