Power, politics and organizational communication:

An ethnomethodological perspective

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Abstract

Power and politics have long been recognised as central aspects of organizational life. In this chapter, we seek to explore how power and politics are used by organizational members as a key component of their category-bound reasoning within strategic interaction. Drawing on tape-recorded interactional data from an action research study of strategic change in a multi-national corporation, we develop an ethnomethodological analysis of the key categories and category predicates used to make sense of, and constitute, the organization and its environment. Our analysis reveals three key insights: (a) power and politics were associated with the category-bound reasoning about the firm's external key account customers and the internal company hierarchy, (b) communication, or more precisely talk-in-interaction, *constituted* the customer and the company as a particular type of actor, with particular category-bound predicates (e.g. attributes, agendas, activities etc.), and (c) this stock of knowledge and associated reasoning procedures influenced key strategic decisions. We conclude by proposing that an ethnomethodological perspective can enable us to elucidate the member's methods through which organizational 'facts' and 'forces' are made inter-subjectively available and used for practical organizational tasks, such as making strategic decisions in our case.

Keywords: Communication, Discourse, Ethnomethodology, Power, Politics, Strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The field of management and organization studies (MOS) has long recognised the significance of power and politics to organizational life (Pettigrew, 1974; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974). The importance of the topic is evidenced not only in the number of academic theories of power/politics in MOS (see e.g. Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips, 2006), but also the range of practitioner-oriented books (e.g. Pfeffer, 2010) and student-oriented textbooks (e.g. Buchanan & Badham, 2008) aimed at teaching current (and future) managers how to navigate the power struggles and political battles that managers routinely face.

Recent developments in the fields of organizational communication and organizational discourse have also begun to advance some of the early work on communication and power (e.g. Mumby, 1988) by exploring how organizational power/politics influences the process of interaction (e.g. Putnam, et. al., 2005; Thomas, Hardy & Sargent, 2011). We begin the chapter by reviewing the ways in which power/politics has been conceptualised in the literature to date, in particular language-oriented perspectives from the fields of organizational communication (Jablin & Putnam, 2001) and organizational discourse (Grant et. al., 2004). Next, we move on to outline the principles of ethnomethodology and how it approaches the study of language-use through the study of accounts and talk-in-interaction. We also discuss ethnomethodology's contribution to process theory through the re-specification of social facts and social forces (such as 'power' and 'politics') as members' methods for accomplishing social organization.

After presenting some background information about the action research study of a multi-national company upon which we draw, we present an ethnomethodological analysis of power/politics from an extract of talk-in-interaction in a strategy meeting. The analysis shows how members used power and politics to make sense of the internal organizational terrain and external organizational environment in which they worked. We emphasise the practical and consequential nature of their talk-in-interaction by showing how the use of power/politics to make sense of their world as 'typical', 'patterned' and 'structured' enabled the strategists to act upon the world (e.g. make decisions, allocate resources, etc.). Finally, we conclude by discussing the contribution of ethnomethodology to further develop the fields of discourse and communication, focussing specifically on the recent developments of the CCO perspective and process theory more generally.

DISCOURSE, COMMUNICATION AND POWER/POLITICS

Mumby (1988) was one of the first to systematically conceptualise the importance of power and politics for the field of communication studies. Mumby (1988, 2001) argues that power is a pervasive feature of organizational life and manifests itself through relatively stable social structures which serve the interests of certain social groups. Power is intrinsically linked, for

Mumby as for other scholars of power, with the forms of systematic inequality found in society, in which access to symbolic or material resources is structured according to aspects such as gender, race or class, amongst other things (see also Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980; Clegg, 1989). Ideology is a key concept in understanding how language and other symbolic forms (e.g. images) are employed to represent the interests of certain groups as somehow 'natural', 'inevitable', 'universal' or 'right' and to generate 'false consciousness' (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, 1971; Lukes, 1974). Scholarship in the field of organizational discourse analysis has also historically placed power and politics at the centre of theories of discourse, particularly through the influence of post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994) and Laclau and Mouffe (Willmott, 2005). Power and politics have been central to the forms of discourse analysis that have influenced management and organization studies (see e.g. Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Thomas, Hardy & Sargent, 2011) and forms of Critical Discourse Analysis in particular (Erkama & Vaara, 2010, Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010; Clarke, Kwon & Wodak, forthcoming). Organizational politics is typically a narrower concept than power, and relates to the study of power-infused behaviours: the kinds of activities and behaviours that people use to maintain or disrupt prevailing power structures in order to advance their own interests. Thus, power can be conceptualised as an 'umbrella' concept under which a range of issues can be studied, including ideology, inequality and politics.

