

***WHAT DOES ETHNOMETHODOLOGY TEACH US  
ABOUT ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND  
KNOWLEDGE?***

**Theme:** The Nature of Learning and Knowledge

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## Abstract

*In this paper I will argue that recent theories of socially situated learning have overlooked the contribution that ethnomethodology makes to our understanding of the interplay between practical action, language and discourse, and organizational learning and knowledge (OLK).*

*Recent qualitative studies of organizational learning and knowledge attempt to take us 'inside' the socio-cultural worlds of specific 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Examples might include Orr's (1990) study of photocopier technicians, Hutchins (1991) study of naval quartermasters, and Wenger's (1998) study of an insurance firm, as well as the anthropological studies summarised by Lave and Wenger (1991). These attempts are fruitful in the sense that they give us a 'feel' for, or 'flavour' of, the worlds they study, which we would otherwise not have. By the extensive use of transcripts and quotations they illustrate the practical sense-making process going on for practitioners. However, there are questions about this sort of study. To what extent can a researcher, as an 'outsider' or an 'anthropological stranger' really gain access to the practices at the core of such communities, let alone represent them faithfully for the OLK research community and its wider public? And what use does the wider OLK research community make of these cases in developing its theories?*

*An answer is that something is better than nothing. Richly ideographic, 'thick descriptions' of specific cultural and occupational worlds certainly tell us something that nomothetic analyses cannot. But do they tell us all that they could and, if not, why not? The above studies both use and study situated language and discourse in relation to situated practices, learning and knowledge. However, language and discourse are not necessarily open and transparent media.*

*Lave and Wenger (1991: 107-109) make a strong distinction between talking about a practice from the outside and talking within the practice. This distinction recognizes that how one uses natural language and practical discourse determines one's access to certain practices found in specialised occupations such as scientific laboratory work. Merely talking about a practice is not the same as talking within a practice. One question this raises is whether the researcher can talk within a practice without becoming an insider, and, if not, whether simply observing and reporting the talk of insiders amounts to a study of or merely a study about a practice.*

*The paper examines talking within a practice and about a practice ethnomethodologically, by reference to two seminal studies by Harvey Sacks (1974) and Harold Garfinkel (1967). The discussion takes us away from cognitive notions of practice, in which the learning/knowning process is conceptualised as a cognitive process mediated by social and material practices towards an alternative which sees learning as a practical social activity.*

## Introduction

Sylvia Gherardi talks about “practice based theorizing” (2000) summing up in a phrase a contradiction, which runs through the study of organizational learning and knowing. Since socially situated learning in communities of practice in the early 1990s to the adoption of activity theory and actor-network theory in the late 1990s the literature has expressed a desire to eschew Cartesian dualism between theory and practice. What this has come to mean within the study of organizational learning and knowing is a preference for studying practice on the assumption that learning happens through practice (“learning-in-working” as Brown and Duguid (1991) term this), and through legitimate peripheral-going-on-full participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Study practice and one therefore studies learning and knowing. Study organizational practices: study organizational learning and knowing. Pile up enough studies of practice and one will arrive at a practice-based theory of learning and knowing in organizations, a theory based on practice, rather than practice based on theory. Indeed, this is what Lave and Wenger (1991) hoped for from their comparative analysis of several rather varied ethnographic studies of socially situated learning in communities of practice. The theory of legitimate peripheral participation was based on a comparison of studies of diverse practices.

But how does one study practice? An answer is that the researcher becomes a legitimate peripheral participant in some community of practice or other. The researcher becomes an insider. For example, Julian Orr (1990) enters a community of Xerox photocopier technicians, Edwin Hutchins (1996, 1995) enters a community of naval quartermasters. These studies provide detailed descriptions of the participants’ practices built up from quotes and transcripts of their conversation, they appear to take us inside the community, inside its practices and inside practitioners’ learning and knowing practices, co-terminus as they are with their actual embodied calculative practices. One can believe that these ethnographers became more than legitimate peripheral participants, they became members of communities and they reported back.

