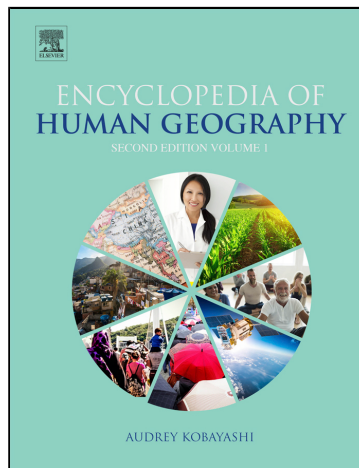


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Ethnomethodology/Ethnomethodological Geography

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Glossary

Epistopics A series of epistemic themes and classical sources of theoretical problems in natural and social sciences such as observation, replication, measurement, imagination, and explanation. Ethnomethodology seeks a return to them as ordinary practices (e.g., birdwatchers observing eagles, neurologists redoing an experiment, economists measuring hospital efficiency, landscape gardeners imagining a new shrubbery, and explaining why one was so upset at work today) and in doing so removes the metaphysical aura of these grand topics.

Hecceity What makes an object uniquely what it is, or, the “just thisness” of a thing. In ethnomethodology, there is a desire to get away from assuming we know what even the most ordinary things are and follow what all the “this” and “that” are of any action, event, conversation, and so on.

Indexicality A long-standing and underpinning term in ethnomethodology. Simply put, the relevance, meaning, appropriateness, and correctness of any expression varies as it is put to use in different settings, by different agents, and at different times. Indexicality causes endless problems for those who would try and replace subjective expressions with objective expressions. Nevertheless, and confusingly to many who would assume otherwise, indexical expressions can, and do, nevertheless have rational properties.

Ironic attitude A common stance of the social sciences toward members of societies’ understanding of events, that what is happening is “not” what they think is happening; it only seems to be like that. From the point of view of the skeptical social scientist, something else is going on. Such an attitude usually substitutes the intelligibility of action at source with explanations from theory that thereby ironize the words and deeds of members.

Respecification Rather than building new theories or models of society, ethnomethodology respecifies existing epistopics in light of ordinary practice. There is a desire to investigate foundational matters in human geography and the social sciences more widely through empirical studies. Bewilderingly, for social scientists that hope for laws or unchanging rules that govern society, ethnomethodological studies do not lead to generalization, instead they surprise from actuality and, sometimes, a form of therapy for the troubles of generalization in the social sciences.

Skepticism Related to the ironic attitude, ethnomethodology is a response to the skeptical attitude in the social sciences which constantly questions whether members of society see things as they really are or are being duped by other (usually larger) actors or foundational ideologies. Ethnomethodology does not seek to defeat the powerful skepticism of the social sciences, rather to show how it reduces, or just misses, all manner of wonderful sense and sense making in human practice.

Unique adequacy Worried about the social sciences’ tendency to miss the core of what constitutes numerous practical fields of activity, ethnomethodology suggests that its students should achieve at least a vulgar competence in the skills of the groups they are studying. If students remain incompetent in the practices they wish to depict or, to put it more politely, retain a disengaged perspective, they will miss what the activity consists of in terms of its skills, rules, morals, reason, order, and more.

Ethnomethodology is the study of the ordinary methods used jointly by members of particular cultures to produce and negotiate recognizable and reasonable social orders. While its name can seem confusing at first glance, it follows a similar logic as related terms such as ethnobotany or ethnomusicology, which study different societies’ knowledges and practices related to plants and music, respectively. Similarly, ethnomethodology concerns itself with the knowledges and practices involved in social activities, thus taking interest in a wide range of practices as different as how street sellers pitch their wares and how social scientists code interview transcripts.