The more recent development of the field known as Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO) (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009) is particularly important for our discussion here because it shared many fundamental tenets with the ethnomethodological perspective we adopt. CCO views organizations not as static entities but as ongoing flows of communicative activity. As such, CCO is a central part of the process perspective on organizations, which involves studying the ongoing process of organiz*ing* (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010). Language, then, enables members to albeit temporarily assign meaning to the ongoing flow of activity – work that is necessary to enable inter-subjective and coordinated action. For example, membership categories (such as 'customer' in our case) - and the predicates and forms of background knowledge members use with them (such as 'politics' in our case) – form a key element of the work of organizing. Membership categories are therefore important for *making sense* of the 'organization' and its 'environment' (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010).

What, then, can be gained from conceptualising organizational power and politics from an ethnomethodological perspective? In the next section, we briefly outline our ethnomethodological perspective and its contribution to process organization studies.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

Ethnomethodology (EM) is a field of study that developed in the 1960s following the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). EM represents a radical break with mainstream social scientific thinking, particularly functionalist social science, because it rejects the idea that social structure is an external and constraining set of social or cultural "facts" (such as norms, values, rules etc) that people internalise and that governs their conduct. EM turns the issue of 'social order' and 'social structure' on its head, or 'upside down', and examines the methods, or procedures, through which people accomplish social organization. People, then, are not cultural 'dopes' or 'dupes', who are unaware of the social facts and forces (such as norms, values, rules etc) that govern their conduct and operate 'behind their backs' (Leiter, 1980). Rather, they are, 'practical sociologists' (Coulon, 1995: 2) who use their stock of cultural knowledge and common-sense reasoning procedures to accomplish orderly social conduct. Thus, people do not simply 'reproduce' stable and external social structures; they actively *produce* them in an on-going and never-ending *process* of sensemaking (Handel, 1982). Take, for example, a queue for the till in a shop. The 'structure' or 'order' of queues does not *make* people form them. Rather, people use a variety of taken-for-granted *methods* for forming them, such as recognising the bodily positioning of others (in a line, facing the other person's back rather than face, etc.), or the presence of artefacts (signs, tills, etc.). Similarly, when someone asks you "How are you?", ethno-methods are used to work out whether it is simply a 'greeting' or a 'genuine inquiry' into your personal feelings, finances, state of health, and so on (Garfinkel, 1967). Thus, EM treats 'social facts' as accomplishments (Garfinkel, 2002).

Ethnomethodology has inspired a field known as Conversation Analysis (CA), which was developed by Harvey Sacks, and the related field of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) (Jayussi, 1984; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2000, 2003, 2009; Fairhurst, 2007: Ch 3; Hester & Hester, 2012). CA has been described as the 'crowning jewel' of ethnomethodology (Housley, 2003). Indeed, many important insights in organization studies have been developed at the interface between EM and CA (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010). While some commentators point to areas of divergence and conflict between the two fields (Leiter, 1980), for the purposes of our discussion here we recognise the fruitful analytic insights that have been made at the interface between EM, CA and MCA, particularly in the study of institutional settings (e.g. Boden & Zimmerman, 1991).

Descriptions (or 'accounts') are important for EM not because they *describe* the world, but because they reveal its *constitution*. Hence, EM shares strong affinities to the field of CCO, given its emphasis on the role of communication in *constituting* the organization. As Coulon (1995: 26) explains:

> "If I describe a scene of my daily life ... this description, by accomplishing itself, "makes up" the world or builds it up. Making the world visible is making my action comprehensible in doing it, because I reveal its significance through the exposition of the methods by which I make an account of it."

By way of example, Llewellyn (2011: 165) shows how three simple accounts produced in the process of buying a charitable magazine on the High Street, accomplish the social organization of ‘Big Issue’ charity magazine sales in a town centre. The woman in question produces the following three accounts: “I don’t want the magazine”, followed by “...it’s just that I’m a Catholic”, and finally “I get a lot of Catholic stuff to read”. The first account transforms the exchange of money from a ‘sales transaction’ (consumption) to an act of ‘giving’ (gift exchange). The second account transforms the ‘gift exchange’ into an act of religiously-motivated ‘charity’. The third and final account transforms the ‘religious motive’ into a ‘too much to read’ motive. Thus, the use of accounts, in addition to non-verbal forms of communication such as bodily positioning, gaze, gesture and use of material artefacts (e.g. purses, wallets, magazines etc.), comprised the *ethno-methods* through which gift-giving practices were established.

In the field of management and organization studies, the kinds of ‘structural forces’ and ‘social facts’ that are typically studied in mainstream perspectives include elements such as organizational ‘culture’ (norms and values), ‘structure’ (functional divisions and hierarchical authority relations), ‘rules’ (such as official policies and plans, written goals or objectives, strategies and mission statements), and institutional ‘forces’ (mimetic, coercive, normative, etc). EM treats these so-called ‘structures’ in a different way. Rather than view them as entities or substances – as external, objective and constraining ‘forces’ or ‘facts’ – it treats them as interpretative resources for situated sensemaking (Leiter, 1980). Bittner (1965) was one of the first to develop an EM perspective for the study of formal bureaucratic organizations. Since then, a number of scholars have sought to use EM to study organizational processes (e.g. Gephart, 1993; Boden, 1994; Housley, 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010; Rouncefield & Tolmie, 2012).

