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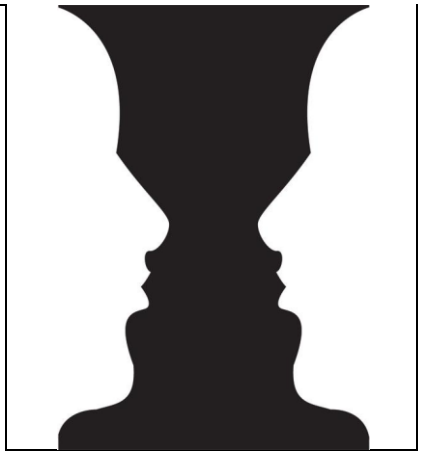

Ethnomethodology as an alternative method for the qualitative study of challenging social arenas: The Nightclub

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Abstract

The current paper discusses the possibility of employing an ethnomethodological research model to generate qualitative data in challenging social contexts, where conventional procedures and techniques present a number of difficulties. These are social settings where it is either difficult or unnecessary to observe or conduct interviews for a variety of reasons. Through basic immersion and documentation of the scene's phenomena, ethnomethodology enables the gathering, selection, and analysis of valuable data by utilizing the viewpoint of the researcher-expert who has membership knowledge after being acquainted with the scene under study. The study's question is whether and to what extent ethnomethodologically produced descriptions, categories, and relationships can be legitimately used in qualitative research aimed at generating theory or identifying more general patterns, given its emphasis on how social order is produced through interaction and its seeming refusal to acknowledge the influence of general norms. The nightclub dance floor was selected as the challenging terrain for evaluation, and one of the ethnomethodology-specific techniques was used to investigate it (ten Have, 2004). The research findings were examined to determine their suitability for traditional qualitative analysis. Beyond the inherent findings of the ethnomethodological research, which are intriguing in and of themselves, the endeavor's conclusion is that ethnomethodology can generate, from the bottom up, data in the aforementioned challenging spaces that construct the actual forms of the background values, beliefs, and norms present in the scenes under study. These forms can then be utilized for the development or production of concepts and theory.

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Keywords
Ethnomethodology; Membership knowledge; Ethnomethodological ethnography; Qualitative research; Norm negotiation and formation; The order of the night and the nightclub;

Introduction: Difficult social arenas

When aiming to conduct a study within the qualitative paradigm, there are certain social settings where the research process and its techniques are considerably harder to implement. Qualitative research relies heavily on the observation of behaviors, communication, and the constructed symbolic environment, as well as on questioning actors about the meaning of these observed elements. Certain scenes and environments, however, may hinder or even make data collection impossible. Such spaces can be, for example, the possible non-places discussed by Marc Augé (1992), but also extremely noisy spaces that block complex, verbal communication, dark or too bright spaces that also produce an incomplete communication and, in general, any space in which there are material or ideal elements that reduce communication only to what is strictly necessary to achieve clear goals - such as, for example, the case of a game of cards or that of a football match.

While in the "order of the day"—the time during which the individual functions as part of large institutions and organizations—such restrictive spaces are avoided and less frequently encountered, in the "order of the night," when the working day ends, they become much more common. The entire ecosystem of nightlife is dotted with social arenas where research is made difficult by space-specific rules that obstruct observation or verbal communication through the imposition of particular norms and/or the construction of an environment in which these are hardly possible. One of the extreme night spaces in this regard, a space where ideas are hard to capture in the form of verbal communication, is the nightclub—a symbolic space of the order of the night. The nightclub almost completely blocks the capacity for verbal communication, significantly diminishes the capacity for rational elaboration, and places the actor in a special mode of functioning, the "club vibe," where actions are governed by an apparently narrow set of core ideas. Investigating these ideas, describing and analyzing their specific forms, is not simple, as the club environment employs a series of techniques that distort and alter cognitive processes. Interviews recalling the actions and ideas of a club night not only describe an extremely altered image but, as it is impossible to conduct them in the club, they are usually recounted within the context of a different system of norms and values, making them difficult to analyze.

Nevertheless, the arsenal of sociological investigative methods includes other ways to empirically research the social, ways that at first glance seem better equipped to meet the challenges posed by such difficult spaces or phenomena. One of these methods is the ethnomethodological approach proposed by Garfinkel in the 1960s.

Objectives and structure of the research

This study specifically aims to evaluate the utility of ethnomethodology (EM) in researching the nightclub, one of the most challenging arenas of investigation, focusing on its ability to generate data useful for subsequent analysis, concept production, and theory formation compatible with the conventional perspective of qualitative analysis. As a research method, ethnomethodology offers several advantages, but also presents certain challenges, particularly when used in a broader research context.