Crucially, this approach departs from mainstream social science’s explanatory enterprises because it does not seek to ironize practices as the outcome of underlying social or cultural factors. Rather, an ethnomethodological approach assumes and acknowledges that members possess, demonstrate, and reevaluate practical knowledge (phronesis) of their ordinary affairs and organized enterprises through their ongoing embodied production of social facts. “Members” itself is a broad term which encompasses human members of groups or communities that can extend to nonhuman animals or machine agents. The simple definition of the study of members’ methods belies a long-standing contentious relationship with the social sciences and an engagement with ordinary practice in the face of theorization and modeling that is as powerful as it is puzzling. Ethnomethodology remains at odds with many approaches in human geography because it assumes that order is locally accomplished, it treats action as already accountable, it dismisses the majority of other work in the social sciences as ironic in its attitude toward actors, it is deeply critical of most studies that draw on the concept of cognition, and it routinely returns to and relies on detailed empirical studies as a way of resolving theoretical problems.

Origins

Ethnomethodology as a distinctive approach is commonly accepted to have been initiated by Harold Garfinkel in the 1950s in response to a series of problems he had come upon, initially, in the 1930s and subsequently in pursuing his Ph.D. in the 1940s under the supervision of sociologist Talcott Parsons. Garfinkel's initial work was contemporary with that of Ludwig Wittgenstein and C. Wright Mills, sharing their concerns with the limitations of rules, references, and individualism that had been commonly provided as solutions to the problem of meaning and intelligibility. It was the publication of *Studies in ethnomethodology* in the late 1960s that really brought what had by then already become a congregation of practitioners (including Egon Bittner, Ed Rose, and Aaron Cicourel) to the attention of the social sciences more widely. At this stage, ethnomethodology's practitioners were centered around the University of California's campuses and attracted a reputation for being both a committed community of scholars, and yet something of a cult. It was also at this stage that Harvey Sacks was collaborating with Harold Garfinkel in a fruitful partnership that led to the initiation of conversation analysis as a fraternal twin of ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology caught the attention of a number of young scholars, such as Lucy Suchman, David Sudnow, Lawrence Wieder, Wes Sharrock, Peter McHugh, Jeff Coulter, and Rod Watson, who went on to become significant figures in the social sciences. During this period, practice of ethnomethodology spread beyond the Anglophone academy, becoming established in France and Japan as well.

While ethnomethodology does not appear to have been adopted as an approach by human geographers during its inception, it was, and remains, congruent with the concurrent concerns of humanistic and phenomenological practitioners in the human geography of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, with the cultural turn in human geography starting in the 1980s, there has come a renewed commitment to, and concern with, place over more abstract conceptions of space. Contemporary human geography still has a deeper affinity with the early and later concerns of ethnomethodology in its attendance to the conjoinedness of human practices and the distribution of agency. Moreover, ethnomethodology and human geography are both concerned with how it is that similar forms of agency, subjectivity, or identity emerge differently in each and every place.

Key Concepts

One should be very cautious about producing a list of "key concepts" in ethnomethodology. Indeed, a central pursuit in ethnomethodological studies is the respecification and clearing away of key concepts in light of detailed investigations of particular cases and settings. Notionally, any concept is therefore liable to respecification, if not removal, in the same way that concepts from social or cultural theory have been open to destabilization and rereading through the approach of deconstruction. There are also harmonies with a human geography influenced by versions of poststructuralism that has sought to replace the singular and overarching grand theory with more modest and plural theories. Ethnomethodology diverges from many of the more philosophically grounded post-structural geographies by prioritizing detailed inquiries into practice.

What is "methodological" about ethnomethodology is the focus on the logic of practices which emerge in social situations. The idea of logic here is one that sees it as reflexively tied to the practice rather than an external one that might see the practice as either illogical or driven by ideology, explained by gender, and so on. This focus on the logic distinctive to, and emerging in, each practice is applied across the board, from ordinary social situations, such as queuing for a bus, to social scientists doing standardized surveys. The lack of acceptance of an in-principle distinction between social science methodologies and other more mundane practices has led to some hostility toward ethnomethodology. While it seeks to raise mundane methods to an equal footing with more formal methodologies, it has at times been interpreted as criticizing the epistemological position of social scientific inquiry.