The terms in which these reports from the field are expressed, however, also tell us a good deal about the researchers’ interest in cognition. To a large extent Hutchins’ (1995) work is an extended reflection upon the practices of US naval quartermasters in the light of his changing theoretical understanding of cognition. And indeed his work is an extended reflection on the nature of situated cognition in the light of his observations of seafaring practices. In microcosm, this is emblematic of the whole field of organizational learning and knowing. A group of cognitive scientists (a) recognize the importance of ‘the social’ and (b) start doing ethnography informed by their social cognitive theories and what they report, based on their ethnographic studies of socially situated practices, adds to this body of socio-cognitive theory. Socio-cognitive theory is the alpha and omega of the whole debate. The learning-as-cognition remains central to the analysis, albeit conceived as a process mediated by social activities. But the study of social phenomena need not start from that point nor need it return to that point and yet it can tell us about learning and knowing in organizations.

In this paper I want to track back to the study of social practices before socio-cognitive theory by examining the tradition of ethnomethodology.

## Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology encompasses a vast body of work, which cannot be summarised here. What I will do is to highlight four points about ethnomethodological work which will allow us to see some of the potential it has for the study of organizational learning and knowledge. Then I will examine two cases to illustrate ethnomethodology's treatment of social practices: joke telling and accounting for death.

First, ethnomethodologists accept that there is a conceptual world, they accept that people have ways of thinking, reasoning and learning, which might be the subject matter of psychologists, but they themselves are not psychologists; even though many of their studies *appear* to deal with psychological phenomena (examples might include Garfinkel's study of "Agnes", an "intersexed person" (1967), Smith's anatomy of a factual account that asserting that "K is mentally ill" (1978) amongst many others).

Second, ethnomethodologists see themselves as 'learning'. Garfinkel often says that he and others "learn". The very opening sentence of *Studies* says:

The following studies seek to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological *reasoning* as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, seek to *learn* about them as phenomena in their own right. (Garfinkel, 1967: 1, my emphasis).

Garfinkel frequently uses the term 'learn' to characterise what his studies of practical activity are themselves doing or accomplishing[1] and he frequently describes his phenomena as "practical reasoning", but this does not make him a cognitivist in his orientation to social facts. Like Durkheim, he wants to insist that amongst the many different sorts of facts in the world, some are social ones and these are not reducible to either psychological or physical facts.

Third, Garfinkel's work provides a critique of cognitivism. Heritage's influential and authoritative account of ethnomethodology makes this point clear (Heritage, 1984: 22-27) and Coulter (1987) provides a very detailed critique of cognitivism from an ethnomethodological perspective. The point ethnomethodologists make is that whilst people do think, reason, learn, make assumptions, and the rest, they also act socially and, sociologically speaking, their practical action is the *social* phenomena, rather than the motives, intentions, meanings and other such cognitive concepts. Ethnomethodology is not doubting that people think, learn, conceptualise etc. but is pointing to visible and witnessable *social* practices that can be seen, observed, witnessed and learned about through studies which afford them the attention usually reserved for more extraordinary events. The point is not to theorise or speculate about cognitive processes lying behind and/or engendering social phenomena but instead to seek to describe, elucidate and learn about *social* practices.

