

Giolo Fele

Mark Rouncefield and Peter Tolmie (eds.), *Ethnomethodology at Work*. Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2011, 278 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/35878)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2011

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Mark Rouncefield and Peter Tolmie (eds.), *Ethnomethodology at Work*. Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2011, 278 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/35878

Studies of work has become one of the most important branches of ethnomethodological research. Garfinkel urged that ethnomethodology, as the study of social practices, not be limited to studying public places, generic social interactions or the so-called “everyday life.” Rather, ethnomethodology should enter the context of expert knowledge to study in its lived details the characteristics that constitute a work practice. The result was that he launched a new way to undertake field of studies of organizations and professions: instead of prioritizing the analysis of identity, careers, stratification, the balance between work and family life, changes in work organization, the impact of technologies in the organization of labour, and so on, which have been the classic themes of the discipline, he commended the to study of the constituent features of a work practice.

What does this mean? One example offered by Harold Garfinkel may clarify this. Howard Becker has studied in now classic essays the careers and the profession of jazz musicians. One of most interesting of Becker’s analyses is about the way in which jazz musicians try to distance themselves from the tastes of their audience, which is oriented toward more tamed, “square” music, whereas the jazz musicians aspire toward innovative music that is more experimental and less recognizable. Garfinkel believed that something was missing in Becker’s beautiful analysis: the heart of any musician’s professional work, i.e. making music together. How you play, what it means to play an instrument, what practical challenges are faced by the musicians as they play together: these are issues that go to the heart of the music profession, and concern the use of the instrument, the technique, the concrete practices that are involved in using an expert working tool. This is the reason why Garfinkel said that current studies on work and occupations were mostly only about the work rather than being oriented to the “what” that constitutes the “quiddity” of the work itself. It is around this “missing what” that Garfinkel launched the program of the ethnomethodological study of work in the 1970s.

The volume by Rouncefield and colleagues is one of the last born of this story, which has happily now reached full maturity. The authors themselves show their discomfort with the edited book by Garfinkel [*Ethnomethodological Studies of Work*, 1986], in which the study of work is applied to rather heterogeneous and exotic contexts, such as truck wheel accidents, kung-fu, and alchemy. The Rouncefield volume presents instead an impressive list of places and contexts in which the volume’s authors have been working for many years – a major steel plant, the UK National Breast Screening Program Service, a retail bank. We find few references to research work that some of these authors have completed [in the domain of the air traffic control or in the implementation of new technologies, research works that are discussed in detail in two other books of the group: Randall, Harper, and Rouncefield 2007; Crabtree 2003].

The book’s purpose is to address the issue of work and organization in terms of the ethnomethodological interests in the “routine, trivial, practical accomplishment” of everyday affairs in working places. The authors are especially interested in how techno-

logy is concretely deployed in the everyday work, in specific contexts and in particular occasions. The authors share Garfinkel's recommendations of looking for the haecceities, the missing details which too frequently are overlooked in classical studies of work, and the situated, embodied practices that are constitutive of a specific work practice.

The book consists of twelve chapters (plus a preface) dedicated to what are some of the key features of an organization: the practical organization of the division of labor (W. Sharrock); the discussion of the notion of "organizational acumen" which was first coined by Egon Bittner in his 1965 seminal article "The concept of organization" (M. Rouncefield and P. Tolmie); calculation (J. A. Hughes); plans and planning (D. Randall and M. Rouncefield); the temporal order of work (A. Crabtree, M. Rouncefield, and P. Tolmie); customer-organization interaction (D. Martin and J. O'Neil); meetings and managerial work (J. Hughes, D. Randall, M. Rouncefield); documents (M. Hartswood and M. Rouncefield, R. Slack and A. Carlin) and texts (J. Rooksby); technology (M. Rouncefield, R. Slack, M. Hartswood). One of the merits of the book is that it shows clearly, always with the use of examples and empirical evidence, the warp and weft of an organization, where the textbook techniques of idealized theorization are replaced by an emphasis upon improvised, contingent, achieved coordination, embodied practices, local knowledge, mutual intelligibility, and the unpredictable, haphazard, subject-to-interpretation organizational life in its real practices.

