

Writeup of Garfinkel (1967)

Garfinkel, H. (1967). What is ethnomethodology? In *Studies in ethnomethodology* (pp. 1-34). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Summary

Garfinkel (1967) introduced his conception of ethnomethodology as a new approach to sociology, first discussing its epistemological and philosophical bases and then presenting three examples of its use in studies. The “central recommendation” he included for ethnomethodology was that the study of everyday activities should focus on the procedures used to account for—i.e. explain, understand, and report—such actions as situated in a given context. Such activities were, he argued, effectively equivalent to the accounting procedures used. Garfinkel then discussed at some length the epistemological beliefs underlying ethnomethodology, including (a) the “properties of indexical expressions and ... actions” (p. 5), (b) the “essential reflexivity of accounts” (p. 7) which is taken “for granted” (p. 8), and (c) an equivalence between commonplace actions in contexts and “doing, recognizing, and using ethnographies” in order to identify “the recognizedly rational properties of ... common sense inquiries” (p. 10). He then presented three ethnomethodological studies as examples. In the first, staff at the Los Angeles (LA) Suicide Prevention Center and the LA Coroner’s Office worked together to produce “properly and visibly rational account[s]” of how individuals died (p. 13) through procedures that, for all intents and purposes, were ethnographic: they collected evidence and “remains” (p. 17) that help determine the likely—“coherent, ... defensible, and ... recognizably rational” (p. 17)—cause of death. In the second, sociology students used “‘ad hoc’ considerations” while following coding instructions in the context of the setting they were observing (p. 21); these could not be suppressed, despite them not being explicitly included in the instructions. Garfinkel argued that the coders “assume[d] the ‘position’ of a competent member” of the setting under observation (p. 22); instead of describing the social order of a setting, such a study would be an account of the setting that “is itself a feature of the [setting’s] activities” (p. 24). The last example related Garfinkel’s work on students reporting on both the literal statements and actual understood meaning of conversations. Here, the students requested increasingly detailed instructions and eventually complained “that the task”—of explaining the meaning—“was impossible” (p. 26). Garfinkel argued this was because they were more interested in what they talked *about*, not *how* they talked (e.g. “narratively, or metaphorically, or euphemistically, or

double-talking”; p. 30). Common understanding, he stated, requires not “matching of substantive matters” but recognizing the social rules and how conversation rationally fits them (p. 30).

Garfinkel concluded with a set of “policies” for ethnomethodology (pp. 31-34) which focused on members’ constantly rationalizing the various practical actions they carry out in order to make them accountable within members’ social setting(s).

Analysis

Garfinkel’s chapter is particularly difficult to understand and follow, particularly the first ten pages. Unfortunately, he never really defines, at least directly, some of the terms he uses—particularly “indexical” (Chalmers, 2004, provided a definition)—which makes his writing especially troublesome for a first-time reader to fully comprehend; a second look helps clarify things some but I must admit to still being confused on a few of his points. Dourish and Button (1998) said that many writings in ethnomethodology have a “relative opacity” (p. 398); “opaque” is (unfortunately) an excellent word to describe many sections of Garfinkel’s chapter. The three examples he presents are relatively clear, however; they still require careful reading and reflective thought on the part of the reader, but make a number of the main tenets of ethnomethodology easier to understand and follow. On a more personal level, I am not sure I agree with one of the (apparent) epistemological requirements of the approach: that actions and inquiries have “rational properties” and can be rationalized to other members (p. 10; see also p. 17, 32). It is certainly possible that one may think in the moment that one is acting rationally, but then be unable to explain one’s action to others a few seconds later, even to those who are members of the same social setting or even to oneself. Coming up with a rational explanation for actions in a research study also requires there being sufficient evidence to conclude as such; in many cases there will not be enough, forcing the researcher(s) to suggest further research be conducted on that phenomenon, action, or setting. Despite my own personal disagreements and difficulty in fully understanding Garfinkel’s chapter, I would still recommend reading at least the three examples to researchers and students interested in learning about this approach to qualitative research and its epistemological and philosophical bases. These examples provide context which is necessary for better understanding this approach beyond the explanation provided by Dourish and Button.