In providing a brief list here, the aim is not to limit the concepts nor recommend what ethnomethodology should study. The aim here is instead to offer a short list of the sorts of concepts that have already been the subject of rigorous study by ethno-inquirers and help ground the more general comments made above.

Accountability

Accountability is often understood as definitively characteristic of institutions such as governments and professional bodies which have to provide justifications of their collective actions. In contrast, ethnomethodology explores accountability as an accomplishment, background expectation, and ongoing concern of human action in all settings. Accountability is used somewhat interchangeably with the compound word observable-reportable. What we do as, for instance, a local councilor or Jenny's girlfriend, has the characteristic of being always observable and reportable but also closely tied to our identities as a particular agent (e.g., member of government, member of an intimate relationship). All human practices, be they of the investigator or the member of cultures, are taken to be more, or less, accountable to those involved in them. How we "see" and speak of the reason, morality, and motives of others (and of ourselves) is thoroughly bound up with the observability and reportability of those practices and, equally, our seeing and speaking has its observable and reportable characteristics.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity follows on from this understanding of accountability. In the social sciences the dominant view of reflexivity is that it is a privileged and expert maneuver of social scientists that allows them to lift themselves one step up, above naïve uses and

understandings of language. Such perspectives posit that the social sciences are aware of how certain words or images are ideologically loaded or incorporate hidden meanings, and must therefore investigate their (i.e., the investigator's) speech and writing for similar investments. Ethnomethodology also puts reflexivity at the heart of its study of human affairs but by treating it as incarnate in all human affairs. In line with raising members' practices onto the level with the social sciences, members are equally capable of taking one step up and commenting on their and others' modes of expression. Ethnomethodology cuts itself adrift from foundational social science by taking social order as locally produced in whatever settings, descriptions, or representations of particular courses of action which are reflexive to those self-same settings. Reflexivity thus overlaps with accountability in the ongoing production of order in each and every place in the world.

Action

Ethnomethodology is concerned with practical action and sees social order as the outcome of members assembling stable situations of action in local sites of production. This understanding of locally produced social orders leads to the study of cultures and societies as the ongoing, practical achievement of local actors by jointly enacting, communicating, resisting, and repairing the task(s) at hand. Ethnomethodology's in-vivo ordering stands in contrast to foundational approaches which would predetermine what sort of action is being studied, and thus would conduct an analysis according to an *a priori* theory. Rather, ethnomethodological studies bracket the action in order to attend to the processes of judgment and claims-making at work as participants produce, maintain, and sometimes transform local social orders.

Programs

Ethnomethodology began with the problem of how social order is produced (in common with actor-network theory and Foucauldian theory). The attempt to reveal inadequate theoretical accounts of social order was operationalized in Garfinkel's famous "breaching experiments," which were designed to cause the collapse of social order by breaking rules which were claimed to be fundamental to social order. Garfinkel had his students carried out experiments which disrupted the intelligibility of various places, such as acting as lodgers within their own home or refusing to pay the display price of items in shops. Rather than social order collapsing, as structural functionalism (a dominant social theory of the era) had posited, it was kept in place, although not without all manner of trouble, complaints, and unexpected discounts for Garfinkel's students in department stores.

As noted earlier, the first and most famous offshoot of ethnomethodology is conversation analysis (CA). CA is concerned with the ways in which speakers speak together and are also analysts of the very conversation that they are ongoingly having with one another. What is ethnomethodological about CA is that it studies the members' analysis of their own conversation in each turn of talk and the members' analysis takes precedent over the professional and/or scientific abstractions of how conversation functions or a particular sentence might be explained by class, gender, or race. However, and somewhat confusingly, in an increasing number of its studies, conversation analysis has also ended up becoming a technical study of language in-interaction that risks supplanting the emergent understandings and methods of members with its own more technical and prescriptive lexicon. An example is a "minimal post expansion" which is a term for a turn in talk that happens after paired turns of talk. So, when one speaker requests information, the other supplies it and then, after that pair of turns, the first speaker says "oh," which would be described as a minimal post expansion. This instance hints at the abiding problem of technical terms in an approach that values members' understandings. In short, when an analyst becomes preoccupied with matching observed methods to preconceived lists, they risk disregarding members' understandings of the situation itself.