Fourth, unlike socio-cognitive ethnographic studies of practical activities, ethnomethodology does not seek to explain members' learning process as a cognitive event mediated by social relations and actions. It does not reduce social to psychological or cognitive phenomena. Rather it seeks to elucidate the social practices being studied and these can be taken as learning processes, though Garfinkel more typically uses the term "inquiries" (e.g. Garfinkel, 1967: 13; 32; 34), a word that suggests practical concerted activities. A particular consequence of the way ethnomethodology, a term which includes the field of "conversation analysis" (Garfinkel, 1991: 14), deals with social practices, is that its ethnographic studies seek to capture "the work of fact production in flight" (Garfinkel, 1967: 79). Rather than seeing social facts, such as deaths in society, wealth in society, as 'done deals' as factor analytic methods do, for instance (Benson and Hughes, 1991) which are capable of being counted, aggregated and sometimes predicted, correlated, and explained, ethnomethodology catches the work of fact production as an ongoing process. Instead of retrospective studies which take a cross-sectional slice through time at some historical point, ethnomethodological studies seek to preserve the ways facts are worked up over a course of practical activity. That is, ethnomethodological studies are retrospective *and* prospective. And this point goes both for everyday facts in everyday life and for official facts like suicide cases and statistics. "Facts" are seen *in the course* of their production, accomplishment, achievement.

We will now examine two examples of fact production in flight. In the first case, we draw upon Sacks' (1974) classic study of a joke told in conversation

### **Example 1: Joke Telling**

In order to illustrate the prospective and open-ended nature of social practices I want to draw out a two points from Sacks (1974) paper on "the course of a joke's telling in conversation". The first point will be about the structural properties of *sequences* of action, specifically the action of telling a joke in conversation. The second point will be about the ways in which *devices* used in the course of conversational action, achieve effects. The point of Sack's analysis is not to focus on the psychological meanings the members might possess, or even how these meanings may evolve and develop, intentionally or otherwise over the course of the activity, though these concerns are present in the analysis as members' concerns. Rather, the point of Sack's analysis is to show some of the formal structures of practical activities and practical reasoning (an aspect which is examined in greater detail in Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). By the term "practical reasoning" we are not speculating about the actual cognitive contents of members' minds, but we are looking at the visible, social methods, which make such possible things *appear* to us over the course of the conversation.

By focusing on just two aspects of the analysis – sequences and devices – this account will be highly selective and it will not even retell the joke. It is not my purpose in this paper to introduce or demonstrate conversation analysis per se. Rather I wish to focus on sequences and devices to demonstrate how ethnomethodology looks at social phenomena. Hence I will not reproduce chunks of the transcript, but I will characterise certain aspects of it, which Sacks' analysis draws our attention to.

It is said that “nature abhors a vacuum”, the same is also true of the social, and it is one of Sack’s background points that in the social activity of everyday conversation, particularly in the US, silences are very rare. The parties to ordinary conversation in groups work hard to minimise gaps, silences and open spaces in their talk; they talk over one another and hardly has one person finished speaking than another starts. Other social contexts, are marked by the formal organization of turn-taking (e.g. lectures, court-hearings, doctor-patient diagnostic interviews).

## *Sequences*

Sacks’ famous paper examines the sequential organization of the telling of a dirty joke in conversation, a joke which is told in the form of a story. The telling of the joke is composed of three sequences, the preface, the telling and the response sequences. The preface indicates an offer by a participant, Ken, to tell a joke, it signals that this joke was told to him only yesterday by his own sister, whom we later learn is only twelve years old. The teller is a teenager who tells the joke to two other teenage boys in the presence of an adult male therapist in the midst of a group therapy session. The offer to tell a joke, is not immediately taken up but becomes the butt of some banter within the group, during which the parties come to see that the joke in prospect will be a dirty joke but not *that* dirty.

The preface sequence sets the scene and sets the expectations of the audience. Once these are set the joke itself is told in an economic way. After the punch-line, the teller himself laughs and after a couple of seconds one of the teenagers loudly laughs outright and the other comments that this had been a “delayed reaction” and then joins in the general laughter. Al, who had laughed loudly after the slight delay, says that he had to think about it a while. And Roger who had noted the delayed reaction says “you mean the deep hidden meaning there doesn’t hitcha right away”. Al kind of agrees, and the therapist says “I guess so” and then they start to comment on other aspects of the joke as a story. One suggests it had “psychological overtones” another observes that Ken’s little sister is “gittin older” and they chuckle. They speculate on whether she understood the joke or just repeated what she heard. One of them says he’s “gladju gotta sister that knows something”. Ken is ambiguous about what his sister understood by the joke and they ask him to explain and he declines, though he later claims that its import all along was that it had taught him something surprising about his sister when she told him it.

