



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## Ethnomethodology/Ethnomethodological Geography

**Citation for published version:**

Laurier, E 2009, Ethnomethodology/Ethnomethodological Geography. in R Kitchin & N Thrift (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. vol. 3, Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 632–637.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00686-6>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00686-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00686-6)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Early version, also known as pre-print

**Published In:**

International Encyclopedia of Human Geography

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Published by Elsevier (2009)

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



This is an author original draft or 'pre-print' version. The final version of this chapter was published by Elsevier (2009).

Cite As: Laurier, E 2009, 'Ethnomethodology/Ethnomethodological Geography'. in R Kitchin & N Thrift (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. vol. 3, Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 632–637.

# Ethnomethodology/Ethnomethodological Geography

Author: Eric Laurier

Address for correspondence:

Institute of Geography and the Lived Environment,  
School of Geosciences,  
University of Edinburgh,  
Edinburgh  
Midlothian  
UK  
EH8 9XP

[eric.laurier@ed.ac.uk](mailto:eric.laurier@ed.ac.uk)

**Keywords:** ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, practical reasoning, indexicality, accountability, reflexivity, work, science studies, Garfinkel, Sacks

## Glossary

*Accountability.* All human actions are essentially observable and reportable. What is unusual here is that not only can people tell us about their activities but also that those activities are produced so as to be describable in certain ways, in other words they are reflexively accountable.

*Epistemics.* A series of epistemic themes in natural and social sciences such as observation, replication, measurement and explanation. Ethnomethodology seeks to return to them to ordinary practices and in doing so remove their metaphysical aura.

*Haecceity.* 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 there being an essence to the thing and follow what all the ‘this’ and ‘that’ are of any event.

*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 sceptical social scientist something else is going on. Such an attitude usually substitutes the intelligibility of action at source with explanations from theory.

*Indexicality.* A longstanding 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 have rational properties.

*Reflexivity.* Related to accountability and indexicality, the concreteness, sense and intelligibility of human actions are tied to the settings in which they occur, yet also, whose sense they produce. Ethnomethodology diverges from many of the social sciences who have treated a concern with reflexivity as allowing them to have a superior knowledge over the commonsense of societies’ members.

*Respecification.* Rather than build new theories or models of society, ethnomethodology respecifies existing epistemics in the light of ordinary practice. There is a desire to investigate foundational matters in human geography and the social sciences more widely through carrying out empirical studies. Bewilderingly these studies do not lead to generalisation, instead they offer a form of therapy for the urge to generalise in the social sciences.

*Scepticism.* Related to the ironic attitude, ethnomethodology is a response to the sceptical 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 scepticism 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 an adequate grasp of the skills of the groups they are studying. Without at least this grasp students will miss what the activity consists of.

## **Definitions**

Ethnomethodology is the study of folk or members' methods for producing recognisable and reasonable social orders. Its title deriving from related terms such as ethnobotany which is the study of folk knowledges of plants. It is as happy studying how street sellers pitch their wares as it is examining how social scientists code interview transcripts. Or as Garfinkel put it during the Purdue Symposium:

[T]here are now quite a number of persons who, on a day-to-day basis, are doing studies of practical activities, of commonsense knowledge, of this and that, and of practical organizational reasoning. That is what ethnomethodology is concerned with. It is an organizational study of a member's knowledge of his ordinary affairs, of his own organized enterprises, where that knowledge is treated by us as part of the same setting that it also makes orderable. (Hill & Stones Crittenden, 1968: 10)

This simple definition belies a longstanding contentious relationship with the social sciences and an engagement with ordinary practice in the face of theorisation and modelling that is as powerful as it is puzzling.

## **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 in the 1930s and then in pursuing his PhD in the 1940s under the supervision of Talcott Parsons. His initial work was contemporary with that of Ludwig Wittgenstein and C. Wright Mills, sharing their concerns with the limitations of rules, reference and individualism that had been handed on as solutions to the problem of meaning and intelligibility. It was the publication of 'Studies in Ethnomethodology' (Garfinkel, 1967) in the late sixties 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 it was centred around the University of California's campuses and attracted a reputation for being both a committed community of scholars, and something of a cult, that it has never quite lost. It was also at this stage that Harvey Sacks' was collaborating with Harold Garfinkel, 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 who went on to become significant figures in sociology, such as David Sudnow, Lawrence Wieder, Don Zimmerman, Wes Sharrock, Peter McHugh, Jeff Coulter and Rod Watson. During this period it also spread beyond the anglophone academy becoming established in France and Japan. While it does not appear to have been adopted as

an approach by any particular human geographers during its inception it is very likely to have influenced humanistic and phenomenological practitioners in the discipline.

