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Ethnomethodology

Foundational insights on the nature and meaning of documents in everyday life

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to argue that researchers in the information disciplines should embrace ethnomethodology as a way of forming deeper insights into the relationship between people and recorded knowledge.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper introduces the core concepts of ethnomethodology as a means of articulating what this perspective brings to the understanding of the way that society is accomplished. A selection of key studies are then examined to highlight important ethnomethodological findings about the particular relationship of documents to human actions and interactions.

Findings – Ethnomethodology highlights the fact that people transform their experiences, and the experiences of others, into documents whose status as an objective object help to justify people's actions and inferences. Documents, as written accounts, also serve to make peoples' actions meaningful to themselves and to others. At the same time, ethnomethodology draws attention to the fact that any correct reading of these documents relies partly on an understanding of the tacit ideologies that undergird people's sense-making and that are used in order to make decisions and get work done.

Originality/value – This conceptual framework contributes to the information disciplines by bringing to the fore certain understandings about the social organization of document work, and the attendant social arrangements they reveal. The paper also outlines, from a methodological perspective, how information science researchers can use ethnomethodology as an investigative stance to further their knowledge of the role of documents in everyday life.

Keywords Documents, Recordkeeping, Social theory, Document theory, Ethnomethodology, Information creation

Paper type Conceptual paper

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Introduction

> Every key thinker gives the social world his or her own distinctive perspective, shining a torch on parts of that world and leaving other parts in the dark, leaving them ready for the arrival of another theorist holding her torch at a slightly different angle. Each of them colors the social world with the sort of quirky and obsessional brilliance that is necessary in order to illuminate aspects of our social world that would otherwise go by unnoticed. They are the chemists and physicists of the social world, perceiving and describing social elements, forces, particles and compounds, explaining reactions, behaviors and mechanisms, mapping the statics of social orders and disorders that need a creative, technical, specialist eye to fathom (Stones, 1998, p. 5).

From the time of Otlet and Briet, the information disciplines have formally embraced "the document" as an object of conceptual interest. In the modern era of document studies, an ongoing concern with definitional issues (Buckland, 1997, 1998; Francke, 2005) has been accompanied by rich and varied research streams that study everything from the emergence of document genres (Dillon and Gushrowski, 2000; Trace and Dillon, 2012), to the practice by which people create and use documents in various professional and personal settings (McKenzie and Davies, 2010; Østerlund and Crowston, 2011). Attention has also been paid to theoretical issues, with researchers

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looking to discourse analytic approaches from Foucault (Frohmann, 2001), Habermas' theory of the public sphere (Andersen, 2004), and Rosenblatt's reader-response theory (Latham, 2014), among others, in order to constitute a theory of documents. This paper adds to the literature by introducing the theoretical and methodological approach of ethnomethodology: a framework that can provide foundational insights into the social organization of document work, but which has yet to be widely adopted by researchers in the information fields.

First introduced in the mid-twentieth century by sociologist Harold Garfinkel, ethnomethodology has a number of sub-fields including conversation analysis, and ethnomethodological studies of the local organization of institutional settings and of specialized work domains (Maynard and Clayman, 1991). At its heart, ethnomethodology is a form of social theory that looks at how social order is possible. Along with symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, ethnomethodology puts human agents, as they act within the social sphere, at the center of analysis (Have, 2002). Inspired by American pragmatism and German phenomenology these so called "interaction theories" look at the rich layers of explicit and implicit norms and meanings that make up people's everyday behavior (Harste and Mortensen, 2000). In particular, ethnomethodology is interested in analyzing sense-making and understanding its input into both action and social structure (Heritage, 1998). In effect, ethnomethodology studies how a member's social world (a world comprised of everyday objects, action, and interaction) is constructed, accomplished, and maintained, and what this social reality looks like from the viewpoint of someone situated within it (Cuff *et al.*, 2003). At the heart of the ethnomethodoligical perspective is the notion that everyday social interaction is made possible through common sense knowledge, a phenomena that includes our stock of knowledge, the natural attitude that we adopt, and our processes of common sense reasoning (Leiter, 1980).

In examining members' sense-making, ethnomethodologists are particularly interested in the mechanisms that members use in everyday life to make sense of their circumstances and to act on them, thereby creating and facilitating social interaction and the accomplishment of daily actions (Heritage, 1996). For Garfinkel, common-sense reasoning is "methodical," in that it is based on methods that are both "social and shared" (Heritage, 1998, p. 178). Ethnomethodology contends that members' ability to mutually understand each other requires "constant attention and competent use" of these shared methods (Rawls, 2008, p. 702). Through these shared methods or processes ("ethnomethods") members not only construct, categorize, and make sense of the social world around them, but also have the sense that this social world is "ready-made and independent of perception" (Leiter, 1980, p. 5). The common sense reasoning used by members is essentially a "set of methods for turning our personal experience into experience of an objective reality" (Leiter, 1980, p. 11). Having a shared set of methods from which we can draw is also said to give us a sense of membership, of having a world in common.