Here, for reasons of space I’m abridging an 85 line piece of transcript that is far more revealing about the structure and sequence of the joke’s telling and of the way that different readings and interpretations of whether the little sister really understood it at all are suggested and tested out. However, even in this abridged form we can see that three sequences – preface, telling and response – were worked through by the participants.

## *Devices*

The second point I want to draw out is the kind of practical detail that Sacks alerts us to about the structuring of this joke. He points out, for example, that as with any kind

of conversation, the telling of this joke in conversation minimizes any gaps or silences and moreover it does this in ways that structure a competitive element into the recipients' response to the joke. These ways are conversational or actional devices that shape the range of possible responses. This is not to claim that Ken intended any such shaping of the possible responses. It simply points out that certain conversational devices do shape recipient response. Once a joke is underway, it is heading towards a punch-line, at which point participants may or may not laugh. If they do not laugh, this indicates the joke was not funny. But in a group, laughing can happen in many ways: everyone may burst out laughing together, some listeners may start laughing first, then others join in, some may start laughing first and others may never join in, the teller may start laughing first and some join in, others never; the teller may start laughing and all join in together, and so on. If the relative starts are oriented to, they can provide materials with which to comparatively assess recipients.

Sacks calls this structural feature "the recipient comparative wit assessment device" inviting us to recall that "jokes and dirty jokes in particular are used as 'understanding tests'" (Sacks, 1974: 350), the power of which is that

...it encourages recipients to try to laugh before they have seen whether others will, and once any recipient has laughed whether on those grounds or others, each other recipient is thereby also encouraged to laugh as soon as he can" (Sacks, 1974: 350).

The fact that in this case, there is a delayed response, followed by one person laughing loudly and the other commenting on the delayed reaction indicates that at least the latter was aware that the first might not have got the joke immediately and could therefore be mocked for being slow or might not have really understood it. That Roger suggests this even though he himself did not laugh immediately either indicates that he got it straightaway but did not find it that funny, but found the fact that Al's laughter was delayed an amusing cause for conjecture about Al's appreciation of the joke; or that Roger did not get it but sought to cover himself by pointing out the delay in Al's response.

A key point here is that we do not know and cannot tell from the data, what Ken's true intentions were nor who understood what. An insider might have a better guess than we reading of the episode years later, Sacks himself might have a pretty good idea. However, this is not the point. The point is that mastery of natural language involves the use of devices, sequences and mechanisms which are conversational practices akin to signalling before turning left when driving down the freeway. These forms of signalling shape the unfolding action. And signalling need not take the form of a flashing indicator light (deliberately or accidentally switched on) it could take the form of a sudden leftward lurch, or two. The point is that social action does not always come properly labelled for what it is but it is still readable, often accurately enough for practical purposes. And practical purposes can include teaching, learning, deciding, making the next move.

Sack's paper suggests many more ambiguities of interpretation in the transcript, but his point is not to demonstrate the general ambiguity of social action. For example, he points out that the silence following the punch-line can also be taken to indicate the joke was not funny. He talks of a "joke grading device", whereby members can turn the tables on the teller, instead of competing to laugh first, they can stall and then

grade the joke as unfunny. This is not easy to do, however, as it depends on all hearers not laughing at once. Roger's problem could be, as the two to three seconds roll by before Al burst out laughing, that he may eventually laugh (as he does). The tactic of concertedly not laughing, then claiming the joke was unfunny, depends on no-one breaking ranks. But once one person laughs uproariously, then it is more difficult to suggest the joke was unfunny. His point is that we can see only from close attention to indexical details, what options of interpretation are possible. We may speculate about the invisible cognitive or mental interpretive process going on in participants heads, but Sacks does not, he looks at the reasonable options and how devices, sequences, mechanisms of talk make some possible and others not in this situated strip of talk.