The book is a wonderful representation of the Manchester–Lancaster–Nottingham school ("the triangle of evil," as the editors somewhat proudly say they are sometimes called) of ethnomethodology. Their peculiarities reside in the fact that they pursue "studies of work and technology" in a distinctive way. Their approach owes to the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Winch and Ryle – as well as Garfinkel's ethnomethodology – their interests in solving (and dissolving) big theoretical issues through a close inspection of the details of language as it is used and practiced, avoiding and downplaying abstract theorizing. Their methodology is essentially a version of an ethnographic approach, in which there is much fieldwork and a close connection with the contexts that they study.

Many of the authors have their home in computer science departments, rather than in sociology departments. This means that their approach is somewhat a product of a hybridization of disciplines, and close relations are maintained to system designers, engineers and the work of engineering. The book is also an illustration of the way in which their approach is different from the strand of cognate ethnomethodological work known as "workplace studies," in which videorecordings of natural occurring activities, and a rigorous analytic approach based on sequential order, are the basic instruments used to describe the constitutive characters of practical actions in their embodied and material aspects. Instead, the program of the "study of work" is a looser and easy approach from a methodological point of view, in which the knowledge of the researcher, field notes and interviews are the basic instruments of the research.

The book has the great merit being a primer for students in Sociology, Business Studies, Management and Computing Science, and it is a fine introductory book, with its emphasis on empirical data and a contagious passion for the dissemination and sharing of research results, as well as in their practical consequences and applications (for policy making and socio-technical design). But at the same time the book does show some limits. The first limit is paradoxically connected to the popular intent of the book. Sometimes

some key issues are addressed a little in haste, without being defined and described with sufficient complexity. In addition, there is little effort to take into account sufficiently other intellectual traditions that are not ethnomethodological as if nothing preexisted their research. The final result is therefore sometimes awkward. I will offer only one example for all. In the chapter dedicated on time in organizations and work – see note 1, page 91, – it is said hastily: “Time is, of course, of broad theoretical interest to social scientists and philosophers too, but we do not want to touch upon that here other than recognize that interest in time is broad and diverse.” To this observation, admittedly too vague, follows a list of references so diverse, in alphabetical order, that it does not help much as an orientating device: “Adam 1990, Bolter 1984, Castells 1996, Durkheim 1947, Giddens 1981, Heidegger 1978, Lash and Urry 1994, Marx and Engels 1976, Munford 1963, Weber 1985.”

The second limitation of the book concerns the difficulty of representing an entire movement, not just a school. The ethnomethodological movement is quite lively, as we know, and emphasizing the divisions seems to be more common game than attributing value to what unites the movement. In this case the book might have benefited from being more open to a dialogue with at least other cognate approaches (for example with the area of Workplace Studies), which seem to be almost foreign and far away. If you look at the bibliographic references it results a text rather endogamic.

Having said that, the book is a significant achievement that it offers a comprehensive presentation of a body of research work that has a long and vital heritage. Together with other recent books [see, for instance, Llewellyn and Hindmarsh 2010; Szymanski and Whalen 2011], it should be read as one of the best products of the ethnomethodological investigation of work sites and organizational life.

## References

- Crabtree, A.  
2003 *Designing Collaborative Systems: A Practical Guide to Ethnography*. London: Springer.
- Llewellyn, N. and Hindmarsh J. (eds.)  
2010 *Organisation, Interaction and Practice. Studies of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Randall, D., Harper, R., and Rouncefield, M.  
2007 *Fieldwork for Design*. London: Springer.
- Szymanski, M.H. and Whalen, J. (eds.)  
2011 *Making Work Visible. Ethnographically Grounded Studies of Work Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Giolo Fele*  
University of Trento