The fundamental premise of this paper is that ethnomethodology is an appropriate worldview from which to study the nature of documents and document work. The case is made that researchers in the information disciplines should embrace ethnomethodology as a way of forming deeper insights into the relationship between people and recorded knowledge. The paper begins with an overview of the intellectual roots of ethnomethodology, situating this perspective in relation to the disciplines of sociology and phenomenology. Next, the core concepts of ethnomethodology are introduced as a means of articulating what this perspective brings to our

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understanding of the way that society is accomplished. A selection of ethnomethodoligical studies are then examined to highlight these concepts in action and to delineate key findings about the particular relationship of documents to human actions and interactions. The paper ends with an outline of how information scientists can use ethnomethodology as an investigative stance to further our knowledge of the role of documents in everyday life.

The intellectual roots of ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology has been identified as an attitude, a worldview, a research perspective, an independent sociological perspective, a methodological style, an intellectual posture, and a form of life (Mehan and Wood, 1975; Coulon, 1995; Vom Lehn, 2014; Have, 2004). Whether or not ethnomethodology actually constitutes a theory in its own right is the subject of debate (Rawls, 2008). Equally contentious is its relationship to sociology, as well as ethnomethodology's conception of the nature of sociological knowledge.

These debates are rooted in ethnomethodology's emergence during a period of the twentieth century when the relationship between the social and the natural sciences was under scrutiny. The prevailing attitude of scientism asserted that principles and assumptions from the natural sciences could form the basis for an objective form of sociological enquiry. Scientific methods were seen as the means to understand human phenomena and the true nature of social reality. Ethnomethodology broke free from such discussions, setting about sociology in a "different way" (Cuff *et al.*, 2003, p. 126). Instead, ethnomethodology takes scientific notions such as truth and rationality and respecifies them as members' methods (Have, 2004), allowing scientific attitudes to be studied as but one form of sense-making that allows members to construct, categorize, and make sense of the social world. Accordingly, if "theory" (at least in the scientific sense) generally provides an answer to "why" questions, ethnomethodology is concerned with more foundational questions of "how" people accomplish everyday life (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). Ethnomethodology can therefore be understood as pre-theoretical, seeking to "arrive at an understanding of how the subject matter of theory comes into existence in the first place" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, p. 495).

The intellectual roots of ethnomethodology owe much to Garfinkel's engagement with, and critique of, the work of a number of leading social theorists of his day, including his PhD supervisor, Harvard sociologist, Talcott Parsons (Parsons, 1937, 1951; Parsons and Shils, 1951), and the works of phenomenologists Edmund Husserl (1960, 1970) and Alfred Schütz (1962, 1967) (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). In Parson's view, there was one social reality, a reality in which there was a marked difference between the real world (made up of concrete objects) and our subjective interpretations of the real world (made up of conceptual representations and descriptions that form approximations of objects) (Vom Lehn, 2014). For Parsons, action was always directed toward an end goal, with the human actor trying to bring about or reach a particular state of affairs (Heritage, 1996). Parsons believed that the scientific observer and the everyday actor approached this world using different methods and thus understood the world in different ways (Vom Lehn, 2014). According to Parsons, rational-scientific methods (scientific perspective and scientific knowledge) led to more valid and coherent descriptions of social order, and thus these methods come closest to describing the true nature of reality (Vom Lehn, 2014). The scientific method stood in stark contrast to everyday actors' methods – the "messy," "unspecified and varied" perspectives, and accounts of social order that ordinary members of society were said to produce (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 60).

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In the quest for a theoretical basis for the social sciences, Parsons developed his own analytical constructs (pattern variations) which allowed social scientists to take people's subjective orientations to given social situations and to differentiate, describe, and analyze social order in a causal manner (Vom Lehn, 2014). For Parsons, the materialization of social order started from the premise that some mechanism must be in place to align the "diverging perspectives of everyday actors" (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 61), thus limiting or putting a cooperative spin on peoples' end goals, and on the methods they use to achieve them (Heritage, 1996). Parsons believed that this mechanism was an a priori social system (a value system) where external social norms and rules (as described by the pattern variations) become internalized values that serve as the motivation for people to follow the demands of the social system (Heritage, 1998). For Parsons, the order we see in society is derived from rational choices that people make based on "rules that regulate self-interest, and from the development of shared value systems that provide individuals with meaningful ways of selecting between courses of action" (Holton, 1989, p. 99). In seeking to understand how people sustained these internalized values, Parsons saw this sense-making largely as a psychological rather than a sociological process (Heritage, 1996).

Garfinkel rejected Parson's notion that social facts impose themselves upon us as "an objective reality" (Coulon, 1995, p. 12) and instead conferred on people a greater degree of agency. In rebuffing the idea of an independent external social world (a world that the social scientist was thought most competent to describe), ethnomethodology focuses instead on everyday sense-making. In effect, ethnomethodology studies how people produce or accomplish social order through everyday reasoning, conversation, and interaction. Rather than studying how people sustain social norms and values, ethnomethodology draws attention to the interpretive work in which people are engaged so that they may understand these forces as "objectively real" and to decide how to act within a particular social situation (Leiter, 1980, p. 25). Ethnomethodology, therefore, views social order as self-generating, contingent, and interpretive; where the relationship between actor and situation is not "stable and unchanging, produced by cultural contents or rules," but is produced by people's reasoning and processes of interpretation (Coulon, 1995, p. 4). Viewed as a cooperative endeavor, this sense-making is therefore seen as fundamentally social rather than psychological in nature (Heritage, 1998). With no interest in what "goes on in the mind," ethnomethodology focuses instead on what is "overt," "scenic," and "directly observable" (Have, 2004, p. 27).