The primary issue posed by the difficult spaces discussed here relates to the impossibility of obtaining useful data through interrogative techniques. The field impedes communication, and the recall of interactions during an interview occurs under conditions so different from the lived experience that the opinions or descriptions gathered are difficult to interpret or are rendered useless. Ethnomethodology, which neither recommends nor requires interrogative techniques (the researcher, as a competent member of the scene, being in a position to explain the visible behaviors and the ideas accompanying them), thus appears to be an ideal choice for investigating these spaces.

Alongside this major advantage, ethnomethodology also has certain drawbacks when its data are intended for use in traditional analysis or description. A key aspect is EM's initial goal, which, by focusing on how local order is produced, unsurprisingly yields highly valuable data on norms and their negotiation within interaction. EM is concerned with the immediate, with lived experience, with social order as a product of interaction—indexical, situated, particular, and characterized by norms and behaviors in constant flux and negotiation—a product of a volatile local social reality. Can such an approach, then, produce or assist in the production of categories or theories that are sufficiently stable, ultimately contributing to a usable description of elements of social structure?

To address this question, and considering that the mere use of existing literature is not always illuminating—especially given that ethnomethodology disregards prior theorization—the study employed a small-scale research project within a difficult social space, the dance floor of a nightclub. The results of this study were, in turn, evaluated to determine whether they could yield data usable in the conventional qualitative mode.

The study proceeds with a discussion of the genesis, characteristics, and development of the ethnomethodological method, followed by a conventional presentation of the research conducted in the nightclub scene. The discussion concludes with an analysis of the study's results and the overall conclusions, exploring whether and how the ethnomethodological perspective can be employed to generate data that can be aligned with conventionally produced descriptions.

The ethnomethodological approach (EM)

Ethnomethodology is a way of investigating the social. It was proposed by Garfinkel (1967) as a radical alternative to the formal analysis typical of sociology at that time, and particularly in response to the rational action perspective proposed by his doctoral advisor, Talcott Parsons. Influenced by Schutz's phenomenology (Psathas, 2004), Garfinkel accepts

that individuals behave rationally, but use a different type of rationality compared to the scientific, formalized model preferred by Parsons. Garfinkel found Parsons' idea of individuals as strictly rule-following, socialized "cultural dopes" to be untenable.

The etymology of the term ethnomethodology involves *ethnos*, referring to members of a human social or cultural group, and *methods*, which are the ways members communicate and produce local truths, or a commonly accepted description of reality, concepts, and existing causal relationships. The meaning of the term *method* in ethnomethodology is taken by Garfinkel from Felix Kaufmann (1944) and interpreted through Schutz's lens (1943). It refers to the process by which ordinary people produce a shared truth in interaction using a type of rationality similar to scientists, with the key difference being the degree of precision sought—for everyday life, probable causality suffices, in contrast to the certainty required in natural sciences or mathematics (Hammersley, 2020).

The ethnomethodological approach is based on a simple idea: if we believe, as Garfinkel did, that the order of social life is an *ongoing accomplishment*, something that people work on and construct in every moment, we must also believe that people have specific methods to coordinate in doing this. For these methods to function, they must necessarily be visible, communicable, and shared among members, who must use them together to produce local social order (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, ethnomethodology specifically aims to study the methods used by actors/members of a scene to produce a mutually recognizable social order, methods by which they produce social facts "on the go," as an *ongoing accomplishment* (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 79).

Ethnomethodology assumes that these methods are necessarily visible and intelligible, meaning that an observer in the scene has access to the entire communication process and that if the researcher-observer is a competent practitioner of the studied social phenomenon, they can correctly decode the communication (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2002, p. 6). This condition may require long-term participation in a particular phenomenon, sometimes years. It is an important condition because ethnomethodology does not appeal to a priori concepts or theories to interpret reality. The researcher must be able, through ideas gradually absorbed in the respective space, to decide what communication is important, what it conveys, and how it constructs local order.

Indexicality, reflexivity, accountability, and unique adequacy

The ethnomethodology described by Garfinkel in 1967 does not emphasize individual actions—for Garfinkel, the scene is more important than the actors, and each newly arriving actor adopts and adapts their methods to the scene's order (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2002, p. 24). A scene can change and vary from one moment to the next, depending on the actors' competence to recreate it and the new elements that emerge on the scene—each moment being unique. The idea in ethnomethodology that local social order is constantly changing introduces the concept of indexicality: in other words, each idea, statement, or behavior of the members is produced in that moment for that moment, to continue the never-identical construction of social order—itself a set of ideas in flux. The implications of

this perspective on research are profound: any subsequent data collection of actions is debatable and contraindicated, as the reasons why individuals said or did something are associated with that specific moment, and when recalled, they are placed in a different context/moment and irreparably distorted (this excludes, therefore, interviews). The researcher, according to Garfinkel (1967), is the only one able to determine the meaning of observations, and for that, they must possess *unique adequacy*—a profound familiarity with the researched scene. These guidelines provided by Garfinkel, however, change over time, as I will discuss later, between 1967 and 2002.

