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Listening with indifference

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In the following, we suggest that the product of ethnographies undertaken for commercial and industrial purposes is under threat of losing its integrity. The sorts of results furnished through 'applied ethnography' and those resulting from methods like focus groups, interviews, questionnaires, etc. appear largely of the same kind; they describe and codify the members of a setting and their behaviours, and differ, if at all, in terms of depth and detail. In short, it is not easy to distinguish between the product of applied ethnography and that produced from the many other methods available. This apparent dissolution begs the question 'what's left' for applied ethnography and, indeed, for its practitioners? We report on our efforts to take this question seriously and reflect on how 'the ethnomethodological policy of indifference' has offered a useful starting point. Having situated this policy in a disciplinary context, we offer brief examples of how its insistence on a distinct analytic sensibility has directed us to see and hear, as best we can, from the 'local's viewpoint'. It is the strong commitment to this, then, that we conclude may offer applied ethnography one opportunity to distinguish itself.

> There is nothing heroic about indifference. It does not require an effort to purge the soul of all prejudice, or the performance of a technique that controls or rules out sources of bias. It is not a matter of freeing oneself of mentalities that are inherent in an ordinary situation; instead, it is a matter of explicating such situations with a full attention to their ordinary accountability. In other words, ethnomethodological indifference is not a matter of *taking something away*, but of *not taking up* a gratuitous "scientific" instrument: a social science model, method, or scheme of rationality for observing, analyzing, and evaluating what members already can see and describe as a matter of course. Lynch, p. 221 (emphasis in original).

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INTRODUCTION

Dare we say it? The application of ethnography in industry is in danger of becoming mainstream. After working long and hard to introduce ethnography to our clients, businesses, organisations and so on and popularise its application, our efforts are steadily bearing fruit. EPIC is testimony to this. So too is the uptake of ethnography in unexpected sectors of industry. Not only are we seeing ethnographers increasing in numbers in technology-focused organisations such as Microsoft and Intel (by no coincidence the primary sponsors of EPIC) and the practice increasingly offered by small and large consultancies alike. Surprisingly (to us at least), marketing and advertising firms have taken on the methods and techniques that *applied-ethnography* (to coin a phrase) has come to be associated with. Our recent invitation to present our ethnographic experiences to Hakuhodo (Japan's second largest ad agency) demonstrates, for example, the interest advertising agencies are taking in fieldwork methods as a means to better understand the motivations and drivers associated with people's consumption patterns and "life-style choices". Indeed, the use of "ethnographics", as we've heard it called by marketing firms in London, indicates ethnography's incorporation into the arsenal used to 'know' the user, customer, market segment, etc.

So what's the danger? Isn't this what we've all wanted? Ethnography adopted *en masse*? Well perhaps, but the argued cost of this (and one many an EPIC attendee will be familiar with) is that ethnography is being dumbed down with its gradual, but widespread adoption. It's often hard to distinguish between the end product of the varied methods practitioners put into practice, including those of ethnography. The results, whether they be key concepts, reports, diagrams, charts, tape recordings, diaries, artefacts, or otherwise might differ in their substance and/or detail, but they contribute generally to the cataloguing and ordering of a context in more or less the same ways. In other words, ethnography is being used to "describe and codify" (*cf.* Button, 2000) the behaviours of those being studied in much the same way as other methods.[1] Many a reader, for example, will be familiar with the outputs of applied ethnographies that break down 'users' or 'customers' into established segments, pairing them with observed behaviours or needs. Evidence of detailed, qualitative fieldwork is critical here, usually in the form of "key quotes", but, in the end, the process remains one of sorting behaviours into categories and is more often than not judged on the basis of "how many people said so" (i.e., the dreaded issue of sample size). The final contribution of matrices or taxonomies of behaviours set against categories of people is thus similar to what we might see from focus groups, diary studies, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and so on. To be fair, this picture might be a gross generalisation, but nevertheless the general trend points towards is a very real threat to ethnography's integrity in industry being

[1] Button (2000) distinguished between the kinds of ethnography done under the auspices of anthropology and what he called "scenic fieldwork", a fieldwork that merely describes and codifies. As the use of the term "ethnography" (in its loosest sense) has come to be the *sine qua non* to qualitative, in situ investigations of almost any kind (much more so, if anything, since Button's article), we have chosen not to make such a distinction.

eroded, and specifically questions raised as to the uniqueness of applied ethnography's product.