Garfinkel's ideas about the nature of the social world and everyday sense-making were also influenced by the German-French philosophical school of phenomenology, specifically in relation to its program of research on cognition and mundane reasoning (Heritage, 1996). In particular, Garfinkel drew from the works of phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schütz (Leiter, 1980). In seeking to explain the dynamics underlying the political and economic crises engulfing Europe in the 1930s, Husserl had challenged the positivist worldview of western scientific and philosophical thought. Such a worldview sought a monopoly on the meaning of reason by privileging scientific conceptions of the world - holding that an understanding of the nature of social reality would only be secured through an approach analogous to the natural sciences and to that of the scientific method. Husserl countered that modern science was alienating to humanity, divorced from the "lifeworld of everyday experience," serving merely as an "abstract vision of the world stripped of human value and meaning" (Heritage, 1998, p. 177). As a counterpoint, phenomenology draws attention to the totality of lived experiences that is said to constitute our mundane, self-evident, life world

(in German – our *Lebenswelt*). Husserl believed that the two worlds (the world-according-to-science and the world of everyday, lived experience) were not necessarily in conflict. Indeed, science and the scientific method were seen as stemming from, and dependent on, the *Lebenswelt* (Cuff *et al.*, 2003). What was important to Husserl was to look at how we came to develop a way of looking at the world that distanced the common sense from the scientific way of thinking (Cuff *et al.*, 2003).

The contribution of Husserl's work to ethnomethodology includes the notion that people in daily life (both laymen and women, and scientists) have a "natural attitude" or common-sense view of reality, one in which the life world is seen as self-evident and as "factual from the outset" (Leiter, 1980, p. 39). In ethnomethodology, the orderliness of the social world is attributable to the fact that members demonstrate to each other, through their everyday actions, that they recognize this common nature to the social world. People's "acceptance of the facticity of the social world as given and independent of perception" is seen as a form of common sense reality (Leiter, 1980, p. 42). The object of Husserl's phenomenology, like ethnomethodology, is to study how people both create and sustain this presupposition. Therefore, while acknowledging that social facts (rules, norms, and shared meanings) exist, ethnomethodology treats these facts not as an objective reality but as phenomena to be studied in their own right. The notion of an endogenous order in ethnomethodology reflects this view of social life as an accomplished phenomenon; one in which people use the "resources and competencies they have as members" in order to achieve a rational and orderly world (Pollner and Emerson, 2001, p. 120).

One of the contributions of Schütz's work to ethnomethodology lies in his understanding of the social world as accommodating multiple realities (finite provinces of meaning) in which "different observers may see the world in different ways" (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 64). Unlike Parson's rational-scientific approach to the nature and description of social order (which sought to interpret social order through concepts produced by the social scientist), Schütz's work allowed for the explicit differentiation and interpretation of both a common sense and a scientific attitude – between the perspectives of a social actor (first order constructs) and scientific theorizing (second order constructs) (Schütz, 1962).

Drawing from Husserl, Schütz took the "natural attitude" to mean that people take the existence of a common, external world (and the objects within it) for granted (Leiter, 1980). The "natural attitude" means that people generally live in a world that they accept largely without questioning (any doubt about the world and its objects are generally suspended) (Leiter, 1980). The defining feature of the "natural attitude," however, is that it is practical and pragmatic in orientation – directed and organized toward the accomplishment of action (Cuff *et al.*, 2003). The "natural attitude" is most commonly associated with the "common-sense attitude," that attitude under which we generally operate in our daily life and at work. As Cuff *et al.* state, "among any given set of people there is a vast multitude of things that they will take for granted, that between themselves they treat as obvious, apparent, as going without need of comment or explanation, as transparently and without question plainly the case, and readily known to anyone and everyone, i.e. as common sense" (Cuff *et al.*, 2003, p. 154).

While the "scientific attitude" also takes the existence of an external world for granted, this way of relating to the world is distinct from the "common-sense" attitude. The scientific attitude is concerned with "knowledge rather more than with practicality, with finding out as opposed to getting things done, and with knowledge for its own sake, rather than knowledge that enables the fulfillment of a here-and-now practical task"

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(Cuff *et al.*, 2003, p. 155). However, the scientific attitude can be seen as subordinate to the common-sense attitude in that even the process of doing science is reliant on people taking many common-sense things for granted. Moreover, as people move in and out of the scientific attitude, they inevitably return to the world of everyday reasoning (Cuff *et al.*, 2003). While ethnomethodology accepts these distinctions within the natural attitude, this distinction is not rendered as important or as absolute (Have, 2004). Instead, ethnomethodology draws particular attention to the "practical rationality" inherent in all everyday activities, and how these lay understandings, in turn, form a grounding for professional practice of all kinds (scientific and otherwise) (Have, 2004, p. 17).

To understand the life world, and how people act within it, Schütz felt it necessary to study how people operate under this natural attitude (Cuff *et al.*, 2003). Schütz's work was directed toward understanding how people intersubjectively make sense of objects, actions, and other people during the normal course of action and interaction. In doing so, Schütz held that people drew from a shared "stock of knowledge," providing them with the wherewithal to act within a social setting. Critical to this notion is the idea that people experience a world in common and that this is achieved through "the idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints" (the taking for granted that the way people see and experience things will be reciprocated even if they change places), and "the idealization of the congruency of the system of relevances" (the belief that the differences in perspectives that arise from each person's unique biography is assumed to be largely immaterial to the situation at hand) (Schütz, 1962, pp. 11-12). To study how people construct social reality, Schütz developed a technique that was later adopted by Garfinkel for ethnomethodoligical purposes. The method allowed the researcher to place social practices, and how they are produced and maintained, to the forefront of study. By suspending assumptions about the world every individual takes for granted, and bracketing the life world for analytic purposes, Schütz made possible the study of the processes by which members' "separate and distinct" life world becomes an "objective reality" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, p. 489).