## Key Concepts

One should be slightly, no *very*, cautious, about producing headings that would count as a list of “key concepts” in ethnomethodology. A central pursuit in Ethnomethodological studies is re-specification of concepts in the light of detailed investigations of particular cases and settings. Notionally any concept is therefore liable to re-specification in the same way that concepts from social or cultural theory are open to their deconstruction by Derrideans.

In providing a list here the aim is not to limit the concepts, it is instead to offer samples of the sorts of concepts that have already been the subject of rigorous study by ethno-inquirers.

### Accountability

Where we might be used to thinking about accountability as the characteristic of institutions to have to provide justifications of their actions, ethnomethodology explores it is an accomplishment, background expectation and ongoing concern of human action. It is used somewhat interchangeably with the compound word observable-reportable in that what we do has the characteristic of being always observable and reportable. All human practices be they of 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

Where we left off with accountability is where we take up with reflexivity. In the social sciences the dominant view of reflexivity is that it is a privileged manoeuvre of social scientists that allows them one step up above naïve uses and understandings of representation. A step up that at the same time begins to dismantle such a move. Ethnomethodology puts reflexivity at the heart of its study of human affairs by seeing it as incarnate in those human affairs. Because it takes social order as locally produced in whatever settings, descriptions (or representations) of particular courses of action 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.

### Mind

Hopefully there will be some familiarity when I add that a series of topics related to the study of mind such as motives, reasons, intentions, perceptions, imagination, memory and cognition are taken by ethnomethodology to be locally observable-reportable features of human action. Setting itself against ‘mental’ explanations of how people remember, reason, imagine, see and so on, ethnomethodology is concerned with how such apparently ‘private’ processes are publicly available. Not only are they publicly available, it is our ongoing concern to make them so.

## Programmes

A recent collection of Garfinkel's papers (Garfinkel, 2002) was entitled 'The Ethnomethodological Program', it might have been better expressed in the plural. Since its inception ethnomethodology has sired a number of more or less legitimate offspring. To begin, once again, where we left off, with the concept of mind, this run of studies is concerned centrally with practical action & practical reasoning. In some ways it has had the longest run given that it begins with Garfinkel's famous 'breaching experiments' which were designed to cause the collapse of social order. Therein Garfinkel had his students carry 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 certain social theories had posited it was kept in place though not without all manner of trouble, complaints and some pleasing discounts for the students in department stores.

As noted earlier, the most famous offshoot of ethnomethodology is conversation analysis. Its concern is with the ways in which those who converse are also analysts of the conversation they are ongoingly having with one another. The name of this approach is in a classic ethnomethodological manner the study of the analysis done in, by and with conversation rather than a professional and/or scientific abstraction of conversation. However somewhat confusingly conversation analysis has also ended up becoming a technical study of language-in-interaction that in various ways supplants the methods of members with its own more technical lexicon.

Conversation analysis began with Harvey Sacks looking at the detailed methods used by speakers during phonecalls. His studies were unusual at the time for making extensive use of audio-recordings of actual phonecalls to a suicide helpline and between friends on the phone. Drawing on these materials he re-specified a number of major philosophical topics such as measurement, observation, and, once again, mind. Of great importance were how speakers relied on and put to use membership categorisation devices and the sequential properties of conversation. This work led ultimately to one of the most cited papers of all time in the social sciences on the turn-taking mechanism (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

A third branch of ethnomethodology is workplace studies which takes as its concern the production of order in each particular setting of work. While these range across scientific laboratories, truck garages, martial arts studios, court rooms, classrooms, banks and air traffic control centres, they have a common concern with the routine features of each workplace as they are produced ongoingly, day by day. These 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 was the significant focus for workplace studies.

For a while it seemed like ethnomethodology, with its unique adequacy requirement 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 fields entirely. However in two interdisciplinary it has re-appeared as a guiding ethos: Computer Supported Cooperative

Work (CSCW) and Science and Technology Studies (STS). Whether ethnomethodology will become an established programme in geography is not yet clear.