Keywords: ethnomethodology, epistemological, epistemology, philosophical, examples, activities, actions, situated action, context, accounting, accounts, accountable, reflexivity, ethnography, rationalism, policies

Writeup of Dourish and Button (1998)

Dourish, P., & Button, G. (1998). On "technomethodology": Foundational relationships between ethnomethodology and system design. *Human-Computer Interaction, 13*(4), 395.
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Summary

Dourish and Button's (1998) article discussed ethnomethodology and its application to and in human-computer interaction (HCI), computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), and system design work, under the guise of what they call "technomethodology." They started by defining ethnomethodology both in terms of its origins—in the work of Harold Garfinkel and his colleagues in the 1950s and 1960s—and in its main beliefs: (a) that sociology should study the "objective reality of social facts" as a "fundamental phenomenon," not as a principle (p. 400); (b) that "everyday practical action involves not just engaging in rational social behavior, but also being seen by others to be so engaged," or being "reflexively accountable" (p. 401); (c) that members "exercise [their shared] commonsense understandings by finding, within the immediate circumstances of action, the means to understand ... and interpret them for practical purposes" (p. 403); and (d) that "ethnographically generated materials" should be used as data (but ethnomethodology should not be confused with ethnography itself; p. 403). Next, Dourish and Button discussed ethnomethodology's increasing role in HCI and CSCW, noting it informs design both through learning from the findings of fieldwork and through the "development"—jointly by ethnomethodologists and computer scientists—"of an understanding of the temporal organization of activities and interactions" (p. 405; also see p. 408-410). This was through increased interest in Suchman's situated action theory; the participatory design movement; and ethnographic methods for studying HCI, CSCW, and system design; as well a shift in HCI's focus from "dialogue with the user ... [to] the work setting" (p. 407) contributed. Dourish and Button argued a more productive approach would be what they termed "technomethodology," taking "the relationship between ethnomethodology and system design ... [as] a matter of analytic orientation rather than project management"; the technomethodological perspective concerns "the foundational concepts of system design, not simply the process by which [it] proceeds" (p. 412). They continued by comparing the process of abstraction in HCI and ethnomethodology, arguing that it was necessary to "open up the abstractions ... [and] the mechanisms that lie behind them" and thus make them more accountable (p. 416), similar to an

existing approach called Open Implementation (pp. 417-419). They also provided an extended example of “accounting for file copying” (p. 420), showing how a technomethodological approach to designing such an interface would differ from traditional HCI design and the use of (cognitive) mental models. They concluded by stating that technomethodology moves “between the abstract and the concrete, between the general and the particular,” focusing on aligning HCI and system design with how “working practices arise and are constituted” (p. 427).

Analysis

Dourish and Button’s article was definitely clearer and more understandable than Garfinkel’s chapter, although it was not *extremely* easy to follow. In particular, some of their statements about ethnomethodology and technomethodology are fairly long (hence the relatively liberal quotes above) and take careful parsing on the part of the reader to fully understand. Nevertheless, their explanations aided my understanding of ethnomethodology in particular quite a bit, although I still have my issues with the focus on “rational social behavior” and “being seen by others to be so engaged” (p. 401) that it appears to require. Their concluding statement on moving back and forth between abstract generalities and concrete particularities echoes that of other qualitative researchers—including, amongst others, Bong (2002) and Fidel (1993)—who discussed different methods of analysis; ethnomethodology clearly shares many of the same characteristics despite some of the differences between it and other qualitative methods and epistemologies. Dourish and Button’s article is clearly best suited for researchers interested in HCI, CSCW, or similar research areas; however, I would still recommend it to researchers in other areas who are interested in conducting or learning about ethnomethodology, since such studies will increasingly deal with information and communication technologies (ICTs) and systems and a technomethodological approach could prove useful.

Keywords: ethnomethodology, technomethodology, human-computer interaction, HCI, computer-supported cooperative work, CSCW, system design, rationalism, action, activity, situated action, participatory design, accounts, accountable, abstraction, ethnography