Conversation analysis began in the early 1960s with Harvey Sacks looking at the detailed methods used by speakers during phone calls. His studies were unusual at the time for making extensive use of audio recordings of actual phone calls to a suicide helpline and between friends, along with other sources of conversation on the phone. Drawing on these materials, he respecified a number of major philosophical topics such as measurement, observation, and mind. Of great importance were how speakers relied on, and put to use, membership categorization devices and the sequential properties of talk. This work led ultimately to one of the most cited papers of all time in the social sciences, the coauthored article on the turn-taking mechanism. For analyzing transcripts, conversation analysis has been taken up in human geography as an alternative to software-assisted coding. Where the latter is driven by content, the former examines the meeting point between content and process. Conversation analysis helps us grasp not only what people have said but how they said it and what they were trying to achieve at the time.

A second branch of ethnomethodology, and one that is perhaps the most obviously geographical, is workplace studies, which takes as its concern the production of order in each particular setting of work. While these studies range across scientific laboratories, truck garages, martial arts studios, court rooms, classrooms, banks, and air traffic control centers, they have a common concern with the routine features of each workplace as they are produced ongoingly, day by day. These workplace features are not merely routine; they are also taken to be the objective, if disputable, phenomena of these workplaces. The constitutive gap between their objective qualities and their indexicality remains the significant focus for workplace studies.

Ongoing debates regarding the political capacities of ethnomethodology have also generated a considerable body of work. While ethnomethodology has been employed to study politics in action, e.g., in studies of US presidential debates, civil service policy-making, political activism, as a field ethnomethodology has traditionally been viewed as apolitical, particularly in light of its policy of "Ethnomethodological indifference" between social science methods and other members' methods. This prescription

of “indifference” appears to have broadened to an indifference to the political stances and claims made by critical theorists. Its attention to the heterogeneity of practices and accounts of interactions, however, has inspired scholars such as A.W. McHoul to propose a politically inflected ethnomethodology rooted in the description of power as it operates in everyday practical actions. Such claims have received criticism, notably by David Bogen and Michael Lynch, who argue against presumptions that this kind of “critical” work will help resist disciplinary power and that, instead, it risks creating ironic descriptions of parties’ actions. Although these disagreements suggest limitations to ethnomethodology’s ability to be used to intervene into the situations of everyday politics, equally Bogen and Lynch warn against assumptions that its practice is a strictly apolitical affair. As Harvey Sacks himself pointed out, the very perception of an event is a distributional phenomenon, such that a notable event like the presence of police on a street corner might communicate safety to some persons, while others perceive an increased risk of danger. Sacks alludes to an everyday politics at work in description as a type of witnessing and acknowledgment, and which resonates with contemporary political action and controversies such as the increasing the video-recording of police violence in relationship to race. The mediated ordinary practices of documentation, presentation, and moral claims-making bespeak a politically engaged practice of ethnomethodology.

For a while it seemed like ethnomethodology, with its ethos of having its practitioners become their phenomena (e.g., to study law become a lawyer, to study jazz learn to play jazz piano), might disappear into other professional fields entirely; however, in two interdisciplinary realms it has reappeared as a significant school: human–computer interaction (HCI) and science and technology studies (STS). Whether ethnomethodology will become an established program in geography is not yet clear, though it has influenced work in wayfinding, geographies of mobility, moral geographies, and media geographies.

The grounds for the establishment of an ethnomethodological program in geography would, at first glance, be its harmonies and conflicts with the archeological approach of Michel Foucault, ethnomethodology’s contributions to social studies of science and technology, and ethnomethodology’s ways of describing everyday life and the ordinary. There are at least two further connections between ethnomethodology and human geography. The first is in its treatment of speech as action and its attention to materially embodied possibilities, which allies it with more-than-representational theory and assemblage theory. It also shares with both, attention to process-based ontologies, how orders are stabilized and the emergence and distribution of agency. The second is in its revivification of the centrality of responding to empirical materials and fieldwork in particular places, be they road traffic control centers or family homes, in the service of respecifying the theoretical problems that always beset human geography.

