

Preface

This book addresses a number of somewhat under-emphasised themes in the ethnomethodological literature. The first is *consociation*, the social organisation of patterns of coordinated action which extend in space and time. Although formal and informal organisations, groups and institutions have often been the sites of ethnomethodological investigations, only occasionally has their character as socially constructed collectivities been studied. Instead, investigations have tended to narrow in on the interactional features of joint action. Picking up themes from some of the earliest work within Ethnomethodology and from our own previous studies, we ask how hierarchically, temporally and spatially extended sequences of action are achieved as the accomplished lived-work of organisational life. How are accountable joint action sequences produced by members of organisations in those circumstances where the usual resources of face-to-face communication cannot be invoked?

Second, we focus on senior managers and executives, a group which has been almost entirely overlooked. In particular, we look at *executive management as a finite province of meaning*; that domain of organisational action construed in terms of the expectations, motivations, attitudes and shared understandings of the group usually described as providing overall direction and leadership to the organisation. In doing so, we offer an initial description of some aspects of the interior configuration of the world of executive management as the encountered, day-in, day-out experience of managing – what their experience of managing comes to as a course of life's work.

Third, we centre our discussion on executive documents and related objects, a class of phenomena which has had a relatively low profile in ethnomethodological reports. By treating these and similar artefacts as *ordering devices*, we bring out their central contribution to the accomplishment of organisational consociation. In particular, we draw attention to how their socially organised features are made available to members of the local setting and so facilitate the production and reproduction of standardly structured, uniquely performed patterns of action; that is, how predictable types of action are brought off through the specificities (the 'haecceities') of any particular occasion. Following Dorothy Smith's original lead, we aim to re-emphasise and extend the availability of documents and the like as first-class resources for ethnomethodological analyses.

Fourth, our turn to the world of senior management returns to Ethnomethodology's distinctive cast as a '*First Sociology*' and the use of first person experience as a resource for analysis.¹ Since its inception, and for entirely understandable reasons, Ethnomethodology has steadily increased its dependency on the standard sociological research strategy of intensive or extensive ethnographic fieldwork. This dependency has had many disciplinary and other benefits, but equally, we suggest, has encouraged an homogenisation of the types of materials gathered and the analytical approaches used. By eschewing fieldwork and replacing the evidence it provides with the analytically reconstituted practical understandings of the executive manager, we hope to re-claim a place for third person reflection on first person experience.

Fifth, and this is perhaps more a reflection on the nature of not just Ethnomethodology but all contemporary social science, we have undertaken these investigations because the phenomena are *interesting in themselves*. We have been drawn to them not because they provide instantiations of other issues of ~~more~~ interest to government agencies and funders nor because they are an accessible means by which to demonstrate 'impact', 'value', 'multi-modal methods', or some other virtue. Husserl's injunction 'Back to the things themselves!' was a lodestone for Garfinkel when re-thinking what he later termed 'classical' or 'constructionist' Sociology. In this book, we take the injunction in a slightly different way, namely as an instruction to address whatever phenomena the social world makes available to us as objects for analysis in their own right rather than as signifiers for something else. It is our curiosity regarding the social character of such management impedimenta as spreadsheets, strategic plans, computational models, charts and so on which encourages us to be indifferent to any macro-sociological significance ~~which can~~ be attributed to them. Their intrinsic interest alone is justification enough for wanting to study them.

The organisational setting

At the time to which the studies relate, County University (CU) was a Higher Education initiative designed to help raise standards of educational attainment in a region of England where they had traditionally been below the national average. It was led by a partnership comprising the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), two regional universities, Regional University North (RUN) and Regional University South (RUS), the Regional Development Agency (RDA), the County Council (County), the city (City) and the Further Education College in the city (College). Start-up funding was provided by HEFCE, RDA and County. The core educational provision, HEFCE funded student places, was transferred by College. In addition, provision was provided in four other local Further Education Colleges. The model of the institution was a 'hub and spokes' with the hub in the city and the spokes being the Further Education College partners.

The formal structure of CU was a Company limited by Guarantee with a Board of Directors representing the partners. The Members of the Company were the two regional universities. Until it could reach a student population of 4,000 and

bid for independence, CU was ‘Godfathered’ by RUN and RUS. As well as chairing the Board in rotation, the universities offered advice and support with regard to educational and operational matters.

The project began its operational life in 2005 and appointed its CEO at the start of 2006. Soon after, a small management team was put in place. The target date for its first intake was September 2007. As well as setting up the academic and operational infrastructures, two critical tasks had to be accomplished in the first phase of CU’s existence. Academic staff had to be recruited to teach the courses. It was expected that the vast majority at the hub would be transferred under TUPE arrangements from the College. Staff in the partner colleges would remain with their current employer. At the same time, a programme had to be initiated to provide purpose-built facilities for the hub. This programme depended on a complex set of ‘deals’ involving funding from RDA and land owned by College and City. The first teaching and administrative building was opened in 2008 with student accommodation and further teaching facilities following slightly later. In 2016, CU became an independent university.

The materials on which the studies in this book are based are taken from the first five years of CU’s operation. Where necessary, specific contextual detail is provided as part of the presentation of individual studies.

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Note

1 And hence to the concerns discussed in Howard Schwartz’s unjustly disregarded gem “Data: Who Needs It?” (Schwartz 2002).

Reference

Schwartz, H. 2002. “Data: Who Needs It?” *Ethnographic Studies*, no. 7 7–32.