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“Deciding” as Situated Practice: The Work of Public Safety/9-1-1 Call-Takers¹

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Abstract

A detailed investigation of 9-1-1 operations, using participant observation and video recordings, when taken together with other naturalistic studies of practical human conduct, suggests that the prevailing cognitivist approach to decision making has a number of limitations. This observational and video data provides a framework for an ethnomethodological respecification of the phenomenon.

Decision making in 9-1-1 operations

In the course of their ordinary work activities, public safety call-takers engage in a wide variety of actions and tasks that are commonly described, by both call-takers and observers, as “determining” and “deciding” or as requiring some sort of decision making, often under time constrained circumstances. For example, call-takers are required to determine the precise nature of the citizen caller’s trouble or complaint, and to quickly assess whether this is something that should be the business of the police or fire department. If the trouble is determined to be organizationally relevant, there is the closely related problem of assessing its severity or seriousness, of deciding if it is a *bona fide* emergency or a trouble that can be handled in a less urgent fashion. Plainly, these and other tasks by which “calls for service” are organizationally processed involve a number of possibly fateful “decisions.”

“Decisions” as essentially cognitive events

In studying these and other, more routine instances of decision making, researchers in the human sciences tend to conceptualize and analyze “decisions” as discrete, readily identifiable events that result from or are primarily a consequence of a mental process of

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deliberation. While the organization of this cognitive process is explained in a variety of ways, and the degree to which decision making can be understood through normative models of rationality remains a matter of some debate, there is very little disagreement over the view of “deciding” as an essentially mental phenomenon. Even those studies that develop descriptive (rather than normative) models of natural behavior from investigations of decision making in ambiguous, complex, real-world environments, and that emphasize how individuals perceive ever-changing social situations in assessing their choices and taking action, have been preoccupied with the analysis of and theorizing about cognitive processes (see, for example, Klein et al, 1992).

An ethnomethodological respecification

There are a number of problems with this approach, however. Data collected during fifteen months of participant observation as a call-taker and dispatcher in a 9-1-1 operations center, including a large corpus of video recordings of call-takers processing “calls” at their work stations, allows us to identify some of these problems and suggest an alternative strategy for the study of practical human conduct *in situ*. From this alternative view, social practices rather than persons and their psychological properties need to be placed at the center of analytic attention; accordingly, personal attributes or skills can now be seen as instantiations of, or derivative properties from, acculturated public conduct comprising the matrix of social affairs (Coulter, 1989).

References

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