The paper is remarkable within the sociology of humour for two things. First, the 85-line transcript, done in full conversation analytic notation, reveals second by second pauses and gasps, which minimises the analyst's tendency to tidy up the joke as a conversational event, in the style of dialogue found in a novel. The unique form of the notation renders the audible experience of the conversation visible, witness-able. In Sacks' paper we see the joke being told with all the interjections and side-swipes that threaten to derail its course; we hear the punch-line and we watch the audience falter before laughing and then discuss in veiled ways what the point was, had the sister really understood it or not, had Al, had Roger, what did it mean? Conversation analytic transcription is a unique method for rendering talk; even without analytic commentary it reveals the complexity of conversation's audible and structural features.

Second, each sequence is analysed for the possibilities that were open to the participants at the time and which were made open by the teller through devices that nonetheless propelled them towards inevitable laughter, by setting up a competition through the device Sacks calls "the comparative wit device" which pre-empted the counter-use of the "joke grading device". Although everyday meanings are assumed in this ethnographic account of a strip of contextualised social action, as the analyst trades on everyday cultural knowledge which does not exclude the reader, the point is not to explain the lived experience for these teenagers in particular, as an interactionist might, nor is it to supply the missing meaning behind the words, nor is it to make manifest esoteric community understandings, and yet the analysis does display practitioners' knowledge and knowing and learning and tactics in actual practice without theorising this as a piece of social cognition happening.

As Sack's says toward the close of the paper:

A story can have its telling warranted by virtue of the surprise its events involved or the surprising news its teller learned from them that he can figure his recipients do not yet know. (Sacks, 1974: 353).

And in this actual case the teller of the joke claimed:

..that its import all along was as a report of something surprising about his sister which he learned and which the joke's telling to him by her teaches. (ibid.).



In other words, people do claim to learn and get taught by events in life, including events like stories told in context, yet this is not proof that they do, nor yet does this show how cognitive processes of learning are mediated socially. Rather, what Sack's paper demonstrates is a *social learning process* not a *cognitive learning process mediated socially*; which is material and practical, not cognitive at all, but a witnessable social context in which conversational sequences and devices are seen to possess structural properties. What the individuals in this simple case understood remains ambiguous for us and is never resolved by the paper, yet the mechanisms, techniques, sequences and devices by which their understanding was achieved is brought to our attention in ways that will help us see such phenomena again next time we analyse the course of a joke's telling in conversation.

And that is how ethnomethodology's findings build. Each study shows the structures of practical actions, practical reasoning in a specific sort of case and these may then be found in similar sorts of case. Ethnomethodology does not trade in general facts, general laws, general truths. Each case examined is appreciated in its contingent, socially situated, contextual and indexical detail and that contextual detail is endogenous to the case, it is not the kind of contextual detail theorised by some formal analysis of the kinds of detail found in typified contingent circumstances.

### **Example 2: Death in Society, the Case of Suicide**

I now want to examine a different case of fact production in flight: the case of formal facts concerning how death occurs in society.

Durkheim (1982) took an interest in those phenomena that were a mixture between the natural and the social. Thus natural death is a natural fact but 'suicide', although it also involves death, can *only* be a social fact. The point being that 'social facts' involve intention but are not limited to mere intentions, wishes or fantasies, they also involve practical and material *acts*. Death can happen by four elementary possibilities: natural cause, accident, murder, or suicide. A suicide and a murder are both cases of death, which carry a specific social meaning: they are the result of deliberate human action. They are forms of death that can only be accounted for in terms of practical human action. Natural death, can carry social meaning too, of course, and different cultures account for it in different ways. Accidental death can also carry social meaning, irony, tragedy, fate, the revenge of the gods etc.

Social meanings are not all of the same kind, therefore. Some refer to the ways in which a society, culture, group or individual member, explain, conceive of and conceptualise things and others refer to occurrences that can only happen through practical human intention. This difference is easy to understand in principle and yet frequently difficult to perceive in practical reality. The case of suicide illustrates this point.

