Let me preface this review by stating that I am not an avid supporter of ethnomethodological approaches. Nor do I embrace the intricate accounts of mundane human behavior that they produce. Yet, despite my preference for what Rouncefield and Tolmie would disdainfully call the ‘constructionist approach’ (in my case methodologies informed by critical theory) I came away from my reading of Ethnomethodology at Work with an appreciation for its almost Zen like approach to understanding user behavior.

Rouncefield and Tolmie have done a masterful job incorporating key chapters written by leading experts who set out to show rather than tell the reader how ethnomethodology is done. In doing so the ethnomethodologists’ notorious ‘anti-theory’ stance that causes so much tension with other sociologists seems not only reasonable, but rather a good idea. The result is a process that transcends the preconceived ideological, philosophical and theoretical lenses the researcher might project onto the analysis of an interactive situation. What remains is an account that just tells us ‘what is really going on here.’

Ethnomethodology at Work explores the contribution that ethnomethodological studies continue to make to our understanding of the ways in which people actually accomplish work from day to day. As such, it will appeal not only to those working in the areas of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, but also to those with interests in the sociology of work and organisations. It will also be of interest to those involved in the design of interactive systems in general - i.e., in Human Computer Interaction.

Two chapters that exemplify the value of this book are Chapter One: “The Sociologist as Movie Critic” by Rouncefield, Randall, and Sharrock; and Chapter Three: “Organizational Acumen” by Tolmie and Rouncefield.

The Sociologist as Movie Critic is relatively controversial, arguing that the wide range of sociological practices we currently draw upon to understand human behavior are missing the point. For Rouncefield, Randall, and Sharrock attempts by sociologists to culturally situate what they are observing results in the failure...
to look at the specifics of the activities the participants are engaging in. This position, while not particularly politically correct, is hard to ignore. Indeed issues that are at the forefront of much sociological investigation such as race, class and gender certainly leave little room for in-depth examination of ‘the trivial.’ In the chapter on Organizational Acumen we get a sense of the value of insights that arise from a focus on the mundane.

“Organizational Acumen” is set mainly in a bank and involves an investigation of the workers conducting their day-to-day tasks. No Post Marxist commentaries on the way in which repressive Western power structures operate, emerge here. Rather, the focus is on what workers are doing to actually complete their tasks. The result is a rich picture of humans attempting to get the job done despite prescriptive workflow processes, inflexible automated systems and bureaucratic processes issued from above.

There is clear value in understanding users in terms of the ends they will go to, to achieve their goals. In this chapter we see how workers on a production line develop an ingenious method of ensuring that there is the right level of stock by repeatedly reporting current stock as faulty. The process of ‘lying to the machine’ shows the importance of designing systems that allow for elements of creativity to be incorporated into the workflow process.

Overall, the book is detailed enough to be relevant to experts in the field, while at the same time uses language that makes it accessible to a broad audience. A main strength is that it provides insights into how one could adopt the ethnomethodological approach in one’s own research. A bonus is that these insights are delivered with classic understated British commentary.

The timing of the book is fortuitous in that its release coincides with a trend in Human Computer Interaction to embrace critically and theoretically informed approaches to the design of new technology. As a potentially politicized design space emerges, ethnomethodology takes on a new significance. Not only as a means for understanding users, but as a counter balance to culturally situated accounts of user behaviors; thus ensuring that ideological agendas do not overshadow genuine user needs.

The subject matter, the no nonsense title and the conservative cover are all in keeping with the conventions of a sociological texts but this is more than a dry, academic book. I am referring to the fact that the book provides a different perspective on human beings. No matter what one’s view on the ethnomethodological approach might be, Ethnomethodology at Work captures the ingenious, industrious and often bumbling human as s/he goes about her daily activities. The result is a book that is intensely interesting and at times, deeply entertaining.