There is, of course, an argument in favour of this diluting of ethnography. Perhaps the message has been spread; aren't many now aware of the proposed benefits to studying people in the places they work, live, play, and so on—the study of people *in situ* as we say? Whether it's ethnography that enables this, some hybrid or something altogether different, what does it matter? There is also a good argument in favour of promoting a collection of methods that practitioners can mix and match to suit the work and/or research they are tasked with. Ethnography, from this viewpoint, is used when more depth and detail is required. The trouble, however, is that whatever the arguments put forward, they still frame ethnography as merely capable of contributing more of the same. The greater depth and detail gleaned from ethnographies merely places its methods along a continuum where they can dissolve into others. The use of quotes or observations obtained from the "field" as opposed to, say, numerical data to provide 'evidence', as it were, of categories does little to distinguish ethnography's contribution. In fact, on this basis, it simply offers more depth and less certainty. If this is the case, it's not clear what's left for ethnography (or, indeed, those practitioners who see themselves as plying the ethnographic trade). What, if anything, can those practicing ethnography claim to offer that's unique if the results of alternate methods are broadly of the same kind?

Picking up on the question of what's left, we want to suggest that with its gradual adoption of ethnographic methods, industry is in danger of losing something that is more fundamental to ethnography as an enterprise. What is possibly being overlooked in the turn towards methods like participant observation and its derivatives is ethnography's in-built sensibility or "analytic mentality" (Anderson, 1997) towards hearing and making sense of the voices of the people being studied. Yes, arguably focus groups, workshops, sorting tasks and even psychometrics aim to glean something of what the user or customer is thinking. Ethnography, though, gives special emphasis to how it is that meanings and understandings of the world are actively and locally constituted. That is, special attention is given to the *viewpoint* of those on the ground, so to speak, those established members of an office, home, village, tribe, culture, etc.

Various debates have raged, and no doubt will continue to do so, over the extent to which ethnographers have (privileged) access to insiders' viewpoints (e.g., Becker, 1967; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1996). Much could be said to hinge on the different interpretations of reflexivity (Lynch, 2000; Macbeth, 2001). Rather than engage in these debates, what we want to do here is present one route we have been trying to follow in finding our way back to an analytic integrity. Specifically, we want to introduce and discuss our broad experiences with the *ethnomethodological policy of indifference*, a policy that prioritises a setting's members' ways of doing and seeing over and above the themes, theories and methods of social science. We will say more of ethnomethodology below. At this stage, we recognise the policy may be familiar to some and may possibly wrangle those that feel it misrepresents the broader theoretical and analytical underpinnings of ethnography. We introduce it, however, not in

defence of ethnomethodological posturing, nor as a critique of alternative perspectives, but, we hope, as a genuine attempt to work through how it might help in clearly distinguishing the kinds of things we should be especially sensitive to as ethnographers. What we want to suggest is that the policy of indifference reasserts ethnography's commitment to voicing the viewpoints of those members of a setting being studied and in doing so helps to distinguish ethnography's methods from others available to practitioners. Thus it establishes ethnography not simply as another method to be used alongside focus groups and the like, but as a distinctive approach to making sense of the social world. This has the potential to uniquely define ethnography's product; attention is drawn to how social order is locally constituted rather than imposing external orderings or categories. As will become evident, the lesson we want to draw from this position is a modest one, but nevertheless one we hope will offer some way forward for ethnography's application in industry.