Our ethnomethodological perspective on power/politics views them not as stable ‘essences’ or ‘attributes’ of a person, a collective or an action (Schneider, 2007). Social facts such as ‘power’ or ‘politics’ – or any other ‘social fact’ for that matter - are not seen as ‘substances’: stable entities that pre-exist and ‘cause’ social action. Rather, they are an outcome of ongoing sensemaking *processes* (Watson & Goulet, 1998): the contingent, temporary and unstable outcomes of a never-ending *process* through which people use ethno-methods to accomplish order and organization in social life. Conversation analysis in particular has been used to develop important insights into the operation of power at an interactional level, such as through asymmetry in turn-taking or the use of adjacency pairs such as question-answer or threat-response sequences (Molotch & Boden, 1985; Thornborrow, 2002; Samra-Fredericks, 2005; Schneider, 2007; Hepburn & Potter, 2011). Samra-Fredericks’ (2005) study in particular shows how ‘power effects’ are enacted in talk-in-interaction and contributes to our understanding of so-called ‘capillary’ power relations. Categories such as ‘accountants’ (ibid, p. 820) and ‘rookie programmer’ (p. 822), and category-bound predicates such as ‘cost’ (p. 820) and ‘time’ (p. 823), were crucial in building up a definition of the situation in which the strategic planning took place.

In this chapter, we develop this perspective through attention to the categorical aspects of talk-in-interaction by showing how members use the categories 'power' and 'politics' as part of their category-bound reasoning. We seek to elucidate some of the key methods and "practical reasoning procedures for the reproduction of social orders" (Samra-Fredericks, 2005: 806): also in our case the orders of 'strategy meetings'. Our aim in this chapter, then, is to explicate the way in which situated accounts are used by members to accomplish the social organization of 'strategising'.

METHODOLOGY

Case Background

The data upon which this chapter draws is taken from an action research study in the UK subsidiary of a multi-national company, FitCo (a pseudonym). The company was a leading player in the sale of branded goods and apparel. The idea for an action research study was developed through discussions between the UK Managing Director and the Dean of a local Business School. The company was keen to get professional assistance in developing a new strategy for key account management, based on the results of a recent customer satisfaction survey. The term 'strategy' and 'strategist' used throughout this chapter is thus an 'emic' term used by the participants themselves – they referred to themselves as a "strategy team" and worked on documents entitles "Strategic Plan" and "Key Account Management Startegy".

A lecturer from the Business School ('Ted') was selected for the role of action researcher because he had considerable industry experience, having previously worked as a senior manager in a large multi-national company. The action researcher was invited to play the role of (unpaid) 'management consultant' who would lead the strategic change initiative, whilst also being given permission to gather data for his own PhD study. The study took place over a period of two and a half years and generated a data-set which comprised over a hundred (repeat) semi-structured interviews, work shadowing, field-notes, tape-recordings of strategy meetings (the focus of this chapter) and a variety of documents, texts and emails.

Research Methods

In terms of research methods, ethnomethodology does not have a single 'preferred' method (Sharrock, 1989). EM scholars have used a variety of different methods, including participant observation, non-participant observation, tape-recordings of talk, video-recordings of interaction, forms of somewhat 'artificial' experiment-like activities, and occasionally interviews (see e.g. Garfinkel, 1967; Leiter, 1980; Rawls, 1992; Lynch & Sharrock, 2011). However, EM has a preference for studying (audio- or video-) recordings of naturally-occurring social settings. The reason is simple: naturally-occurring data tell us about what people in a social setting normally do in their day-to-day lives, rather than what they do when researchers ask them interview questions or ask them to complete a questionnaire survey[1]. They also enable us to study members' ethno-methods in a level of detail not normally available in retrospective accounts or field-notes (Llewellyn, 2008; Samra-Fredericks & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2008).

Unfortunately, in our study, the action researcher was unable to secure permission for video-recording, so certain key interactional features (such as gaze, gesture, posture, and use of various material artefacts such as documents and technologies) were not available for analysis. Gaining permission to take video-recordings is often hard to accomplish in organizational settings, especially where important and commercially-sensitive discussions are taking place. In the analysis that follows, we rely solely on the transcript of the audio-recording, coupled with whatever field-notes the researcher has of the meeting and other events, while recognising the limitations of the reliance on audio-recordings alone. The audio-recordings of the strategy meetings produced over 1,000 pages of transcription, covering 10 strategy meetings, each lasting between 3 and 5 hours, over a 12-month period. The transcript follows the notation conventions set out by Jefferson (2004).