Ethnomethodology, in essence, departs from general sociological enquiry in terms of its understanding of social order and how it is to be studied. For Garfinkel, the question of how social order comes about requires analysis at a level more elemental than that of studying social facts and how they impinge on and shape human behavior. Ethnomethodology looks at what sociology has generally taken for granted – that people's sense of the objective reality of social facts is in fact an ongoing achievement. Ethnomethodology is concerned with how people, together, accomplish this sense of the social world and how such understandings are made mutually intelligible (Garfinkel, 1999).

Ethnomethodological concepts

In setting out a program for ethnomethodology, Garfinkel both co-opted and developed a specific language for its key concepts. The study of everyday sense-making is thus understood in reference to terms such as "indexicality," "reflexivity," "stock of knowledge," "typifications," "documentary method of interpretation," and "accountability." At its heart, ethnomethodology views social life as being constituted through spoken and written language (Coulon, 1995). Ethnomethodology therefore sees the social world as "managed, maintained and acted upon through the medium of ordinary description" (Heritage, 1996, p. 137). A fundamental tenet of ethnomethodology is that language use (and action) is indexical. The concept of indexicality is bound up with the notion that expressions (and objects) are socially situated; their sense and meaning united with, and dependent on, commonly understood knowledge or features of the background context in which they

occur. For ethnomethodology, our actions, our understandings, and our descriptions of the social world (including those embodied in text) are also said to be reflexive. Reflexivity refers to the notion that what members "know about," or "make of," or "do" in a setting, is both "simultaneously embedded and constitutive" of that setting (Pollner and Emerson, 2001, p. 121).

Drawing from Schütz, ethnomethodology starts from the premise that people have "all kinds of background knowledge about people and circumstances that we employ and take account of in our dealings with others" (Heritage, 1998, p. 180). These pragmatic constructs and categories, native understandings, or background knowledge, consist of "recipes, rules of thumb, social types, maxims, and definitions," as well as "social types or idealizations of people, objects, and events," all of which serve as points of inference and references for action (Leiter, 1980, p. 5). This background knowledge is used "to 'fill in' the meaning of what people say and do" (Heritage, 1998, p. 182). Ethnomethodology views a person's stock of knowledge as social in origin – coming from a person's own experiences but more typically being derived from learning from and interacting with others (Schütz, 1962). A person's stock of knowledge is therefore contextually bound (unique in its particular configuration), but also derived from the general social stock of knowledge of a culture or community. Our stock of knowledge is learned and handed down through social interaction whether, for example, from parent to child, teacher to pupil, or co-worker to co-worker.

A core understanding of ethnomethodology is that the very rules and norms (our "stock of knowledge") that help guide or inform the production of action are the same rules and norms that inform our reasoning about that action (Heritage, 1998). As Gurwitsch states, this stock of knowledge "forms the frame of reference, interpretation, and orientation for my life in the world of daily experience, for my dealing with things, coping with situations, coming to terms with fellow human beings" (Gurwitsch, 1979, p. 119). In studying how members make sense of the world around them, ethnomethodology pays attention to a notion drawn from Schütz's work on mundane reasoning; that "an experiencing consciousness is inherently a typifying one" (Heritage, 1996, p. 51). Schütz believed that people were able to cope with indexicality, and deal with each experience, by creating and deploying types and typifications from their stock of knowledge (Vom Lehn, 2014). This includes type constructs of people and objects and "recipe knowledge" about how to get things done (Schütz, 1962).

For Garfinkel, however, the notion of types and typifications in itself was insufficient to explain how action and interaction is actually accomplished in such scenarios. Instead, Garfinkel looked to the "documentary method of interpretation" to understand how people operate in conditions that are fundamentally indexical (Vom Lehn, 2014). The documentary method of interpretation, a concept drawn from the work of social theorist Karl Mannheim (Garfinkel, 1999 – referenced in Heritage, 1998), requires that rather than having a predefined notion of the meaning of an action, people are said to search for and use patterns to build up a picture to infer meaning and motive in the behavior of others. It is through this activity of "comparing and contrasting" that mundane typifications are said to arise (Heritage, 1996, p. 51). How we interpret and perceive a current situation, and how we act in that situation, is a product of our activity of reflecting on, and searching our past experiences for a situation with which to compare. This work entails inferring meaning by treating any action as a "document" or as an expression of a presupposed underlying pattern that is drawn from a person's common knowledge and experience (Garfinkel, 1999). In turn, from a research perspective, people's actions can be studied as a type of document – as

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evidence or pointers to the underlying patterns of meaning that make social interaction possible (Garcia *et al.*, 2006).