INDIFFERENCE

In brief, ethnomethodology arose in response to a range of arguable weaknesses in sociology and more broadly social science. The seminal text, written by Harold Garfinkel in the 1960s, set out a comprehensive if densely written agenda for ethnomethodological studies.[2] Garfinkel sought to shift sociology's attention beyond identifying and explaining the reasons for different sociological categories through theorised frameworks, categories such as class, gender, culture and so on. Moreover, he refused to confer privileged status to any method, theory, subject position, or cultural/political standpoint. Instead, a strict program of research was outlined for investigations into how social order is made visible and understandable by and for the given members of any setting.

Given this backdrop, ethnomethodology has centred on an insistence that to take social phenomena seriously, a researcher must remain indifferent to sociology's and social science's programmatic views and formal methods, including their schemes of categorisation (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970).[3] In his inimitable way, Lynch (one of the more congenial ethnomethodologists, and there are a few) presents two simple but instructive examples:

> When studying... the orderly production of automobile traffic, an ethnomethodologist examines how traffic patterns are "achieved" by local cohorts of drivers. This differs from trying to determine if specific orders of traffic are safe, efficient, rational, or democratic. Similarly, when studying conversation, ethnomethodologists investigate the production of routine sequential orders; they do not as a matter of policy

[2] For an accessible overview, see Livingston's *Making Sense of Ethnomethodology* (1987). For ethnomethodology's influence in applied design, see an article by Button (2000) or the recent *Fieldwork for Design* by Randall, Rouncefield and Harper (2007).

[3] In *Do categories have politics?* Suchman (1993) discusses how the grafting of external schemes of categorisation onto real-world practice can have consequences for design.

> **set out to identify mistakes, offences, or imbalances, except in so far as they are locally accountable as mistakes, offences, or imbalances.** (Lynch, 1999, p. 221)

Put in context, the *policy of ethnomethodological indifference* asserts that we would be remiss as ethnographers if we approached our field studies with the intention of studying power, gender, class, race, etc. or promoting any other particular *theory* of social order. To do otherwise would be to draw attention to our own disciplinary methods and thus miss the endogenous detail of just how people practically organise themselves. In other words, by rehearsing social science's methods, theories, models, categories and so on, we would lose sight of how it actually is that people competently act in the world and interact with one another.

Applied indifference

The seemingly nuanced and some might add obtuse policy of indifference probably feels far removed—if not a million miles away—from the concerns of practitioners' who ply their ethnographic trade in industry. In our own field research, however, largely oriented towards interactive system design (with a particular emphasis on contributing to *Human-Computer Interaction* (HCI)), we've found the policy to offer a useful guide to what exactly we should be attending to.

Our ongoing fieldwork undertaken with family households is hopefully illustrative. Over the past three years we have amassed a large quantity of field materials from our observations and interviews with a number of family homes in the UK. As well as offering general insights into family and home life, this project has also been used to help inform various directions in HCI and interactive systems design. Our work thus has a significant applied component, one directed at shaping future possibilities for interactive technologies in ways that are sensitive to real-world, human practices.

Naturally, there have been a host of possibilities available to us for analyzing and interpreting the materials resulting from this work. For example, in our papers and talks, we are regularly reminded of what we might call "topical concerns". We find ourselves being asked whether we can generalise from our ethnographic materials so as to assert general interrelationships or patterns of social organisation. So, the questions go, "is it women that tidy family homes?"; "are teens' textual abbreviations the cause of falling rates of literacy?; "is family scheduling a middle class preoccupation?"; and so on. Occasionally, these queries are more pointed. A reviewer of a recent article we wrote, for example, exclaimed their astonishment at the lack of any reference to gender and power relations in our discussions of domestic work.