Data Analysis

Ethnomethodology approaches the analysis of discursive data, such as recordings of talk-in-interaction (Samra-Fredericks, 2003) or members' use of texts/documents (Watson, 2009), differently to other forms of discourse analysis (e.g. Willmott, 2005; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010*;* Thomas, Hardy & Sargent, 2011; Clarke, Kwon & Wodak, forthcoming). Talk and text are not interpreted as 'caused' by social forces that lie outside of the text and operate 'behind the backs' of members, such as power/knowledge, vested interests, institutional forces, dominant systems of thought, and so on. Furthermore, talk and text (whether written documents or conversations) are not 'coded' into second-order constructs such as dominant discourses, subject positions, narrative themes, interpretative repertoires or rhetorical strategies. Ethnomethodologically informed studies of meetings standardly proceed by looking into the fine-grained detail of sequential organisation in talk, categorisation practices, gesture, human-machine interaction, or a combination of all these. This requires two key analytic stages: firstly, the creation of transcripts of interaction that employ a notation system such as the Jeffersonian system, and secondly, the repeated reading of the transcript, in conjunction with any video-recordings or

[1] Ethnomethodology has also influenced the development of studies of the ethno-methods involved in doing different forms of research methods, including studies of the production of social statistics known as ethno-statistics (Gephart, 2006), and studies of the nature of interaction in research interviews (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) and focus groups (Puchta & Potter, 2004).

other sources, to identify the key ethno-methods through which social organization is accomplished.

The data-set for this study - comprising interviews, audio-recordings, field-notes and documents - was shared with a wider group of scholars five years after the study was completed, to enable further insights to be gained from secondary analysis. Thus, the study was not ethno-methodologically-informed *at its outset* (cf Samra-Fredericks, 2003), but rather ethnomethodology was used much later to perform further analysis. As an 'action research' study, our analysis includes talk by 'Ted' in his role as a *member* of the group. Ted was the central change agent in the project, and was oriented to by members as a bone-fide member of the strategy group, who had been invited into the company for his valuable skills and experience as a senior manager. Ted spoke primarily as a 'management consultant' rather than academic expert, although he laid claim to both sets of expertise, and played an active role in the strategic change project.

For EM, being so 'close' to the people you are studying is not a 'problem' or 'issue' (in terms of 'objectivity' or 'impartiality'), rather it is a *requirement* in the sense that a researcher needs to know how members accomplish their everyday affairs – and ideally also be able to competently do them as well – in order to study the methods they use. This is what is often referred to as the 'unique adequacy requirement' (Garfinkel, 2002), which at its most basic insists that the researcher is sufficiently competent in the research setting so that he or she can 'see' and 'understand' the meaning of social action in the same way as other members.

Typically, ethnomethodological studies either examine an extended sequence of interaction within a single context (such as the extract examined here), or a larger collection of shorter episodes in the same (or similar) settings, such as opening a telephone call, buying a magazine or purchasing a ticket (see e.g. Llewellyn, 2011, 2012). Collection studies are well-suited to more routinized interaction, where interaction is more structured around certain sequences (e.g. summons-response, question-answer, etc.) or categories (e.g. category of emergency, category of ticket purchase, etc.). While certain sequences and categories are indeed routinely present in strategy meetings, they are less routinized and generating a 'collection' of similar sequences is more difficult. The topics, categories and sequences varied extensively throughout the over 1,000 pages of transcript, as did the ethnographic field-notes collected by the action researcher over the 30-months of participant observation. Hence, we have followed Samra-Fredericks (2005) in selecting two illustrative excerpts from the extensive corpus of empirical materials for detailed analysis. However, in our case, the excerpts are sequentially linked and follow on from each other (line numbers indicate sequence flow between the two excerpts).

POWER-TALK AND POLITICS-TALK IN A STRATEGY MEETING

The extract we draw on is from the second strategy meeting held by a cross-functional group of senior managers. The group was established by the Managing Director, with Ted as action researcher and Project Leader, to develop a new Key Account Management Strategy. FitCo had experienced a steady but significant decline in sales and their brand position has also been deteriorating in recent years. While many factors were understood to contribute to this decline, one major issue was thought to be the relationship they had with the big retailers ('key accounts'). FitCo relied on retailers to sell their products to consumers. If retailers did not buy-in many of their products, or negotiated a heavily reduced price for each product, or failed to give them sufficient shop-floor or shop-window space, FitCo's 'bottom line' was affected.

The group spent their first meeting deciding how they would develop the new Strategy. They decided to trial a new relationship management approach with one retailer ('key account') called 'HighStreet' (a pseudonym), on the back of the launch of a new (and hopefully successful) sub-brand (we call 'StreetCool'). The idea was to trial the new approach first with HighStreet, in order to learn lessons from the trial, before rolling it out across all key accounts in the following quarter.