In addition, actions and patterns are also seen as self-referential in that not only is the action understood in relationship to the underlying pattern to which it is said to refer; the underlying pattern is also derived from the action. These typifications are therefore both "contingent and revisable" (Heritage, 1996, p. 52); having both an "open horizon of meaning" (meaning is derived from the relevant and situated contexts in which they are used) (Leiter, 1980, pp. 5-7); and a continuing horizon of meaning (people assume that knowledge that has proven adequate up to now will also suffice in the future and a person's stock of knowledge is taken to be valid until proven otherwise) (Heritage, 1996). In applying this stock of knowledge in the process of reasoning, these typifications are not only made meaningful but they also help to create a world that seems familiar (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). Therefore, not only do we use our stock of knowledge to typify, we also use it to normalize our view of everyday social actions and situations (Heritage, 1998).

Ethnomethodology is also interested in the methods by which members make their everyday activities "visible," "rational," and "reportable" (i.e. accountable) to themselves and to others (Garfinkel, 1999, p. vii). The notion of "accounting" is tied to the fact that doubt and questioning can be a feature of social situations. In these instances, ethnomethodology looks at the way in which members come up with accounts as a way of restoring social order (Vom Lehn, 2014). "Accounting" involves people drawing from rules, values, and social principles (stock of knowledge) to provide descriptions and explanations and thus to demonstrate the coherence and rationality (the accountability) of their behavior and that of others (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000; Vom Lehn, 2014). Actors undertake activities in such a way that "their sense is clear right away or at least explicable on demand" (Have 2004, p. 20). In effect, the notion of accountability has two meanings (Heritage, 1998). One is intelligible – having knowledge of their own situation, members can account for their own actions. The other is in the more traditional moral sense; we can be held accountable for our actions (Heritage, 1998). People can be held to account because "they are visible as the producers of the action" (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 18).

Ethnomethodology and the study of documents

> One of ethnomethodology's contributions to the understanding of social life is its capacity to produce a deep wonder about what is regarded as obvious, given or natural. Whether it be the interpretation of documents, the utterance of "uh-huh" or the flow of everyday interaction, ethnomethodology has provided a way of questioning which begins to reveal the richly layered skills, assumptions and practices through which the most commonplace (and not so commonplace) activities and experiences are constructed (Pollner, 1987, p. ix).

Different sociological theories and theoretical frameworks provide us with distinct ways of looking at and understanding the particular relationship of documents to human actions and activities (Trace, 2011). Phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspectives provide ample evidence of those distinct viewpoints. Parsons believed in one social world, albeit one that the scientific observer and the everyday actor experience differently, based on their use of different methods. For Parsons, a separation exists between the real world and the experienced world such that a concrete object and the object as experienced are two distinct things. Yet, given this fact, and given the presence

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of a shared system of values allowing for mutual interaction among everyday actors, the meaning of objects (such as documents) is assumed, in Parson's worldview, to be "fixed and socially agreed upon prior to the emergence of social situations" (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 63 quoting Heritage, 1996, p. 29). Schütz, on the other hand, believed in a multitude of social realities, where people's varied attitudes and orientations to the world created different meanings to people, actions, and interactions. In this model, however, the real world and the experienced world are seen as equivalent in that objects are said to be perceived and experienced in the moment, and in their individual context (Vom Lehn, 2014). As such, the meanings of objects such as documents are never fixed and stable. Instead, objects are seen to have "different meanings for different people in different situations" (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 64).

Ethnomethodology supports the notion that objects are understood in the moment, and in their individual context, and that documents both represent and constitute aspects of the social world. From an ethnomethodological perspective, documents are seen neither as providing adequate facts or sources of information about the experiences and behaviors of their creator, nor seen as a tool for the researcher to critique those experiences (Hak, 1992). Instead, the tenets of ethnomethodology dictate that documents are indexical objects (objects that have meaning in context), and that document work needs to be understood in terms of its reflexivity (documents can only be understood as part of the practices that documents, in turn, help to constitute) (Hak, 1992). Ethnomethodology thus emphasizes the ties that exist between documents and the social order that creates and is created by these documents (Garfinkel and Bittner, 1999). The role that the natural attitude, reflexivity, and indexicality play in our understanding of documents and document work is made manifest through such seminal ethnomethodological work as that of Garfinkel and Bittner's (1999) examination of how patients were selected for treatment at an outpatient psychiatric clinic, Cicourel's (1995) study of the juvenile justice system in two California cities, Zimmerman's (1969) study of the intake process in a public welfare agency, and Meehan's (1986) research into the policing of juveniles in two suburban police departments.

Ethnomethodologists have a particular interest in understanding how members operate within the natural attitude, a world that is "perceived, assumed, and taken for granted" (Leiter, 1980, p. 68). The natural attitude that members adopt results in a social world that is seen as pre-existing and shared, and one in which the focus is on those objects and events that have immediate relevance to action (Leiter, 1980). Ethnomethodology therefore provides us with a model of the social world in which people act as if documents "are something rather than are seen as something" (Rogers, 1983, p. 53). Within this pervasive, social, natural attitude, documents are understood as resources that are simply out there, ready to be used. In effect, documents are viewed as "intersubjective facts that are independent of any one person's action or perception" (Leiter, 1980, p. 79). Given the ethnomethodological thesis of the "interchangeability of standpoints" and "the idealization of the congruency of the system of relevances," documents are also understood to have meanings that are available for any competent member to comprehend (Leiter, 1980).