To be clear, we are hugely sensitive to such topics. The unequal sharing of duties in homes and the prevalence of what we have in the past referred to as "mothers' work"

(Taylor and Swan, 2006) has been evident in the admittedly small number of families we've spent time with.[4] The point we want to make here, though, and that we believe has the potential to distinguish ethnography from its counterparts, is that there is something quite different to be had from our ethnographic materials; by returning to the policy of indifference, we are reminded there is something to our investigations that is much more to do with what goes on for a home's members day-in-day-out, as a matter of routine. In short, we are reminded of the commitment we have as ethnographers to come to terms with how places like homes are seen and heard from those who live in them, from, as it were, a native point of view.

The policy of indifference thus re-directs us so that we ask questions not of a disciplinary nature, but, instead, about what it is to live in a home. How, then, is it that homes come to be the places they are for those members who live (and work) there? What are the observable ways in which the home is *locally produced* by and for its members? How does the moral economy of the home play into the observable work of being a mother, father, or even child? Such questions might appear trite if not commonsensical at first, but on seeking answers to these *local problems* we find the home and life within it to be a worked-at accomplishment with quite particular properties. Indeed, it is precisely when we come across the commonsensical often tacit knowings and doings of a home that we feel we catch sight of what it is as a place.

It is with questions like the above then that our own attention has been drawn to the routine aspects of our homes' members. We have, for instance, given some might say inordinate attention to a number of ordinary and unremarkable features of family homes, one being, for instance, list-making (Taylor and Swan, 2005). With such attention, we find, unsurprisingly perhaps, that the making of lists is an example *par excellence* of how families routinely make themselves and their actions accountable to one another. By organizing themselves, their to-dos and events on the backs of envelopes, notepads, and papers pinned on fridge doors and kitchen pin-boards, we see how the ordinary comings, goings and doings of a home are managed and accounted for. The location of a list and its itemised content made-visible (or invisible) at once prescribe an ordering to the home: who is to do what, when.

A list from one of our studied family households is exemplary. The list is placed for all to see on an open page of a notebook, on the kitchen table (Figure. 1). The mother of the household, Luci, has instructed all family members including the two young sons to add what they want purchased on the next visit to the supermarket. Besides the school-boy handwriting and misspellings and its haphazardly arranged content, the scrawls and etchings

[4] It is worth noting that we have continually struggled to strike a balance between expressing something of the apparent discrepancy in housework and childcare on the one hand, and veering away from slipping into a rehearsal of the disciplinary themes of gender and power on the other. As many will have recognised, this paper stands as an effort to work this balance out in our own minds as well as provide some hopefully useful points for its readers.

read off like most shopping lists: "Fruit and veg", "bananas", "ero" (mis-spelt Aero chocolate bar), "toothpeks", etc. We discover on further investigation, though, that despite the apparent democracy of this exercise, authoritarian rules are applied. The children add bacon and chewing gum to the list, periodically, to find that their requests are adamantly crossed out. The boys' parents assert the time-honoured prerogative of laying-down-the-law: the home is a non-gum-chewing, vegetarian one. And so a "theory" of the home is produced, locally, through the grocery list made publicly available, the contributions inscribed into it and the authoritative deletions of what is not allowed. The home (as an orderly place) is not then miraculously brought into being (from somewhere outside), but, through its ordinary and accountable accomplishments, worked on and up to become the place that it is.

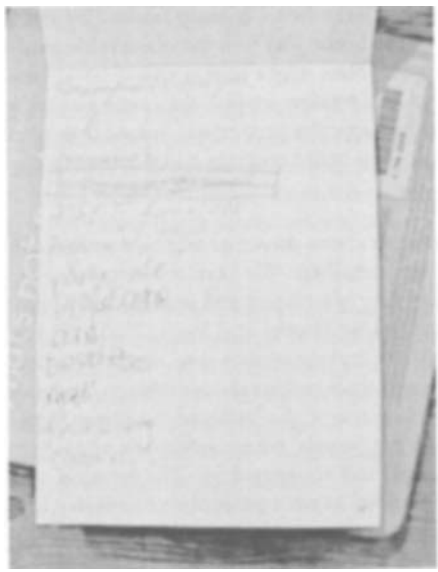

FIGURE 1 The shared shopping list in the kitchen table.