An early study by Garfinkel, examined the Los Angeles Coroner's Office, which had teamed up with the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center. How can you tell from a bundle of human remains if these were the result of natural death, accident, suicide or homicide? How can one read the bare facts to find the actual, practical cause of death, for *real* and not just as a guess. While most people in society can just take a guess, the

Coroner's Office cannot; it must record the *actual* cause of death and supply reasons for its decision, sufficient to withstand any future reopening of the case, any legal challenge and so forth in order to protect the relatives from the pain of not knowing the reasons for the death and the coroner's staff from law-suits, professional embarrassment and more.

Whereas for Durkheim, suicide was a social statistic, for SPC staff it is always a concrete case. This indicates a key difference between ethnomethodology and formal analysis. Garfinkel looks at practices of identifying suicide, or any act of decision, on a case-by-case basis and it is the practices that count. In order to illustrate this point I want to provide an extended quote from Garfinkel, which I will subsequently draw upon in several ways to illustrate the difference between ethnomethodology and formal analysis.

### ***The Coroner's Question***

The SPC inquiries begin with a death that the coroner finds equivocal as to *mode* of death. That death they use as a precedent with which various ways of living in society that could have terminated with that death are searched out and read "in the remains"; in the scraps of this and that like the body and its trappings, medicine bottles, notes, bits and pieces of clothing, and other memorabilia – stuff that can be photographed, collected and packaged. Other "remains" are collected too: rumors, passing remarks, and stories – materials in the "repertoires" of whosoever might be consulted via the common work of conversations. These *whatsoever* bits and pieces that a story or a rule or a proverb might make intelligible are used to formulate a recognisably coherent, standard, typical, cogent, uniform, planful, *i.e.*, a professionally defensible, and thereby for members, a *recognizably* rational account of how the society worked to produce those remains. This point will be easier to make if the reader will consult any standard textbook in forensic pathology. In it he will find the inevitable photograph of a victim with a slashed throat. Were the coroner to use that "sight" to recommend the equivocality of the mode of death he might say something like this: "In the case where a body looks like the one in that picture, you are looking at suicidal death because the wound shows the 'hesitation cuts' that accompany the great wound. One can imagine that these cuts are the remains of a procedure whereby the victim first made several preliminary trials of a hesitating sort and then performed the lethal slash. Other courses of action are imaginable, too, and so cuts that look like hesitation cuts can be produced by other mechanisms. One needs to start with the actual display and imagine how different courses of actions could have been organized such that *that* picture would be compatible with it. One might think of the photographed display as a phase-of-the-action. In any actual display is there a course of action with which that phase is uniquely compatible? *That* is the coroner's question." (Garfinkel, 1967: 17-18).

The above quote is remarkable in several ways for a discussion aiming to show both the relevance of ethnomethodology for organisational learning and knowing and for demonstrating the uniqueness of its approach. First of all, we encounter an event,

which is equivocal, in this case someone's death but in the literature on organisational learning this could just as easily be a corporate failure, a crisis like Bhopal, an event which everyone recognises to be negative and the point of analysis is to see how it happened and to see in the account of what happened a learning process gone wrong. I'm not saying that all cases of organisational learning are like this, but that some are (Weick, 1988, 1993 for example). So the analyst seeks to make sense. In this case, Garfinkel is one sort of analyst and the coroner and SPC are another. Garfinkel follows the latter to see what they see.