Members deal with documents within the natural attitude (Leiter, 1980). In Garfinkel's study, the natural attitude under which clinic staff operated led them to construct documents in ways that made sense to, and acted in compliance with, a particular social order: one in which the performance of activities, and the clinic-patient relationship, were seen in terms of the clinic's role as a medico-legal

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enterprise with an associated set of obligations between clinician and patient. In highlighting the indexical character of the clinic records, Garfinkel draws particular attention to the fact that any subsequent and "correct reading" of these clinic files is dependent on an understanding of the particular ethnographic context surrounding the creation of the files. Such a biography includes knowledge of the persons involved (both those creating and those captured in the documents), the principles underlying the clinic's operation, and everyday clinic procedures (including those for recordkeeping) (Garfinkel and Bittner, 1999; Hak, 1992). This premise of a correct reading of documents holds true both for the people involved in the creation of the documents in the first instance, and for the people who engage with those same documents thereafter. However, while it is believed that documents are experienced in a similar way, and to have fundamentally the same meaning, ethnomethodological studies show that these meanings are not always shared with or available to everyone. As Garfinkel and Meehan show, in some professional contexts members can and do take a proactive stance to constrain certain external readings of records, particularly in instances where members' actions could be perceived in a negative light.

In Zimmerman's (1969) study, the natural attitude adopted by caseworkers during the claims process was as an expression of an underlying investigative stance on the part of staff that applicants should not be viewed as trustworthy. Within this particular natural attitude, the staff took for granted, from the outset, that certain external official documents (documents over which the applicant or other interested parties had no influence or control) and applicant records (in instances where the applicant was legally responsible for their accuracy), as well as the aggregate of internally created case documents, were reliable. That is, their factual and objective nature was taken as a given, with the information in the documents "treated as a set of intersubjective facts," whose meaning was available for all staff to understand (Leiter, 1980, p. 79). The "plain fact" nature of documents was evident in that these information objects were routinely privileged over the applicant's own statements in deciding issues of eligibility (Zimmerman, 1969).

Ethnomethodology tells us that this "natural attitude" (members' sense of the objective reality of social facts) is an ongoing accomplishment. Ethnomethodologist's study of these sense-making methods, and how they are deployed in action, is centered on instances where people are making distinctions in order to decide on a course of action. Such, for example, is the case when people are deciding "what is 'actually the case,' 'really going on,' 'surely a fact,' 'unquestionably correct' and so on" (Cuff *et al.*, 2003, p. 163). From the perspective of document studies, this involves looking for what Cuff *et al.* call the "ordinary, familiar, and unsurprising" methods that members use to investigate and determine the reality of recorded information (Cuff *et al.*, 2003, p. 163). This would include how, in the course of work, members decide, for example, whether documents are true or not, factual or not, correct or not, etc.

The means by which members construct social interaction and understand the objects with which they interact on a daily basis is achieved and sustained through the use of the documentary method of interpretation. In interacting with documents, members engage in interpretive work, drawing from and linking to membership knowledge in order to recognize and inform the situation at hand. According to Heritage (1996), "what the record actually represents is thus grasped in an interpretive process in which the record is compared with 'what is known' (outside of the record) and the sense of each is elaborated to accommodate the other" (p. 167). These

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information objects therefore both rely on, and are evidence of, the "underlying patterns" of members' "common knowledge and experience" (Garcia *et al.*, 2006, p. 399). Meehan's study draws particular attention to police officers use of background knowledge to "infer the meaning, import, and 'accuracy'" of the records with which they work (Meehan, 1986, p. 71). Meehan ascertained that members accumulated the necessary background knowledge for the job in the form of a "mental dossier," sharing this information through interactional exchanges, dubbed the "running record" (Meehan, 1986). In Meehan's study, members (police officers') rarely took the contents of official records at face value; instead, they invoked their mental dossier and the running record to decode and make sense of the written record.

Accounting practices are examples of the documentary method of interpretation in action. In accounting, members demonstrate the reasonableness and coherence of their actions, including rationalizing the ways in which documentary evidence is understood in particular organizational settings. Zimmerman's (1969) study highlights the fact that it is through accounts that personnel in a public welfare agency make the "plain fact" properties of bureaucratic documents and their modes of production observable both to themselves and to others. It is through accounts that the factual nature of documents is achieved, with members drawing from knowledge at hand to provide accounts "which display the ways in which the documentary evidence is visibly more reliable, more objective, more trustworthy than the applicant's word" (Zimmerman, 1969, p. 343). This plain fact nature of bureaucratic documents was maintained despite the occurrence of doubts and contingencies that arose in the normal course of working with such information objects. These accounts achieved their authority and purpose by presenting documents as both byproduct and representation of normal, everyday procedures and activities. In essence, ethnomethodology shows us that documents provide a means by which people can inscribe the accountability of their actions and it is through these accounts and descriptions that social order is therefore accomplished and made visible.

Working within the natural attitude, it is important to reiterate that members have at their disposal a stock of knowledge, both general and specialized. That is, members have access to a collection of understandings that consists of categorizations of people, objects, and events, and sets of recipes and rules of thumb for every kind of action. In Cicourel's study, for example, the stock of knowledge that law enforcement used in working with juveniles included theories about "individuals and groups, morality and immorality, good and bad people, institutions, practices, and typifications of community settings" (Cicourel, 1995, p. 66). Such knowledge coalesced around "everyday" categories used to delineate what was considered "strange," "unusual," and "wrong," and what was "routine," "normal," "harmless," and "right" (Cicourel, 1995, p. 113). The continuous activity of sense-making is dependent on these common sense constructs and categories, with this routine knowledge offering the individual "effective responses to recurrent situations that were once problematic" (Rogers, 1983, p. 55). Members, in fact, "read into" the documents what they know about the routines and procedures of daily life, and thus find evidence of this life in the documents themselves (Atkinson, 1988, p. 455).