Household clutter may seem less amenable to such analytical scrutiny. Routinely remarked upon and present at least in some shape or form in every household we have studied, we felt obliged though to consider what if any part it held in the ideas our participants had of their homes. Clutter we found wasn't made up of any old thing put in any old place. Bowls and drawers appeared the containers of choice for holding a lose assortment of things with uncertain status. Perversely, by attending to these clutter containers, we shed light on how homes sort and categorize their things, and how it is often just-good-enough methods that are devised to put the home in order, whatever that order is

(Swan, Taylor, Izadi and Harper, 2007). So, particular things coalesce where household members know others will (or won't) see them, where and when they may be needed, where they can be seen to be *en route* to somewhere else, or simply where there's nowhere better for them.

One household in our research thus had, in their kitchen, a junk drawer with a broken front (as if to emphasise its ramshackle content; Figure. 2). The drawer and its contained miscellany give emphasis to the ambiguity some objects have in the home, whether they be of practical or less certain status. The mother, Jane, of the household in question sums this up nicely:

> This is where I just put things where I- you know where you think you really want to throw it away but you don't feel that you can. so it's a combination of those things and little things that I don't have a home for but I should have a home for, like the tape measure, and the rulers, and the paper clips, and things.

Evident here is that the drawer has taken on a known-about quality for Jane and her family; it is an acceptable place where uncertain things that fall outside of a clearly defined order can be "just put" without much thought. Disorder in the home, as it were, is permitted to reside within circumscribed sites, sites, we might say, of liminality. Seemingly banal features of homes like junk draws are then suggestive of the categorical orderings of family life, not in all eventualities, but in the practical business of sorting things out, sorting clutter from order, dirt from clean, and, one might imagine, all that belongs outside the home from that which belongs within.

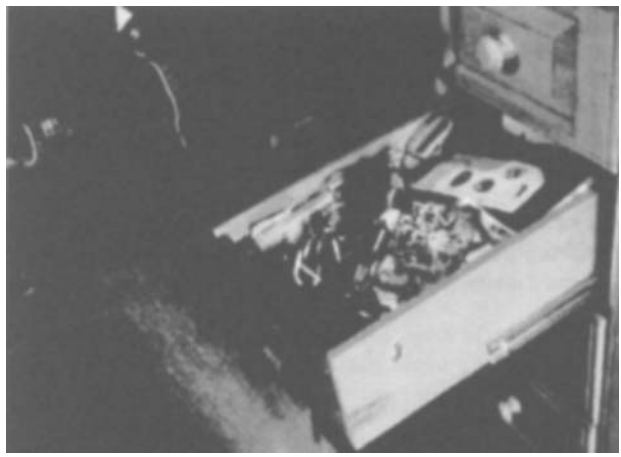

Figure 2 The junk drawer in Jane's family kitchen.

Digging deeper, if you will, into Jane's junk draw, we catch sight of the workings of further systems of organisation. Going through what Jane refers to as the drawer's "layers", she recounts something of its content:

> ... torn up Yughio cards [tossing what looks like part of a card into a to-throw-away pile]. I think there are torn up Yughio cards because when sometimes the boys fight and they tear up each other's cards and I have to say: 'don't worry I'll fix it!' which of course I can't do, but I'll say that [laughs]... and then I'll put it in there [the drawer] and it gets forgotten about and then it's all alright because nobody cares and they won't remember.

The rights of just putting away, of sorting fixed from broken, order from mere junk, bestows a certain sort of status upon Jane. Here, she has the power not only to magically wish-away torn playing cards, but to disarm fighting boys. A moral economy of sorts, one that confers status upon those who sort tidiness from mess and clutter, is thus put to work in that most practical of problems caring for and placating children. The very doing of housework and childcare, as theorist and self-proclaimed housewife Martin aptly puts it, "entails control of *time*, *territory* and *resources* in the home." (Martin, 1984, p. 26, emphasis in original).

