

# *What does ‘work’ mean in ‘ethnomethodological studies of work?’: Its ubiquitous relevance for systems design to support action and interaction*

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*In computer systems design, ethnomethodology is seen as a form of ethnography that emphasises situated work practices and the workplace. However, designers have increasingly taken an interest in developing systems to support non-work matters such as social networking, gaming, and fun, and non-work settings such as the home. Some have, therefore, suggested that ethnography driven by interests in work practice is not relevant for these new developments because they do not involve matters of work, and that, consequently, a new form of ethnography is required. This paper critically addresses this argument and contends that ethnography can be analytically grounded in ethnomethodology as a ubiquitous method for building ‘the social’ into systems design.*

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A ubiquitous and omni-relevant question for designers is how to do ‘better’ design. Reflection on, or studies of design practice can be engaged in to improve that practice. Another way is to attempt to ground design, or those areas of design that are appropriate or amenable, in a methodology that is generative of practice. A significant methodological development in the design of computer systems (especially those aimed at the workplace) that began more than two decades ago but has particularly gathered pace more recently, is the importation of *ethnography*<sup>1</sup> from the human sciences as a method for building ‘the social’ into their design. By attending to social matters such as the nature of the work and the organisational context of use, system designers have sought to better design systems by improving their usability as a systematic, methodical manner. Ethnography is now: deployed in University and Corporate research activities; taught in University Computer Science Departments; and offered by consulting organisations, all of which can be witnessed and attested to in systems’ design conferences such as CHI, CSCW, ECSW and COOP, for example.

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a system would be used by some systems designers might be in danger of losing its initial bite. This was because that interest was not so much fuelled by the method of ethnography itself, which specified observation from within the context, but from a particular sociological perspective that used, in part, ethnographic fieldwork techniques to make those observations: *ethnomethodology*, especially *ethnomethodological studies of work* (Garfinkel, 1967, 1986).<sup>2</sup> It was noted, then, that ethnography was not all of a piece, and it was argued that the general development of ethnography in systems design, as merely anthropological or sociological fieldwork - scenic ethnography as it was referred to - as opposed to analytic ethnography, as embodied in ethnomethodological studies of human action and interaction, would impoverish what was the development of an interesting method in the design of computer systems.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, since that article was written, designers of workplace systems, and researchers into the design of workplace systems have, as indicated above, embraced ethnography. For example, a recent collection by Szymanski and Whalen (2011), gathers together a number of studies of design and studies of use and the workplace done by Xerox researchers under the auspices of work practice studies propelled by an ethnomethodological concern with social action and interaction. The emphasis on *work practice*, as exemplified in this collection and in many other ethnomethodologically oriented work may, however, give rise to a problem for those in the design community who are interested in the development of a method for doing design as a way of improving design practice with regard to the social. Simply, a method for building in the social into design implies ubiquitous relevancy across social matters, but the emphasis upon *work practice* in ethnomethodological studies of work would seem to limit ethnomethodology's relevance to just the workplace or to work related activities.

Certainly this is something that has been picked up in the research community concerned with systems design (Bell, Blythe, Gaver, Sengers, & Wright, 2003). It is argued that systems design is more and more involved in the design of systems for environments outside of the workplace such as systems for the home, and for people on the move, and for other activities to those of work-related activities such as social networking, fun and gaming. Consequently, an ethnography that focuses, as ethnomethodology has done, upon work practices in the workplace would not be appropriate for design in these other environments and for other than work activities. A new form of ethnography, such as one that produces critical readings of a culture and of society, is required.

If this argument was correct then ethnomethodologically driven ethnography would not, as was previously argued (Button, 2000) be appropriate for the development of a ubiquitous methodology for building the social into the design of computer systems, and the previous argument that it offers the opportunity for a more rigorous design methodology than scenic ethnography would have

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