A key understanding in relation to documents and document work is the fact that this stock of knowledge is fundamentally social in nature and origin. As Gurwitsch states, "we have been told and shown by our teachers and parents what the things mean, how they are to be used – that is, how they are interpreted and typified in our society" (Gurwitsch, 1979, p. 119). Indeed, people demonstrate their competence as

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members of a community by connecting "context-specific information, in a reasonable manner with generally available knowledge" (Have, 1990). An equally fundamental insight is that people's stock of knowledge includes constructs and categories about document work (Trace, 2007). As such, we can expect that knowledge about documents and document work will be "transferred to the individual through social arrangements," including "child rearing in the family, teaching in school, on the job-training and conversation among peers" (Cuff *et al.*, 2003, p. 156). Indeed, prior ethnomethodoligical research has established that much of our knowledge about the nature of documents and document work (how to create and use documents), is first learned in our youth and taught as part of the hidden curriculum in school (Trace, 2007). For children, this knowledge includes the fact that records exist and are managed as physical objects; that records are entities that control, reflect, and organize their environment; that records serve as evaluative instruments; that records can hold them accountable; and that records have a role to play in managing social relationships (both with teachers and with other students) within the classroom context (Trace, 2007).

In sum, therefore, the heart of Garfinkel's work is a reframing of Emile Durkheim's aphorism that "the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental principle" (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 10). For ethnomethodology, any sense that social facts have an objective reality is, in fact, an accomplishment, something that members achieve. In studying how people "do" document work, ethnomethodology starts from the premise that people have a natural attitude that undergirds their experiences and makes it possible for them to act. Within this natural attitude, documents exist as part of the process of everyday action and interaction, created from within a social setting and thus only truly understood in relation to this context. This natural attitude is defined through people's associated stock of knowledge at hand – knowledge that is accumulated throughout life and that is profoundly social in nature. From an ethnomethodological perspective, it is not enough to simply uncover this stock of knowledge as part of our study of the rules of conduct that people follow in engaging with documents in daily life. Ethnomethodology encourages us to reframe our analysis so that rules of conduct are not treated as a resource but as a topic for research. In doing so, ethnomethodology leads us to study the way in which members make sense of the rules, and the ways that members account for their actions by referring to the rules. In the case of documents and document work, this provides us with a frame of analysis that looks at the rules in action, allowing us to understand how the rules are used to constitute what is and what is not acceptable practice.

Discussion and conclusion

The rise of the bureaucratic organization, and the attendant routinization of recordkeeping, has led to the "embedding of organizational actions in the processing of documents so that, in significant respects, document work (often paperwork) has become the work" (Hartswood *et al.*, 2011, p. 151). The fundamental premise of this paper is that ethnomethodology is an appropriate worldview from which to study the nature of this document work. If the case has been made in this paper that those in the information disciplines should embrace ethnomethodology as a way of forming deeper insights into the relationship between people and recorded knowledge, all that remains to do here is to outline what such a program of study would entail, from a methodological perspective. To begin with, all ethnomethodological studies need to share a commitment to certain immersive methodological approaches and "investigative tendencies" (Lynch, 2009, p. 88). In particular, ethnomethodology

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requires that any investigative method be capable of studying and recovering social reality at the level where it is constructed – in the very concrete realm of action and interaction (Leiter, 1980). In an organizational setting, any study of documents and document work would therefore involve a close examination of the practical details of everyday activities, including work processes (how members carry out their work tasks), institutional talk, the organization of interaction, and the way in which members make decisions.

In addition, ethnomethodology requires us to approach our research with Garfinkel's notion of "perspicuous settings" and his policy of "unique adequacy" in mind (Garfinkel and Wieder, 1992; Garfinkel and Rawls, 2002). A "perspicuous setting" is one in which our phenomena of interest (document work) manifests itself in the form of practical action, done in real-world settings, by competent actors, as part of their everyday lived experience. Such a setting needs to be observable and recordable, and capable of teaching the researcher what he or she needs to know. Perspicuous settings for studies of document work direct the researcher to organizations as diverse as government, corporations, schools, social clubs, hospitals, banks, courts, professional and religious organizations, the police, and the legal and prison systems.

The idea of unique adequacy goes hand-in-hand with membership, requiring that researchers "fully embed themselves into the social activities and acquire the competence and skills of the participants in order to understand and pursue the activities just like the participants themselves" (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 106). Such an approach is demonstrated in Livingston's (1986) study of mathematical proofing and Sudnow's (1978) study of improvisation in jazz piano playing and piano pedagogy. In ethnomethodology, two kinds of unique adequacy are distinguished, based on the level of competency acquired by the researcher and on the types of "account and description" produced as a result (Vom Lehn, 2014, p. 107). A weak version of unique adequacy requires that the researcher acquire what is called a "vulgar" or everyday competence. In essence, a researcher must acquire membership knowledge such that he or she can recognize, produce, and account for the relevant phenomena under study, and create descriptions of the same (Garfinkel and Rawls, 2002). For any study of documents and document work, such competence could typically be obtained through fieldwork in the form of participant observation.