The second meeting, from which we draw our extract, focussed on the nitty-gritty detail of exactly how they would change their approach to selling to this account, and who would be involved. Immediately prior to the extract shown here, the group discussed which sales person they should choose to 'launch' this new approach with HighStreet. The group began listing names of possible candidates. The discussion then moved to what criteria they should use: Should the sales person be somebody fairly new to FitCo or fairly experienced? Should they be from a particular product line? Or have particular experience of working with HighStreet? A wider discussion branched out about what enables the 'best' results: somebody who is new and fresh to the customer ('key account'), or somebody who knows the customer well. In the following analysis we pay particular attention to categorisation practices albeit within the context of the sequential ordering of meeting talk.

A list of pseudonyms is provided below:

Pseudonym	**Job Title/Role**
Ted	Consultant /Action Researcher
Rob	Product Development Manager
Bill	Marketing Manager
Kate	Product Development Manager
Ann	Trade Marketing Manager
Paul	Key Account Manager
FitCo	Company they work for

Constituting the 'Customer'

Ted: I think there's a (.) big balance (.) a big balance to strike (.5) and the
mo:re com:plex the account the more there is to understand about
the way it works (.) the internal politics (.) the (.) way they make
decisions (.) and often that doesn't come (0.5) in a couple of years
(0.5) sometimes that takes (1.0) [I mean
Rob: [True] (0.5)
Ted: It takes a long ti:me (0.5) erm (.) but there is the opposite danger as
you quite well point out (0.5) that you get too cosy with the account=
Rob: =I think this is what we suffer from.
Ted: Yeah (.) So (.) so it's a bit of a dilemma isn't it? (1.0)
Bill: What's the dilemma?
Ted: About whether you have account managers sitting with an account
for a long time (.) or [not
Bill: [Can] I, can I, ca, can I make another
observation [as well?
Rob: [Interesting] one.

In the following sequence Ted provides an account that can be heard to constitute the 'key account', i.e. the retail customer (L.1-5). In this case, and in many other cases like it (e.g. Housley, 2003), the account forms an extended sequence within the on-going flow of the meeting talk. The preface to the account is framed in terms of a mental predicate; namely 'I think' (te Molder & Potter, 2005). During the course of the account, and after a significant pause at L.5, Rob provides an affirmation token at the same time as Ted resumes his turn. This provides a first part of an alignment sequence that unfolds over the next set of exchanges.

At line 9 Rob provides a statement that is latched to the close of Ted's turn and reflects the recipient-designed features of the account through the further use of the same mental predicate formulation namely 'I think'. In sequential terms this may be significant in that it provides recognition of the opening formulation of Ted's account underpinned by a latching sequence that is not characterised by interruption. Thus we might understand this exchange as one which represents a form of perspective alignment between Ted and Rob.

At line 10 Ted provides an agreement token at the turn transitional relevant point followed by a question that re-allocates turn position back to Rob as previous speaker. In doing so Ted introduces a category bound activity which is tied to the work of the Team and which provides further organisational description to the Team's unfolding and accomplished sense of the relationship with the customer; namely that it can be understood as a 'dilemma'. However, at line 11 the next turn does not display the same features as the turn provided at L.10, i.e. it is not a simple 'latched' response. Rather, it is a response by Bill after a significant pause that is constituted in the form of a query 'What's the dilemma?' and can be heard as self-selection at a turn transitionally relevant place. This does not represent alignment and sets up a next turn for Ted that calls him to account and invites explanation for the previous description of customer relations. This is offered at L.12-13 and is offered in terms of a contrast class formulation sequentially marked by a pause '… a long time (.) or not'. This is followed by overlapping talk and a successful bid for the floor by Bill at line 13; this bid for the floor is overlapped by further alignment tokens offered by Rob for Ted's explanation of the 'dilemma' at lines 12 and 13. At line 14 Bill makes a bid for the floor through an attempt to offer 'another observation'. However, this turn is characterised by overlapping talk towards the end of Bill's turn that involves a 'skip connection' back to the previous topical item proffered by Ted on line 12; the observation concerning managers sitting on accounts for a long time is recognised and affirmed as 'an interesting one' by Rob (L.16).

In addition to the sequential work of change agent practice in team meetings where the topic is understanding and improving customer relations there are some displays of category work within the talk-in-interaction. In this sense there is a folding back effect between sequence and category in the interaction presented here (Watson, 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002, 2009).

The excerpt we analyse next follows on sequentially from this previous excerpt, but the topic changes from the external environment (their customers) to the internal environment (the company they work for).

Constituting the 'Company'

Bill: I think our business (.) you know (.) will go do:wn five or six percent for say Q3[2] whatever because if we're changing like that (.0) >it may do that<. (.) And yet it would do that (.5) >you know if we stopped work< ↑now (.) if the business stopped (.) we'd still deliver the product (1.0) we'll still (.) em (.) >we still go and talk to them, somebody would still go and put a marketing package blah blah blah< we'll still do that. What I'm trying to say is (.) the business just operates in the way. If, if you really focus on that o:ne thi:ng (.) you might actually ↑change the game.