Central Misunderstandings

Ethnomethodology seems to have suffered more misunderstandings than most approaches in the social sciences. Had ethnomethodology come into being in era of poststructuralism and posthumanism rather than in the midst of the postwar positivist dominance in the social sciences, there might have been far fewer. Three such misunderstandings are particularly prominent and worth summarizing here:

1. Ethnomethodology is not the collecting and documenting of various sorts of “folk wisdom” that either underlie or distort more scientific knowledge of the world. An ethnomethodological geography would not supply “folk geographies”; to do so would be to ironize how knowing certain things constitutes certain communities and equally how certain communities make sense of their actions. There is a subtle distinction between the idea of the ordinary and how the term “folk” is used in contrast with scientific knowledge.
2. Ethnomethodology is not a method. Unsurprisingly, given the positioning of methodology in its title, many scholars assume that ethnomethodology is a methodology of the social sciences or is a variant on ethnography. It is neither. As noted at the beginning of this article, it is the study of methodologies, be they those of members of a queue at a bus stop or members of a neuroscience lab examining images from electron microscopes. Many ethnomethodologists use ethnographic methods given their harmony with its desire to understand communities and settings from the inside.
3. Ethnomethodological studies are not microstudies. Because ethnomethodology remains stubbornly attached to studying the details of diverse local sites of action, such as following a route shown on a smartphone, a conversation among teenagers, or learning to play piano, it is often taken to task for missing structures that operate at a larger scale. However, the idea of how a larger context or scale exists in ethnomethodological studies is the same as the treatment of scale or context in actor–network and assemblage theory. Large-scale structures are, in their hecceities, inevitably and reflexively encountered locally. The questions raised in ethnomethodology and actor–network theory are: how do they go about “localizing” themselves and how do they go about “extending” themselves into other places, in other words, how do grow and operate at a distance. Equally there is a shared concern with whether, and how, larger contexts (i.e., the “macro”) are made locally available and locally recognizable in any particular course of action.

Future Directions

To maintain its vigor ethnomethodology has been hybridized with other disciplines and crafts. As noted earlier, the meeting of computing science with ethnomethodology in the interdisciplinary zone of HCI gave fresh impetus to ethnomethodology's workplace investigations. The craft skills of writing software and building prototypes required the forms of detailed description of work practice that ethnomethodologists were exceptionally good at offering. Equally, the marrying of science studies and ethnomethodology in the work of Lynch, Livingston, Bjelić, and others has brought a number of new concerns to ethnomethodology which are central topics in the scientific method such as epistemology, evidence, and equipment.

Where human geography might further entwine with ethnomethodology is, first, in a concern with both epistemologies and ontologies. In terms of epistemological concerns, context, observation, representation, and imagination are topics that ethnomethodology has worked on. The ontologies of agents and entities have been pursued in world-making and world-sustaining practices that we find in workplaces such as laboratories or more familiar settings such as family homes. Second, there are a number of vernacular geographies that exist outside of human geography as a discipline and institution, and that are of interest to human geographers and ethnomethodologists. These are the vernacular geographical knowledges that proliferate and transform into new variants of geography. Such wild geographies can be found in how, for instance, tourists find their way around cities, how place-based identities such as a café's "regulars" are recognized and displayed, and how a particular public responds to speech that connects race and place. Ethnomethodology offers one of the ways that human geography can draw succor from these wild variants rooted in other life-worlds than the academy.

Critiques

Because of its desire not to ironize ordinary practices, to deal instead with local actions and their accountability, ethnomethodological studies may find themselves subject to criticism around the oblique way they approach central concerns of the social sciences such as gender, race, class, and age. If participants in the setting under study are not attending to them in the ways that an external social scientist might, then ethnomethodological studies will not shoehorn them in. As a result, many studies either do no touch on those topics or arrive at them in a roundabout fashion. Garfinkel's work about "Agnes," a transsexual, is a classic in gender studies that continues to influence current work on the performativity of gender. On reading it, it does not, however, set out the social science framework on gender at the time. In Sacks' examination of how witnesses report events, social science political topics *do* crop up in members' actions. In both these classic works, these social science topics feature in unexpected ways.

