Work Studies and Design

Ethnomethodological studies of work are often simply referred to as ethnographic studies in a design context. In a social science context the term ethnography delineates little more than a distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods of social research. As Shapiro (1994), commenting on the limits of ethnography in CSCW, describes matters,

While ‘ethnography’ as a term strikes a useful contrast to traditional methods of requirements capture, within sociology and anthropology themselves it denotes rather little. It marks a distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches to social science and carries with it a commitment to a period and degree of immersion in the social setting being studied that is sufficient to reach a qualitative understanding of what happens there. These are important matters, but beyond this, ethnography can be put to the service of virtually any theoretical school: there are, for example, functionalist, structuralist, interactionist, Weberian and Marxist ethnographies.

This is not the place to explore the differences between such schools of thought. It is the place, however, to note that the term ethnography denotes neither a unified method nor a coherent school of thought. Rather, and as Shapiro makes clear, the term ethnography is a gloss on various and different analytic formats. In turning to ethnography,

19One such format of some prominence in HCI and CSCW alike is provided by Activity Theory (Kuutti 1996). Activity theorists often employ ethnography as a means of studying their unit of analysis – i.e., activity – in the first instance. In the second instance they seek to analyse the ethnographic data they gather in terms of the constructs from which the theory is composed: constructs such as ‘actions’, ‘operations’, ‘motives’, ‘goals’, and ‘tasks’, etc. In other words, activity theorists use the generic analytic format furnished by Activity Theory to code and classify the ethnographic data and thereby grab onto little bits of the real world in order to render the theory real worldly. The accounts of work practice produced through the use of Activity Theory – and any other generic analytic format employed to analyse ethnographic data – are thus subject to the problem of constructive analysis outlined in Chapter 2.
systems designers are not turning to some distinct coherent entity, then, but to a varied and competing array of analytic formats, not all of them theoretical in character. One such framework is the ethnomethodological one which has, to use a phrase of Shapiro’s, ‘dominated CSCW’ in light of Lucy Suchman’s pioneering work in the field of human–computer communication (Suchman 1987). As Shapiro puts it in accounting for the format’s purchase in design,

ethnomethodology sets for itself a strict agenda which separates it in certain ways from most mainstream social science. It insists on a rigorously descriptive rather than theoretical program, or an explanatory one (in the sense that most social sciences would understand it). This lends it its strength in producing rich descriptions of work-in-context.

Ethnomethodology rejects theory in order that work-in-context may be appreciated in concrete detail and that designers may, therefore grasp “what is really going on” in the course of a piece of work, “what is really the problem” about doing it, and what instruments might therefore be devised to help resolve these problems (Hughes et al. 1992). Although the contextual and non-theoretical character of ethnography has proved to be of great value to designers (Kensing and Simonsen 1997), the approach is not without its own practical problems. As Bardram (1996) puts it,

From the very beginning, workplace studies have played a prominent role in the research field of Computer Supported Cooperative Work. They are used to understand and shed light on work and interaction happening in a workplace ... and as such [have provided] an important insight into the subtleties of ... socially constructed work practices. Within CSCW the value of these insights into the social nature of work activities, gained through such workplace studies, is unquestionable. However, there has been an ongoing dispute in the field ... [as] to the exact value of these often very detailed and specific investigations of the workplace. Questions like: how effective is the field study approach for informing [the] design of CSCW systems? How can typical ethnographic field studies, which take months or years, be done within the fast pace of systems development? What should they be used for within the design process? Are they economical, or even practically desirable in a complex design process? Is it possible to generalize such detailed and narrow studies into applicable design recommendations? ... Questions like these are often coming from the social scientists themselves.

3.1 The Role of Ethnomethodological Studies of Work in Design

In the first instance, one of the primary roles of ethnography to date has been to sensitize designers to the sociality of work (e.g. Heath and Luff 1992; Hughes et al. 1994; Bowers et al. 1996) – a job which, as Bardram points out,