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# Garfinkel on strategy: Using ethnomethodology to make sense of “rubbish strategy”

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### ABSTRACT

This paper has three aims. First, it presents what the term ethnomethodology means and explains some of its central concepts and tenets. Second, the paper illustrates an ethnomethodological approach to studying strategy by drawing on a fieldwork study of the development of a waste management strategy in a UK Local Authority, conducted by the first author. Third, the distinctive approach that ethnomethodology takes to the study of social organization is presented in order to outline what it could offer to the understanding of *strategic* organization in particular. The paper concludes by discussing the insights that ethnomethodology can offer in the strategic management field, including existing applications and potential future lines of enquiry, particularly in the field known as Strategy-as-Practice. The conclusion advocates a move away from rational analytic models, proclamations and prescriptive treatments of strategy towards studying the more mundane work that enables strategic action to take place, notably the production of *accounts* of various kinds. It is argued that through accounts, members produce the social facts that generate ‘strategies’ of various kinds. This necessitates studying fact production ‘in flight’. Strategic organization is thereby conceptualised as an ongoing achievement of member’s ethno- methods for producing it.

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## 1. Introduction: Harold Garfinkel and ethnomethodology

During his lifetime and since his death in 2011, Garfinkel has achieved the status of one of the most original thinkers in sociology. The publication in 1967 of Garfinkel’s landmark text, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, divided academic opinion. It was met with vehement criticism by ‘mainstream’ sociologists of the time. Even now, ethnomethodology retains a somewhat elusive and unorthodox position in its ‘home’ discipline of sociology, and is certainly far from mainstream in the business and management field. From its inception, ethnomethodology was never a unified field or single theory. Equally, today it is best described as a splintered set of related sub-fields (Button, 1991). One of the most significant relationships is that between ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA), the latter field emerging from the work of Harvey Sacks. Some people use the term EM/CA to highlight this link (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010).

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Our aim in this paper is threefold. First, we seek to discuss what the term ethnomethodology (EM) means and explain some of its central concepts and tenets. Second, we illustrate an ethnomethodological approach to studying strategy by drawing on a fieldwork study of the development of a waste management strategy in a UK Local Authority, conducted by the first author. Third and finally, we discuss the distinctive approach that EM takes to the study of social organization and what it could offer to the understanding of *strategic* organization in particular. We conclude by discussing the insights that EM can offer in the strategic management field, including existing applications and potential future lines of enquiry, particularly in the field known as Strategy-as-Practice (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010). As such, we aim to outline how future strategy research can address Clegg, Kornberger and Carter's (2004, p. 25) plea to "focus on the ethnomethods of everyday strategists".

### 1.1. What is ethnomethodology?

The term 'ethnomethodology' can be quite confusing because it is not itself a research 'method' or 'methodology' like, say, interviews or questionnaires. Nor is it a social 'theory' as such (Button, 1991). Rather, it is a distinct way of doing social science. Button (1991, p. 1) describes EM as a "foundational respecification of the human sciences". EM seeks to 're-specify' the issues, topics and concepts of mainstream social science. The term "re-specify" refers to taking those concepts used within mainstream functionalist social science to explain social action, such as 'rules' or 'norms', and study them as endogenous accomplishments of knowledgeable members of society rather than exogenous 'facts' or 'forces' that cause social order (Button, 1991). EM *inquires* into what conventional sociologists view as their *foundations*: namely, the existence of social facts. Garfinkel (1967, p. 79) referred to this as studying "fact production in flight".

It may be useful to break the term ethnomethodology down into its component parts. "Ethno" refers to a social or cultural group, however large or small. This could be a small project team, an organization or a whole institutional field. "Method" refers to the methods or procedures that competent members of that group use to go about their social life. And finally "ology" simply means "the study of". Put simply, then, ethnomethodology is the study of the practical methods through which members of a particular social group accomplish social order and organization. Take a simple example like a cough. A cough can of course be merely a physiological response to needing to clear one's throat, but it can also be a *social* method (an 'ethno-method') for, say, signalling disagreement, displaying scepticism about an account, interrupting someone, or signalling that someone is blocking your path.

The answer to the question of precisely *which* of these various 'senses' of the cough applies on any given occasion is generated by the *stock of social knowledge* (Schutz, 1967, p. 80) that competent members of a social group use to 'recognise' its meaning in that context. For example, members may have knowledge that, in particular situations, coughs that are particularly elongated, particularly short, particularly over-dramatised, or accompanied by a 'roll of the eyes' signal that cough is not just 'clearing the throat' but has a different social meaning. Thus, EM is fundamentally about sensemaking – how people make sense of (and in so doing *constitute*) their social world. As such, EM has shared concerns with sensemaking research inspired by Weick (1969, 1995) – an important connection with Brown's (2017) paper in this special issue. Certainly, Garfinkel had an intellectual influence on Weick's work. Handel (1982) also makes the sensemaking link explicit in his book title *Ethnomethodology: How People Make Sense*. While ethnomethodologists might not use the term sensemaking itself very often, they do use terms such as "reasoning procedures" and "inferential practices" to describe similar ideas (Samra-Fredericks, 2010a, p. 231).

Notwithstanding this link to sensemaking research, EM is not interested in the private cognitive processes commonly involved in approaches to sensemaking underpinned by social psychology (e.g. Weick, 1969, 1995). The interest is in those methods through which members *socially display* their "sense" in ways that make inter-subjective organized action possible. For example, members will *display* the meaning they took from a cough in their next action – making these ethno-methods *available for empirical study*. This is also an important methodological point: the analyst does not seek to provide their own second-order theoretical explanation of "what is going on here". Rather, they seek to study how order is generated within the first-order methods – what Button (1991) calls "theories-in-use" – employed by members themselves. Hence, the analyst sticks to "what is demonstrably orientated to by the participants themselves" in their next action (Samra-Fredericks, 2010b, p. 2149). This is done by undertaking fieldwork observation or audio- or video-recording this activity as it happens. Hence, EM is not simply a set of theoretical constructs to guide inquiry but is a thoroughly empirical programme of research that seeks to uncover the methods that constitute social organization – whether that is the social organization of coughing or the social organization that accomplishes what we call "strategy".

While the recognisability of coughs seems far away from the field of strategic management, it is precisely this same approach that an ethnomethodological approach to strategy would wish to study. What ethno-methods do strategists use to come to recognise an environmental change as a "threat" or "opportunity"? Or a set of internal activities as a "strength" or "weakness"? What ethno-methods are used to decide what is the organization's "core competence" or "dynamic capability"? In fact, this programme of research is already underway thanks to the ethnomethodological work by Samra-Fredericks (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2010a, 2010b), which has given rich insights into how strategists come to "recognise" and produce accounts of their strategic options, such as when and why to make acquisitions, what their core competencies were, and how to secure competitive advantage vis-à-vis rivals.

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