The grounds for the establishment of an ethnomethodological programme in geography would at first glance be its harmonies with the archaeological approach of Michel Foucault (Laurier & Philo, 2004), the underpinnings it has provided in social studies of science (Lynch, 1993) and its ways of accessing and describing everyday life and the ordinary (Garfinkel, 1963). There are at least two further passages from ethnomethodology to human geography. The first is in its treatment of speech as part and parcel of human action which allies it with the non-representational work of Thrift and others (Harrison, 2006; Thrift, 1996; Wylie, 2005). The second is in its revivification of empirical work and field studies which are there to re-specify and put to rest a number of theoretical problems that beset human geography.

### **Central misunderstandings**

Ethnomethodology seems to have been beset by more misunderstandings than most approaches in the social sciences. Had ethnomethodology come into being now rather than in the midst of the positivist dominance in the social sciences, there might have been far fewer. To mention three here:

1. Ethnomethodologists collect and document various sorts of 'folk wisdom' that either underly or distort more scientific knowledge of the world. From the Purdue Symposium (Hill & Stones Crittenden, 1968: 28).

ANDERSON: ... There is still the question of whether your concern is that of an outsider studying folk wisdom.

GARFINKEL: NO! Once and for all, no! We are not studying folk wisdom in an ironic way. I am not saying that I know better. I am not armed with resources that would permit me to say, no matter how discreetly, "Look, does the botanist believe there are salt water fish in a fresh water lake? Get that!" Nor am I saying things like, "The Catholics believe that whatever it is; the Jews have the inside track on that one." There is no irony.

An ethnomethodological geography would not supply 'folk geographies', to do so would be to ironise how knowing certain things constitutes certain communities and equally how certain communities make sense of their actions.

2. Ethnomethodology is a method. Unsurprisingly given the positioning of methodology in its title many assumed 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 entry, 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.

3. Ethnomethodological studies are micro-studies. Because ethnomethodology remains stubbornly attached to studying the details of diverse local sites of action such, as looking for a book in a library, a conversation amongst teenagers or learning to playing 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 these studies is the same as the treatment of scale or context in actor-network theory. Large scale structures are in their haecceities inevitably and reflexively encountered locally and the questions are both how do they go about localising themselves and how do they go about extending themselves into other places. More specifically the concern is whether and how larger contexts are made locally available and locally recognisable in any particular course of action.

### **Future Directions**

To maintain its vigour ethnomethodology has always hybridised with other disciplines and crafts. As noted earlier the meeting of computing science with ethnomethodology in the interdisciplinary zone of CSCW gave fresh impetus to its 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 (Lynch, 1993), Livingston (Livingston, 1986), Bjelic (Bjelic, 2004) and others has brought a number of new concerns such as, to name but three, epistemology, evidence and equipment.

If we look to the future of ethnomethodology the question arises as to what other communities of practice its congregation are joining. What human geography provides is a series of topic concerns some shared with the other social sciences and humanities and others less so. Context, observation, representation and imagination to name a but a few. Equally there are a number of 'wild geographies' which are of interest to human geographers and ethnomethodologists. The vernacular geographical knowledges emergent in endless varieties such as, what neighbours know about their neighbourhood (Laurier, Whyte, & Buckner, 2002), how tourists find their way around cities (Brown & Laurier, 2005; Mondada, forthcoming), how browsers search for books in libraries (Carlin, 2003; Crabtree, Nichols, O'Brien, Rouncefield, & Twidale, 2000) and how people formulate their location during mobile phone calls (Laurier, 2001; Weilenmann, 2003).

### **Critiques**

Over the years Bruno Latour has grown increasingly sympathetic to ethnomethodology. His initial responses were somewhat more critical than we now find him. In particular he was uneasy about the lack of a 'big picture' or, rather, finding small things rendered large:

In reading the book, one has the same feeling as reading a newspaper through a microscope. Somehow the focus does not seem right, and one is tempted to ask, 'Please, Mike, couldn't you zoom a bit the other way, I can't see a damn thing here'.  
545-546 Latour (Latour, 1986)



Latour is not suggesting that the details are not important, what he wants is the ethnomethodologist to travel away from the local worksite to see how it is connected to other worksites. There is no strong reason why ethnomethodologists do not follow chains of connection between worksites, though they would be looking for a group of some sort who daily business it is to follow those sorts of connections rather than trying to invent a new methodology for the social sciences that provides a privileged perspective on the action.