Ted: Ye:ah I think that's the point one of two of you are making here actually=

Bill: =You could (.) you could (.) y but then that means (.) you know (.) >that ↑could mean actually and it would be great actions from this< (.5) w,we sit and we think "Well even if the first week of December is a lo:ng ti:me" (0.5) you've got two or three people or whatever the↑ resource i:s (.) in five weeks you can, you can, if somebody is given a very clear brief and that's a:ll they d:o (.) >that can make < (.) they can come up with and, and do a massive thing. (2.0) Yeah (.) >what happens in FitCo though is there's s:o many obstacles and it's ↑to:o difficult to do and it's ↑to:o hard blah blah blah so (.) y know, we keep doing what we keep doing.

Kate: Yes

Rob: Uh-huh

Bill: ↑So for m:e (.) I think (.) but then the ↑interesting thing is (.) if you give some people and say "Right we've got Pa:ul (.) >blah blah blah, blah blah blah<." (.) ↑this team has to give those people a ↑ve:ry, very clear brief. So I don't think we're very good at that [either

Rob: [Yeah

Bill: [We'll] say (0.5) hh"whhhhh (.) well you know go and solve it." And they'll sit there thinking ["What am I solving."

Ann: ["What do I do?"] Yeah!=

Ted: =>Well it's interesting because there is< (.) there is a ↑po:wer vacuum (.) a (.) and it's pretty obvious in (.) in FitCo (.5) because if ↑this team doesn't mobilise this sort of activity then no one, no one will.

[2] Q3 refers to quarter 3 of the annual sales target

The conversation that follows on lines 17 – 54 switches the topic to a discussion of *how* they will go about the organizational change process, having chosen the 'right' salesperson to allocate to the key account – that is, one who knows the 'internal politics' (L.3) of the customer but is not 'too cosy' (L. 8). A series of accounts are produced by Bill, the Marketing Manager, about the problems that the group might face in trying to implement change in FitCo. First, Bill describes the decline in sales performance (sales figures 'will go down five or six percent', L. 17-18) that, he claims, would take place regardless of whether they undertook the proposed change (even if 'we stopped work', L. 20). He emphasises that just trying to 'focus on that one thing' (L. 25), namely the launch of the new StreetCool sub-brand in HighStreet (discussed immediately prior to this extract), might increase their chances of being able to 'change the game' (L. 25-26).

On lines 27 and 28 Ted provides an affirmative response to the previous turn which is interrupted by Bill (L. 29), who produces an account of how he thinks they could make their change initiative successful, if they can get certain 'resources' (L. 33) such as 'two or three people' (L. 32-33) and give them a 'clear brief' (L. 34) of what is to change. He describes FitCo as a place that has 'so many obstacles' (L. 37) against making changes, and a tendency to stay the same ('just keep doing what we keep doing', L. 38-39). This stretch of talk is met with affirmation and recognition by Kate and Rob (L.38, 39). Ted, the change agent, does not provide a contribution at this point, Bill has gained the floor and elicited affirmative tokens from others present that can be heard as a distributed *alignment of perspective* amongst at least three of the members present.

Bill repeats his formulation of the problem, where they tend to ask people such as 'Paul' (a Key Account Manager) to 'solve' problems but they do not know what they are 'solving' (L. 42-49), because they are not given a 'clear brief' (L. 45). Through this series of turns, and the acknowledgement tokens and alignment work of Kate, Rob and Ann, Bill builds up a picture of what the 'organization', they work for, is like and what its attributes are (e.g. difficult to change, unclear in direction/vision, etc) that enables them to make sense of what kinds of changes are possible, feasible, and/or desirable, for their Team to lead.

Ted interjects (L.49) at this point to offer his own formulation of 'what the company is like', which reformulates Bill's account. We note the use of the term 'interesting' to preface the reformulation that follows. Ted describes FitCo as having a 'power vacuum' (L. 51-52), which he claims is 'pretty obvious' (L. 52). Of course, it may well be that 'power vacuums' are everyday organisational phenomena, but for our analysis it is significant that this category bound attribute is mobilised by Ted at this moment in the meeting. He claims that if 'this team doesn't mobilise this sort of activity', namely a strategic change in their key account management, 'then no one will' (lines 51-52). The reference to 'power vacuum' is thus used to infer an absence of 'leadership' and 'strategic direction' that those more 'powerful' and hierarchically superior to the strategy team (i.e. the Board of Directors), considering the category-bound responsibilities associated with 'senior management', should be driving.

