

Ethnomethodology

Definition

Ethnomethodology (EM) is the study of the ways in which an organization's staff, its members, organize and produce work in their interactions together. EM focuses on the courses of practical action and practical reasoning, or the work-practices, that inhabit work and which provide for its organized achievement. EM studies of work are particularly concerned to uncover the work-practices involved in the production of formal structures of practical action, such as policies, plans, procedures, processes, workflows, and the other structures of action that populate organizational life. Uncovering or explicating (rather than explaining) work-practice enables EM to identify how the organization itself is reflexively produced as an objective feature of everyday life by the members who inhabit it. EM uncovers work-practice by attending to the local, situated and particular details of works' collaboratively produced interactional achievement. The lived details of work make the art and craft of its achievement visible and display the real world, real time character of organization in a wide variety of occupational domains across industry, institutional life, science, medicine and the arts.

Conceptual Overview

EM initially emerged in the field of Sociology and was pioneered by Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel substituted the prevalent concern in Sociology to account for work and organization through 'generic representational theorizing' - modeling, developing coding or classification schemes, specifying ideal types, administering compliance documents such as questionnaires, etc. EM suspends the use social science accounting practices and replaces them with a concern to unpack the accounting practices that are 'endogenous' or internal to work and organization and which are, as such, a natural feature of it. Garfinkel's seminal insight is that work and organization possesses its own 'natural accountability' and that the use of extraneous accounting practices obscures this.

The core notion of 'accountability' extends in EM beyond its ordinary meaning to draw attention to the ways in which members make sense of work. Extending the philosophical insights of the later Wittgenstein, EM suggests that sense making is embodied (in conversation and gesture), material (tied to equipment, artefacts and technologies), situated (in time, place and physical environments), and achieved in concert (interactionally and collaboratively). EM takes it that the ways in which members make sense of work in the course of its production, make it accountable and intelligible to one another as it unfolds, are identical to the work-practices they devise and exploit to accomplish and organize work. Thus, in accomplishing work-practice members 'reflexively', at the same time, construct the organization of work.

This view of work and organization suspends the logic of exteriority that populates organizational theories. The logic of exteriority essentially construes of organization as a container that in diverse ways specified by the social sciences, and detailed in this encyclopedia and a veritable host of academic texts as well, shapes, constrains and coordinates the actions of individuals within. EM offers the alternate view that organization might instead be understood as a practical ordering of and arrangement to interaction. EM holds that just what the practical order and arrangement of interaction consists of in any organizational setting, and just how that order and arrangement is interactionally produced, is to be found concretely in the natural and reflexive accountability of members' work-practices.

The 'reflexivity of accounts' is a ubiquitous social phenomenon that permeates work and organization as members everywhere are constantly engaged in making their work accountable and available to one another. EM seeks to unpack the phenomenon by describing how distinct arrangements of work are 'formulated' or constructed in interaction. Initial examination of formulations in EM was directed towards unpacking the ways in which conversation is organized by members, who then as now conduct work activities in large part through talk. This line of inquiry led to the development of a specialized field of EM study, Conversation Analysis, which was championed by the late Harvey Sacks and has over the course of its development identified a sophisticated 'turn-taking machinery' organizing the production of accounts.

EM studies extend beyond a concern with the machinery organizing talk, however, to examine other ways in which work is formulated, focusing particularly on the work that talk achieves in interaction (what talk does as it unfolds or its practical effect) the equipment (documents, tools, and other artefacts) that are involved in the accomplishment of work, and the local constellations of collaboration and assistance that are involved in the production of distinct arrangements of work. This latter and more comprehensive field of study represents EM's 'radical studies of work' programme, which is occupied with the Shop-floor Problem.

The 'Shop-floor Problem' recognizes that formal structures of practical action are key ingredients in the organization of work. The Shop-floor Problem asks of formal structures of practical action, how are they produced as naturally accountable achievements of members' work? When social science accounts are consulted, the embodied, material, situated, collaborative and interactional just what and just how – or the 'haecceities' – of this achievement cannot be found. The practicalities of the achievement have been substituted for abstract accounts generated through practices of generic representational theorizing, which inevitably remove the actual details of work's achievement. There is, then, a significant gap in the social science literature on work and organization which consists in what Harvey Sacks referred to as the 'missing interactional what' of organizational studies.