Perhaps the most substantial critique comes from Alan Blum & Peter McHugh (Blum & McHugh, 1984; McHugh, Raffel, Foss, & Blum, 1974) whose school of analysis grew out of ethnomethodology. Theirs remains, like Latour's, an understanding of ethnomethodology that is sympathetic, informed and respectful. What formed their point of departure from ethnomethodology was a disinterest in doing field studies and a return to theorising which, at first glance, appears antithetical to the spirit of ethnomethodology. Yet, the sense of being a re-specificatory response to theorists in the social sciences is retained. Their critique of ethnomethodology resides in an argument more complex than be rehearsed here on whether irony is always invidious, what the nature of theorist and member relationship is and the limits of convention. Ethnomethodology, argue Blum and McHugh, re-affirms convention when it could question it, and, finally, refuses to exercise its authority in formulating excellence for members.

### **Further Reading**

Barry Brown and Eric Laurier (2005). Maps and Journeys: an Ethnomethodological Investigation. *Cartographica*, 4(3), 17-33.

Graham Button (ed) (1991) *Ethnomethodology and the human sciences*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Harold Garfinkel (1967) *Studies in ethnomethodology*, Polity, Cambridge

Michael Lynch (1993) *Scientific practice and ordinary action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Eric Livingston (1987) *Making sense of ethnomethodology*, Routledge, London

### **Websites**

Paul ten Have ethnomethodology and conversation analysis news:

<http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/emca/>

The International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis

<http://www.iiemca.org/>

Australian Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis

<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/aiem/>

- Bjelic, D. (2004). *Galileo's Pendulum: science, sexuality and the body-instrument link*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Blum, A., & McHugh, P. (1984). *Self-reflection in the arts and sciences*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Brown, B. A. T., & Laurier, E. (2005). Maps and Journeys: an Ethnomethodological Investigation. *Cartographica*, 4(3), 17-33.
- Carlin, A. P. (2003). Pro forma arrangements: the visual availability of textual artefacts. *Visual Studies*, 18(1), 6-20.
- Crabtree, A., Nichols, D. M., O'Brien, J., Rouncefield, M., & Twidale, M. B. (2000). Ethnomethodologically Informed Ethnography and Information System Design. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 51(7), 666-682.
- Garfinkel, H. (1963). A conception of and experiments with trust as a condition of stable, concerted actions. In O. J. Harvey (Ed.), *Motivation and social interaction* (pp. 187-283). New York: Ronald Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Garfinkel, H. (2002). *Ethnomethodology's Program, Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Harrison, P. (2006). Corporeal remains: vulnerability, proximity and living-on after the end of the world *forthcoming in Environment and Planning A*.
- Hill, R. J., & Stones Crittenden, K. (Eds.). (1968). *Proceedings of the Purdue Symposium on Ethnomethodology*. Purdue: Institute for the Study of Social Change.
- Latour, B. (1986). Will the last person to leave the social studies of science turn on the tape recorder. *Social Studies of Science*, 16, 541-548.
- Laurier, E. (2001). Why people say where they are during mobile phone calls. *Environment and Planning D : Society and Space*, 19(4), 485-504.
- Laurier, E., & Philo, C. (2004). Ethno-archaeology and Undefined Investigations. *Environment & Planning : A*, 36, 421-436.
- Laurier, E., Whyte, A., & Buckner, K. (2002). Neighbouring as an occasioned activity : "Finding a lost cat". *Space and Culture*, 5(4), 346-367.
- Livingston, E. (1986). *The ethnomethodological foundations of mathematics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lynch, M. (1993). *Scientific practice and ordinary action: ethnomethodology and social studies of science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McHugh, P., Raffle, S., Foss, D. C., & Blum, A. F. (1974). *On the Beginning of Social Inquiry*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mondada, L. (forthcoming). Deixis spatiale, gestes de pointage et formes de coordination de l'action. In J.-M. Barberis & M. C. Manes-Gallo (Eds.), *Verbalisation de l'espace et cognition situee: la description d'itineraires pietons*. Paris: Editions CNRS.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50, 696-735.
- Thrift, N. (1996). *Spatial Formations*. London: Sage.
- Weilenmann, A. (2003). "I can't talk now, I'm in a fitting room": Formulating availability and location in mobile phone conversations. *Environment & Planning : A*.
- Wylie, J. (2005). A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape in the South West Coast Path. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(2), 234-247.