In short, there is a 'vacuum' in Ted's view, because nobody is pushing for the sorts of strategic changes the company needs. Ted thus provides a formulation of what he, as a 'management consultant', (a) thinks is 'going wrong' in the company, and (b) how they (the strategy team he is leading) can help to 'fix' the problem (namely, by 'filling' the 'power vacuum'). In terms of the situated action examined here introduces a normative pairing associated with organisational matters and everyday reasoning concerning action and agency. Namely, if 'this team doesn't mobilise this sort of activity then no one, no one will' (L.53-54). This is an interesting normative pairing between *the team mobilising activity* and *nothing changing*. This is a matter of accountable and responsible action being mapped, within the sequential parameters of the strategy meeting, onto the team present by Ted, the change agent.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of this extended sequence of talk-in-interaction shows that 'politics' and 'power' were amongst some of the key category-bound attributes that members used to make sense of (a) the external environment – i.e. their retail customers (and the various people and departments therein), and (b) the internal environment – i.e. the relationships between various hierarchical levels of the organization. The strategists used these two forms of predication to plan their strategic change initiative. This was not "just talk" but was *practical* and *consequential* because it was through these conversations that key decisions were made, which affected *who* was involved (e.g. which salesperson and which account was chosen for the 'pilot'), what *resources* were involved (e.g. what budget they requested from the Board of Directors and Head Office), and *how* they undertook the change initiative (e.g. what prices they settled with customers).

We selected this excerpt for analysis because it displays the kinds of category-bound reasoning that informed some key strategic decisions: in our case decisions concerning (a) who to allocate to manage key accounts (L. 1-16), (b) how they should manage the key account customer relationship (L. 17-50), and (c) who should lead the change initiative (L. 50-54). This was not the only occasion where power and politics were used as members' category-bound reasoning for making sense of the business. Indeed, the transcripts of the other ten strategy meetings, and the informal work shadowing and interviews conducted by the action researcher, show that this was a common theme for making sense of their customers, their competitors and their own company. For example, power was a central element of their sensemaking about how their relative brand strength would affect their ability to negotiate better prices and more shop space with retailers: "I mean we're not trying to be the brand that dictates because I don't think that's who we are but I think it's about an equal balance of power." (Marketing Manager, Meeting 2, p. 55) Politics was also central to their sensemaking about how they would handle the potential repercussions of their new Strategy within FitCo: “Now because it’s so political, a hot potato obviously, I’ll talk a little bit about it.” (Action Researcher, Meeting 1, p. 38) Due to space considerations, we have not been able to analyse this wider corpus of material here, but seek to signal the potential for a future research agenda that systematically examines the situated use of power and politics as category-bound predicates and members’ reasoning procedures.

To sum up, then, what our study shows is the importance of power and politics as members category-bound reasoning through which their own organization, and the world around them, was rendered intelligible. This sensemaking, we propose, was not ‘just talk’, but rather was consequential for the way in which they interacted with other key stakeholders, such as purchasers, sales people, and senior management. It was therefore also consequential for the way in which their strategy was formulated and implemented, because key decisions (such as which customers to trial the new strategy with, which sales person to select, what bargaining tactics to use, and so on) rested on their use of power and politics as practical reasoning procedures. Power and politics, then, were used by the strategists as ‘typifications’ (Garfinkel, 1962), as they searched for underlying ‘patterns’ to make sense of their organizational life.

CONCLUSION

How does an ethnomethodological perspective on power and politics contribute to process organization studies? The process perspective is founded on the notion that organizations (and their environments) are not stable entities with various properties, variables or attributes. Power and politics, for example, are not seen as a ‘property’ or ‘fact’ associated with various individuals or groups – such as ‘management’ or ‘customers’. Rather, organizing is viewed as an on-going process that is constantly “in the making” (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). Thus, the focus of organization studies thereby shifts away from trying to detect or measure the various ‘factual properties’ or ‘attributes’ of the organiz*ation* (as a noun), towards studying the continual flow and flux of organiz*ing* (as a verb). Ethnomethodology is valuable because it centrally concerns itself with the on-going social processes through which ‘social facts’ are produced. In this chapter, we have shown how a group of strategists produced a series of “facts” about their key accounts (the retail firms they sold their products through) and their organization (the firm they worked for) through a series of category-bound reasoning procedures. The ethnomethodological perspective thereby contributes by enabling us to study “fact production” in its accomplishment – “in flight” (Garfinkel, 1967) – within the interactional process.

Organization is hereby understood not as an entity that pre-exists discourse (the use of language in the form of talk and text), that acts as a form of ‘input’ into the process of communicating. Communication does not merely ‘reflect’ or ‘express’ the factual status of ‘the organization’. Nor is the organization understood as a ‘container’ within which communication takes place. As with the CCO perspective (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), ethnomethodology views the organization as a 'social fact' as *actively constituted through* processes of communication. In short, "the organization is constituted by the interaction processes among its members" (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). Communication, then, brings the organization 'alive' in a continual, never-ending process of interacting. Thus, ethnomethodology (and related fields such as Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis) is valuable, according to Tsoukas and Chia (2002), because it enables us to capture the never-ending interactional process of *becoming*.