A strong version of unique adequacy requires that the researcher acquire the indigenous skills and competencies that constitute membership of a group (Vom Lehn, 2014). More importantly, this strong version of unique adequacy dictates that the methods that members themselves use to create and sustain a social setting are the only way to analyze and describe a setting without distorting it (Garfinkel and Rawls, 2002; Rooke and Kagioglou, 2007). Any study of documents and document work under such a scenario would therefore need to take a wholly indigenous approach in the analysis and the reporting of the research. In effect, it would entail a "refusal to evaluate, describe or explain the activities that constitute the setting using criteria, concepts or theories that are not a part of that setting" (Rooke and Kagioglou, 2007, p. 982).

With the concepts of "perspicuous settings" and "unique adequacy" in mind, there are a number of strategies or methodological approaches that have particular resonance with the purposes and tenets of ethnomethodology (Have, 2004), and that could be used individually, or in combination, to study document work. One such method involves studying members when they are engaged in situations in which the phenomena of interest is strongly manifested, in circumstances where the members are

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engaged in extraordinary sense-making activities. For a study of document work this would involve following the paper trail and looking for instances where documents are a central focus of sense-making activity.

While such a situation could arise organically, this approach is not without its challenges. Although members are said to be "remarkably adept in recognizing, knowing, and 'doing' the lived order," the very taken for granted nature of sense-making activities means that they are "resistant to analytic discovery," both by members and by researchers (Pollner and Emerson, 2001, p. 121). Ten Have (1990) calls this the "problem of the invisibility of common sense." Therefore, ethnomethodology looks for instances where the phenomena under study can be made particularly transparent; a state that can be manufactured through the use of so called "breaching experiments." Breaching experiments consist of planned and deliberate violations of unstated rules and social norms as a way of getting to the heart of how social structures are created and maintained. In the context of document studies, such breaching experiments would challenge taken for granted behaviors, routines, and knowledge as it relates to document work. An example of such a scenario could include a researcher offering to take minutes at a meeting, and then violating acceptable norms by taking notes verbatim, as if in a courtroom. Such a breach would not only serve as tool for understanding the common-sense knowledge and patterns of expectation which underlies document work, but would also highlight the repair work in which people engage in order to try and maintain a sense of social order.

Echoing Livingston and Sudnow, an alternative approach is one in which the researcher is concerned with " 'living' the lived order," eschewing any notion of analytic distance by deeply immersing him or herself in the actual endeavor (Pollner and Emerson, 2001, p. 124). In such a scenario, researchers "study their own sense-making work by putting themselves in some kind of extra-ordinary situation" (Have, 2004, p. 33). Known as "becoming the phenomenon" this approach involves the researcher being a "full time member of the reality to be studied" (Mehan and Wood, 1975, p. 227). Bypassing the usual cautionary tales of fieldwork (to remain objective, and outside of the situation), any such document studies will be judged not in terms of truth values but by the fact that the researcher can "demonstrate to the natives that they can talk as they talk, see as they see, feel as they feel, do as they do" (Mehan and Wood, 1975, p. 227).

Although the relationship between ethnography and ethnomethodology has sometimes been fraught (Pollner and Emerson, 2001), a third strategy involves something akin to traditional ethnographic fieldwork, where the researcher studies a social group in a natural setting. While creating more analytic distance between the researcher and subject, an everyday competence is achieved through the researcher's presence, as observer. Given the affinity of information science researchers for this type of qualitative approach (Trace, 2008), ethnomethodologically informed ethnographies have the potential to become a standard method for the study of document work. In undertaking such fieldwork, the information science researcher would strive to understand the competencies involved in everyday action through the use of direct observation, detailed note-taking, and discussions with "seasoned practitioners" (Have, 2004, p. 33).

However, ethnomethodoligical discomfort at the thought of naively using ethnographic descriptions as a resource provides an option for one final method, that of using audio or video recordings as the raw data (data, i.e. both contemporaneous and in-situ) from which to study human actions. A natural part of conversation

analysis, the goal of recording, and the accompanying transcriptions that serve as a "selective rendering of the data," is to "produce a non-perishable, transportable and manageable representation," that can be used in the later processes of analysis (Have, 2004, p. 43). Such an approach is suited to the detailed study of how activities, such as document work, are linguistically constructed, including how document work is reported and made accountable through language.

The outline provided above demonstrates how ethnomethodology can be used as an investigative stance to further our knowledge of the role of documents in everyday life. The importance of heeding the call to study document work is evident when one looks at the power that documents wield, as permanent and transferable records, both for the lives of individuals and for society in general (Wheeler, 1969). All-in-all, ethnomethodology highlights the fact that members of modern bureaucracies transform their experiences, and the experiences of others, into documents whose status as an objective object helps to justify people's actions and inferences. These written accounts also serve to make members' actions meaningful to themselves and to others. At the same time, ethnomethodology draws attention to the fact that any correct reading of these documents relies partly on an understanding of the tacit ideologies that undergird people's sense-making and that are used in order to make decisions and to get work done (Cicourel, 1995). Bringing to the fore these varied understandings of the social organization of document work and the attendant social arrangements they reveal is an effort more researchers in the information disciplines can now, and should, embrace.

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