Following our noses, so to speak, our investigations have meandered their way through other mundane aspects of home life, including family photo displays, fridge doors, calendars, household planning, and so on. Admittedly, we cannot claim our work is complete or free of analytic choices. For one, our concern for design has predisposed us to questions of materiality and the role the properties of things play in the routines of home life. Nevertheless, our orienting device, if you will, has been one not of topic, method, theory, or standpoint, but of trying as well as we can to examine how the home is actively produced by and for its members. In short, the policy of indifference has served as a reminder to how we can sensitise ourselves to the sorts of (often taken for granted) work that goes on in places like homes and just how it is competently accomplished.

It is not then that we are insensitive to the broad themes and topics that sociology and social science might address in studying the home. The point once again is that they say or make little of ethnography's unique sensibility as they at once becomes implicated in doing or saying something else for someone else. That is, instead of a way into seeing and hearing from the local's point of view, ethnography becomes a method in itself for expressing a disciplinary or theoretical position. Indeed, we would argue it is when ethnography loses its purchase and becomes a method like any other that its results become indistinguishable.

SUMMARY

Above, then, we've tried to shed some light on how we might avoid losing ethnography amongst the host of methods used by practitioners in industry. We've suggested that ethnography has fallen victim to its own success in so far as its methods—distinguished by being largely qualitative and applied *in situ*—have become part and parcel of industrial

practitioners' stock and trade. This has been at the cost of losing the integrity of the ethnographic practice and, specifically, its output; ethnography's methods have merged with others and its product has become distinguishable only in terms of detail and scale.

Offering our own efforts to lay claim to an *analytic integrity* and to introduce a possible remedy to the dilution of ethnography, we've recounted recent investigations of our own into family and home life and the influence a policy of indifference has had on them. In doing so, we've purposefully avoided detailing the methods we've used (observations and interviews in their various guises—EPIC attendees will be familiar with them all). The point has been to look beyond our methods and consider what else is there?

The policy of indifference, we've suggested, serves two functions in answer to this:

- First, the policy promotes a strong commitment to local viewpoints. This is not the imagined exoticism conjured up by the "man from mars"—as if the man from mars might see, hear and know better (*cf.* Sacks, 2000). By observing a commitment to indifference, it is a matter of local voices being heard, in detailing *their* methods, theories, positions and so on and how they go about voicing them.
- Second, the policy reveals how there can be more to ethnography than description and codification. Beyond detailing the activities of the places we investigate and who does what, when, the policy encourages us to take seriously how such places are locally organised by and for it members. Our ethnographic investigations of homes have thus been aimed at gleaning more than whether families tidy their homes or make lists; who does so; or whether one system of organisation is better than another. It's not clear what ethnography's methods have over alternatives to make such claims. Ethnography's purchase, for us, lies in coming to terms with how people for all practical purposes pull off living in family homes day-in-day-out.

The successes of applied ethnographic investigations such as ours are notoriously difficult to measure or attribute any definite result to (*cf.* Anderson, 1994; Dourish, 2007). The policy of indifference contributes nothing more in this respect. It is not like we can claim it enables us to produce more valid design requirements, design better widgets, realise "product transfer" into our organisations, or increase sales for our clients. Our concern here though is not so much with our paymasters or the successes we might contribute to in our specific businesses. Rather our point has been to reassert an integrity to our work so that we might establish what kind of applied business we want ethnography to be. To avoid having ethnography dissolve into the raft of other empirical methods used in industry, our proposal has been that we lay claim to an *analytic sensibility*.

We're not proposing then that we all don our ethnomethodological hats (dread the thought) and subscribe wholesale to the policy of indifference, but rather that as ethnographers we think carefully about how we sensitise ourselves to the settings we find ourselves in and the ways in which those setting's members see, hear and do what they do. As Lynch writes in this paper's epigraph, "[t]here is nothing heroic about indifference". It's a

matter of taking seriously, above all else, "what members already can see[, hear] and describe as a matter of course".

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