Here we have an ethnographer following a specialised community of analysts through the course of their inquiry, just as ethnographers of organisation learning and knowing (e.g. Orr, 1990; Hutchins, 1991, 1995) follow a specialised community in the course of their work. The point is to enter their world, to see things the way they do, to ask the same questions they do. In the SPC case, the aim is to reconstruct the closing moments of someone's life without recourse to witnesses, by looking at and hearing 'memorabilia' and knowing how to read that, when knowing *how* to read is not the same thing as getting it right. The SPC staff can get it wrong, but their job is to make a persuasive and reasonable account of what happened so watertight that it is accepted by any number of interested parties (relatives, police officers, insurance company agents, medical practitioners and more) who might have a vested interest in alternate plausible accounts. Thus SPC staff practically piece together a 'reconstruction' of a course of events and their reconstruction is itself a practical course of events. SPC staff render the death as suicide, or murder, whatever, by reference to evidence which can be "photographed, collected and packaged" and it might be added, taken out of the package, presented and assembled as part of a persuasive version of events over the course of a trial for example.

The 'reconstruction' is like a slow motion action replay with plenty of editing, freezing the frame, varying the angle, providing the commentary over, etc. Events that were never seen except by missing witnesses are constructed *as if* as they happened. While the persuasive version may work – i.e. 'persuade' other interested parties, the artifice of its own construction is not itself the object of the SPC staff's account. That practical artifice *is*, however, *the object* of the ethnomethodological account. Garfinkel tells us the SPC staff, or coroner, may cite standard textbooks, point to the inevitable picture of a "victim with a slashed throat", explain that the presence of "hesitation cuts" are suggestive of suicide rather than the clean cut of a murderer's knife, which taken with other fragments of story and stuff, make the SPC staff's account *persuasive*, because rational, reasonable, cogent, etc. and because it points to details like "hesitation cuts" typified in a knowledge-community's standard texts which comprise esoteric knowledge to lay people.

Here, Garfinkel's account draws upon the inside knowledge of a profession, a community of practice. Just as Hutchins' draws upon his knowledge of textbook and training school navigation classes, Garfinkel, draws upon the textbook knowledge of forensic science. The evidence appears to match the image in the textbook.

Here, in the coroners' reconstruction, we have a case of professionals making reality fit the text, fit the theory, seeing the world through the eyes of a theory. Garfinkel is not saying they are wrong to do so, he is not saying they are right, he is saying that this, their work, comprises a practical course of activity. His account seeks to capture

the *in-courseness* of this activity, to “catch the work of “fact production” in flight” (Garfinkel, 1967: 79). The coroner produces “a professionally defensible, and thereby for members, a *recognizably* rational account of how the society worked to produce those remains”.

In the example of the coroner’s question, we see professional practitioners face a practical task, just as Orr’s photocopier repair technicians or Hutchins’ naval quartermasters. However, the assumptions at work in the analysis are different. They do not include any necessary reference to cognition, they do not presume cognition as a certain kind of mental content. Rather, ethnomethodology draws our attention to witnessable, observable, social phenomena, which leaves aside the question of participants’ actual mental contents or processes. One might argue that this is to ignore the learning or knowing that researchers of organizational learning and knowing are interested in. But there is an alternative argument, namely that learning and knowing need not be theorised cognitively; they need not be theorised at all.

## Discussion

From an ethnomethodological perspective, learning and knowing are practical matters and social-theorising, like story-telling, is itself a practical matter but one which tends to employ a cognitivist account of itself. It is dependent upon analytic conceptualisations that direct its empirical observations, turning the empirical research project into a search for theorised entities and/or theorised relationships between such entities. Alternatively, any research project, which starts with observation and then works towards a theory of observations, such as grounded theory or the discovering sciences, is equally cognitivist, or conceptualist insofar as it ends up with a theory, a conceptualisation, or representation of objective facts. The (re)search either begins or ends with representations of the real and actual world.

This is not a necessary way to view practices. We do not have to describe practices on the one hand and on the other seek the meanings with which participants invest them, as if these can be accessed by careful interviewing or through extended participant observation. To do so is Cartesian. This does not mean that participants cannot be asked for their meanings or that participant observers cannot adequately say what participants’ meanings consist of. It is easy to assume that on the one hand there is the action, activity, practice and on the other hand the participant’s meanings, but to make this assumption is to orient towards the social world *through* the Cartesian dichotomy, which practice-based theorizing claims to want to avoid. We do not have to search for the inner meaning of the activity as if that explains it.