Over the years, one of the founding figures of actor-network theory, Bruno Latour, has grown increasingly sympathetic to ethnomethodology. His initial responses were somewhat more critical than we now find him and connect to the earlier misunderstandings of the micro in ethnomethodology. In his first engagement, he was uneasy about the lack of a "big picture" or, rather, the confusing qualities when small things were rendered large. Commenting on an ethnomethodological study of a laboratory, Latour said that in reading the study, he had the same sensation as reading a newspaper through a microscope: he claimed that the study's orientation to tiny details left him desperate to zoom out because he could not see what the thing was when it was so close up. In making this claim, Latour is not suggesting that the details of a particular practice or scientific laboratory are unimportant. What he wants is the ethnomethodologist to travel away from the local worksite to see how it is connected to other worksites as he done so successfully in tracking the geographies of scientific data collection, process analysis, and publication. There is no strong reason why ethnomethodologists do not follow chains of connection between worksites as actor-network theory often has, though ethnomethodologists would be looking for a group whose daily business also was to follow those sorts of connections, rather than trying to invent a new methodology for the social sciences that provides a distinct but still privileged perspective on the action.

Perhaps the most substantial critique of ethnomethodology comes from Alan Blum and Peter McHugh whose school of analysis grew out of ethnomethodology. Their critique remains, like Latour's, an understanding of ethnomethodology that is sympathetic, informed, and productive. What formed their point of departure from ethnomethodology was a disinterest in doing field studies and a return to theorizing. A move which in itself appears antithetical to the spirit of ethnomethodology as pursued by Garfinkel and Sacks, though it is worth noting not by other early figures in ethnomethodology (e.g., Ed Rose) and later ones (e.g., Alec McHoul). The reason there is continuity with ethnomethodology is that, for self-reflection, the desire to respect ordinary language and to use it in responding to theories that emerged from the social sciences is retained. Their critique of ethnomethodology resides in an argument more complex than can be rehearsed here. We can make brief mention of self-reflection's reconsideration of, first, whether it is necessary to avoid irony in describing members' actions because being ironic is not the same as being invidious. Second, ethnomethodology, argue Blum and McHugh, reaffirms social convention when it could question it, and as a result ethnomethodology refuses to exercise its authority. Third, and surprisingly, given its desire to in some ways celebrate ordinary members of societies, ethnomethodology is pessimistic about their potential to become principled actors. It leaves the actor to be as they were, before the researcher arrived.

Conclusion

As a practice of and disposition toward the study of social life, ethnomethodology resonates with geography's ongoing empirical study of social practices, embodiment, language, scientific knowledge, work, and spaces of encounter. Although many

misunderstandings have stemmed from ethnomethodology's name itself, more substantive criticisms have opened still-to-be-resolved questions about ethnomethodology's capacity and apparent disinclination to contribute to a traditional political critique. Yet, ethnomethodology's orientation to ordinary practices and forensic attention to just how things get done in particular places can also contribute to the respecification of abiding theoretical problems in human geography. It is a body of work which prioritizes attentiveness and care for the experiences of others rather than prescriptivist theories about others' lives.

See Also: Ethnography.

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Relevant Websites

- <http://www.iiemca.org>. The International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis. The web pages of the organization for ethnomethodological studies which has a blog, list of major figures in the field and links to other resources.
- <https://emcadoctoralnetwork.wordpress.com>. The EMCA Doctoral Network is a unique community for students interested in the interrelated fields of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA).
- http://emcawiki.net/Main_Page. EMCA Wiki is an frequently updated website on Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis. It has bibliographies of EMCA publications, information about upcoming conferences, current job openings and resources for teaching.