EM's programme is directed towards explicating the missing interactional what of organizational studies. The programme is radical in that it inverts the accounting relationship, suspending generic representational theorizing under the policy of 'ethnomethodological indifference'. This policy, adopted from Edmund Husserl's phenomenological investigations of the origins of natural science, sets social science accounting practices aside on the basis that the natural accountability of work and organization is necessarily substituted by them. Alternately, EM accounts for work and organization by describing the haecceities that inhabit work and which make it visible on any occasion as the work that it uniquely is. These detailed portraits of work replace abstract, decontextualized and generic accounts with 'corrigible sketch accounts' that exhibit the lived production of formal structures of practical action on the shop floor and wherever else it is that work is carried out.

EM studies of work are done through ethnographic practices of data collection (e.g., participant observation and the gathering of data through the production of field notes, photography, audio and video recording, and the collection of artefacts from the setting, such as documents, process descriptions and job descriptions). EM's use of ethnographic methods differs from anthropological uses in one crucial respect, however: EM replaces the contemporary ethnographic concern with analytic reflexivity, or the act of ethnography and

ethnographic reportage, with a concern to satisfy the 'unique adequacy requirement of methods'. This demands that the analyst suspend concerns with his or her relation to members, and the ways in which he or she may influence our understanding of work and organization, and instead *develop competence in the work under study*. The unique adequacy requirement of methods is a requirement for the analyst to be able to recognize work in its detail as members recognize it and recognize the work-practices that organize it. It is not a requirement for the analyst to 'go native', but to understand just what the missing interactional what consists of and just how work is thereby organized and produced by members on the 'shop floor'.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

The critical emphasis of EM is on descriptive adequacy and the ways in which generic representational theorising is used as means of representing work and organization. This method of representation, which inevitably transforms naturally accountable features of work and organization into abstract signs indicative of general and even universal phenomenon, is insufficient for understanding the interactional production of work and organization, and so EM dispenses with it. EM is not concerned then with the integration of its findings with organizational theory, managerial or otherwise, or with the further development of theory, for EM has *no work* for theory to do. EM instead places critical emphasis on the explication of working practice and working competence through careful description of the naturally accountable ways in which an organization's staff orient to work from within their local and situated circumstances and display the practical relevancies of its production to one another over the unfolding course of 'getting the work done'. Thus, EM suspends the use of generic representational theorising to describe work and organization and instead describes and represents work in terms of the phenomenal field properties of ordinary human jobs.

EM's unique focus on work has contributed to a critical understanding of work and organization in a three main ways. Firstly, EM has unpacked the lived production of work and organization in a wide variety of different settings: industrial, entrepreneurial, financial, government, law and order, transport, medicine, and science to name but a few. Secondly, these studies have permitted the explication of recurrent activities and themes such as, rationality, planning, coordination, rule use, calculation, measurement, knowledge management, representation, decision-making, competence, skill, and so on. Thirdly, with its interactional focus on the embodied, material and situated character of work, EM has made a strong contribution to understanding the social character of technology in work and organization. EM studies of work place emphasis on technology as a socio-technical system and address the practical incorporation of technology into the everyday working world. This strand of research has been of particular utility to the development of Information Technology for the workplace. EM studies have been and continue to be a stable feature of dedicated fields of IT research, particularly Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), and they are exploited today in academic and industrial contexts alike. The purchase of EM studies in this context lies in the attention paid to actual technology use, which largely goes unnoticed in other sociological studies of technology, and to the working knowledge, practices and competences that the effective incorporation of IT into work and organization relies upon. In short, EM studies make the organizationally embedded nature of technology use visible and support the design of IT systems that resonate with the real world, real time nature of work.

While incommensurable with conventional social science studies, EM need not be seen and treated as antithetical to or in competition with them as it often is by opponents and proponents alike. An alternate position might be adopted instead where, in addressing the missing interactional what of organizational studies, EM is seen and treated as asymmetrical but complementary insofar as it addresses the gap in the literature that inevitably emerges from practices of generic representational theorizing. The future of EM does not turn upon its reconciliation with conventional studies, however, even when treated as complementary literatures on work and organization with one articulating formal structures of practical action and the other displaying the art and craft of their interactional production. Rather, the future of EM turns upon the 'hybridisation' of the studies of work programme. The status of EM studies in IT research provides a concrete example of what it is meant by hybridisation: the incorporation of EM studies into the *practice* of technology research and development. Hybridisation sees EM move out of its sociological home and become part and parcel of new professions such that, for example, studies of technology use become part and parcel of the practice of technology design in the workplace. The principal challenge for EM is to continue its diversification, moving away from its sociological home into organizational practice to support effective sociological intervention in the business of everyday life.

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Cross-references

Accountability, Ethnography, Phenomenology, Reflexivity, Symbolic Interactionism.

Further Readings and References

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