Ethnomethodology shares an interest in the situated use of language in the form of spoken or written communication with other approaches to discourse analysis (e.g. Willmott, 2005; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010*;* Thomas, Hardy & Sargent, 2011; Clarke, Kwon & Wodak, forthcoming). Where EM differs, though, is in the way in which language-use is conceptualised. In other approaches to discourse analysis, language-use in the form of talk and text are often conceptualised as 'caused' by social forces that lie outside of the text. For example, in Foucaultian studies, language-use in, say, interviews or naturally-occurring workplace interactions (e.g. meetings, customer interactions, appraisals etc) is interpreted as an outcome of the dominant 'Discourses' or systems of thought that open up subject positions for people to occupy, through processes of 'normalisation' and 'self-discipline' (see e.g. Knights & Willmott, 1989; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). In CDA, post-structural influences from Foucault are also coupled with neo-Marxist theory to 'explain' language use. For example, language-use is understood to be a medium and outcome of dominant interests or interest-groups, as those who hold power in society are thought to use language to maintain or extend their material interests (see e.g. Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Analysis proceeds by pointing to the forces operating 'outside' the talk or text to explain it, whether they are dominant Discourses or material interests.

EM differs from these other forms of discourse analysis in seeking to study the first-order practices of members, rather than generating second-order academic theories and explanations, by studying the "taken-for-granted methods or [] practical reasoning procedures for producing order" (Samra-Fredericks, 2010: 202) that enable "mutually intelligible social encounters" to proceed (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010: 13). The rationale for studying members' first-order methods is simple: it is these methods that are *constitutive of*, and therefore *consequential for*, the actual social settings of the people the social scientist is studying. EM therefore views participants' methods not as somehow naïve, or incomplete, theories of power, to be made more 'sophisticated' or 'complete' by the social scientists' 'professional' theories (Watson & Goulet, 1998). Rather EM focuses on how people, as 'practical sociologists' (Coulon, 1995: 2), use many of the same concepts that the social scientist uses (such as norms, values, rules, power, politics, and so on) to *accomplish social organization*.

This chapter has shown that strategists use 'power' and 'politics' as category-bound reasoning procedures through which they make their own organization, and their organizational environment including customers and competitors, intelligible. We have emphasised the very *practical* and *consequential* nature of these accounts. Talk, then, does not simply 'describe' the world, but *actively constitutes it* in ways that make it possible to sensibly *act*. As such, it has much to offer to the study of management, organizations and strategy.

Having provided an analysis of situated action within a strategy meeting it is worthwhile to reflect on how such analyses might inform the research into organizations more generally. Clearly, the analysis of talk-in-interaction alongside detailed fieldwork has academic rigour and status in its own right (see e.g. Boden, 1994; Samra-Fredericks, 2005). In the context of applied organizational studies we might reflect on the affordances of using situated analyses of meeting talk (Housley, 2003; Clifton, 2006, 2009; Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009; Svennevig, 2012; Hughes et al., 2012) to identify key interactional methods over a large corpus of data; such as account formats that relate to proposing or rejection organisational courses of action, the anatomy of claims making, turn-taking or alignment in strategy talk, and so on. Finally, the role of situated analyses of work interaction can be used to inform reflection upon professional practice in organizational contexts (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2000; Clifton, 2006, 2009; Stokoe, 2011).

In conclusion, then, what can an ethnomethodological perspective contribute to the understanding of the role of power/politics in organizational communication? Ethnomethodology's perspective on communication, specifically on 'accounts' produced during talk-in-interaction, further develops the CCO perspective by showing the *reflexive constitutive* role of communication in organizations. For EM, as for CCO, talk does not simply *reflect* underlying organizational attributes, such as the organization's 'strategy', or 'culture', or 'structure'. Rather, it *actively brings them into being*. Ethnomethodology offers a useful approach for showing *how* this process of 'bringing into being' *gets done, practically, by members*. Thus, instances of communication are not seen as simply *expressions* of external and constraining facts and forces such as power and politics. Communication also *constitutes* these very 'facts' and 'forces', as people use accounts of power and politics during social interaction to make sense of the things they experience.

Ethnomethodology advances the field of process organization studies by studying organizations not as stable 'substances' with certain 'attributes', but rather as an ongoing process of sensemaking and interacting (Leiter, 1980; Handel, 1982). As Tsoukas and Chia (2002) argue:

> "What is so distinctive about the ethnomethodological approach to organizations ... is its insistence on capturing the dynamism and ever-mutating character of organizational life."

For EM, as for process theory, social reality is not a pre-existing and pre-given entity but rather is constantly being created by actors in a process of 'permanent tinkering' (Coulon, 1995: 17). The concept of *process* is therefore at the heart of ethnomethodology: "Where others might see 'things', 'givens', or 'facts of life', the ethnomethodologists sees ... the process through which the perceivedly stable features of socially organized environments are continually created and sustained." (Pollner, 1974: 27) In short, as Boden (1994) argues, EM provides a way of understanding *organization-in-action*.

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