The alternative is to see practices as “naturally accountable” (Garfinkel, 1967), that is, they are not simply an activity like banging in a nail, but are activities that produce themselves for *just what* they are. And all sorts of nominalised things are activities which involve *work* which makes them what they are (Sacks, 1984). A word, which ethnomethodologists use, to describe the natural accountability of social practices is “formulating” (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). Social practices are not just like mute objects – stones, grass, etc. – they are “endogenously reflexive” (Lynch, 1993), they manifest knowledge of what they are doing, they are done knowingly, they are *knowledgeable*. “Hesitation cuts” are the visible product of practices that can manifest

a knowing attempt to kill the self by the self. When I say practices are knowledgeable, or knowing, in this context, I want to suggest the knowledge of a practitioner but draw attention away from their inner experience and place the attention instead upon the visible practice itself. What does a practice achieve, what options are readable in a practice?

Here we return to our discussion of Sack's analysis of a joke's telling in conversation. Practices, like conversational devices and sequences, are readable in reasonable ways and often readable in more than one reasonable way. Whether the practice consists of signalling left or lurching left, whether it appears to be, or is, deliberate or not, it has consequences for others next understanding and next move. Rather than indicating the intent of the driver, or the joke teller, the coroner, the person who died in society, the con-sequentiality of their social practices lies in how they are oriented to by themselves and their recipients; how they shape the possibilities of the response sequence. The coroners' reconstruction tells a story of how the death really happened. Depending on how it is put together, other parties will either acquiesce, agree, disagree, sue, appeal, amongst many options. The ways stories are told, *in situ*, *in vivo*, shape the range of possible next steps or moves. Apart from possibly being funny, a joke tests one's understanding, you either get it or you don't.

Social practices, as dealt with by ethnomethodology, do not reduce social and material practices to cognitive practices or content; they are not explained in terms of people's true intentions. Nor do they reveal the internal cognitive or even calculative practices people may be doing inside their heads. Instead, they are looked at as possessing structures which can only be shown in indexical detail. The point is not to generalise from such cases towards a practice-based, socio-cognitive theory of learning or inquiry, rather it is to treat learning less as a cognitive process and more as a practical social activity, one which can be examined in indexical detail. Each ethnomethodological study is like an individual work of art. They are not all equally good, but they each show something unique, even though many of them appear to be 'about' the same thing (e.g. the human figure, landscape, flowers). It is as pointless to try to generalise from ethnomethodological studies as it might be to generalise about the nature of flowers from an exhaustive survey of all the paintings of flowers ever made. Of course one could try to do that and could be successful to a point, but, not only will something always be missing from such generalisations, but, the unique point of each painting would be lost.

In everyday life, lay and professional fact-finding goes on, and on each occasion some sort of story is told, or some stream of action unfolds which follows a series of sequences, from which we can (psychologically) infer many things about the motives and meaning of the teller, the recipients, their relationships and more. But also each story, or set of events, is a unique production and it can be viewed as a production in process, prospectively, as conversation analysis views the unfolding nature of talk, or as ethnomethodology attends to the unfolding nature of facts in flight, or, retrospectively.

## Conclusion

Ethnomethodologists profess to be learning things and to do so as a company of fellow practitioners (Garfinkel, 1991). They see learning, like inquiry, as a practical social activity not reducible to either physical or psychological phenomena. Their studies illuminate the nature of social facts in a different light to structural functionalist interpretations of Durkheim (Heritage, 1984) and in a different light to the interactionist or social constructionist traditions (Coulter, 1987) both of which are critiqued for reducing social to cognitive phenomena. By paying attention to ethnomethodology, the study of organizational learning and knowledge, may find a way to see social learning as a practical activity rather than as cognition mediated by practical social activity.

## Footnotes

[1] E.g. Garfinkel, 1967, p. 31; p. 77. Garfinkel, 1991: 14.

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