As an empirical method, ethnomethodological research studies the scene as it unfolds, to identify the knowledge and modes of thinking (*membership knowledge*) that allow individuals to organize and perform a common activity. Key concepts associated with ethnomethodological research are indexicality, reflexivity, and the documentary method of interpretation. Indexicality refers to the intimate relationship between the meaning/interpretation of a social action and the context in which it takes place—the action must be understood within this framework; reflexivity concerns the circular relationship between the associated ideas and actions that produce the order of the space—they generate and modify each other reflexively; and the documentary method of interpretation (*accountability*) suggests that what we see, what the participants in a scene do, documents underlying patterns of ideas, the form of which can be understood after gathering sufficient instances of manifestation (Whittle in Cassell, 2018, p. 217).

Practically, the ethnomethodological method involves careful observation of individuals by a researcher competent in the scene's methods. Actions are recorded as faithfully as possible using video, photo, audio methods, or detailed observation notes. Observation is the central method, along with attention to details regarding how local social reality is produced as people communicate and negotiate their individual, subjective social realities. The results of an ethnomethodological study can vary depending on interest and the scene, but the most commonly used sequence begins with describing the modes of producing social order, seeking the *ongoing* and *artful* (*artful* meaning nuanced mastery of methods and the production of appropriate, competent actions/communications), and continues with identifying implicit norms—those that individuals no longer consciously analyze but that guide activity in the scene. Here, Garfinkel develops a specific technique: breaching. It should be emphasized, however, that ethnomethodology does not aim to state what an activity "really" means, does not tie it to existing theories, does not reinterpret, and does not judge normatively, as good/bad, the studied aspects—the goal is to capture the meaning that participants themselves attribute. Ethnomethodology produces a possible form of the norms and ideas that generate social order, but this is by no means final or complete, as the product of the analysis is itself indexical (Whittle in Cassell, 2018, p. 219).

Transformations of the ethnomethodological perspective

Garfinkel introduced ethnomethodology (EM) as a reaction to the formal analysis used in sociology in the 1960s. It was an extreme reaction that practically dismissed everything sociology had become, claiming that "immortal, ordinary society" reflexively and continuously constructs its social reality (Garfinkel, 1988), and no formal scheme or general theory can correctly or completely describe the methods through which individuals truly construct social order. However, ethnomethodology has undergone several transformations of its method over time, transformations proposed and supported by Garfinkel himself. Garfinkel presents the initial model in *Studies of Ethnomethodology* (1967), but significantly departs from it in his recommendations contained in *Ethnomethodology's Program* (2002).

Perhaps the most comprehensive discussion of this methodological drift is made by Melvin Pollner, throughout a series of articles written parallel to the evolution of ethnomethodology, starting in 1974 (Pollner 1991; Pollner in Lofland 2007; Pollner 2011; Emerson & Holstein, 2012). In his article, *The End(s) of Ethnomethodology* (2011), Pollner discusses the drift of ethnomethodological research models between 1967 and 2002, which he labels as EM 1.0 and EM 2.0, respectively. The article is probably the most complete and nuanced critical "package" on ethnomethodology that I could identify, with Pollner addressing certain inconsistencies without denying the value of its fundamental assumptions—assumptions present in both models. In brief, the differences in method over time, identified by Pollner, are as follows: the first iteration, EM 1.0, makes the familiar exotic using the breaching technique. EM is interested in the visible-but-ignored, background aspects that sustain the consciously accessed foreground. It documents members' practices while maintaining the member/researcher distinction. Ethnomethodological indifference—ignoring sociological theories without denying them—EM is another way of discussing society. It emphasizes ethnomethodological reflexivity. At the other end, EM 2.0 makes the exotic familiar through the explanations of the practitioner-researcher, an insider. The focus is on the foreground, on the immediately visible, on things important to practitioners. It highly values presence, immediacy, *haecceity*. It demands *unique adequacy*—the training of the researcher in the discipline studied ethnomethodologically—to a much higher degree than EM 1.0 and abandons radical reflexivity.

Four EM research models

Paul ten Have (2004) identifies four ethnomethodological research models in *Understanding Qualitative Research and Ethnomethodology*:

1. **Breaching**. The dynamic production of social order on a particular scene involves the members' desire to construct that order, with methods essentially being a form of negotiation, of jointly producing a shared "truth" that guides their actions. The breaching technique involves an apparent misunderstanding of these background ideas, manifested through inappropriate reactions, "out of context" behaviors, or

demands for rational, detailed explanations of certain "common-sense" fragments of communication. Garfinkel frequently used this technique, but usually as a didactic method to highlight the presence of underlying, hard-to-directly-observe ideas that sustain local order. Given that breaching often involves violating social norms or conventions, potentially eliciting strong emotions like shock, surprise, or anger, it can raise serious ethical concerns and is currently avoided.

2. **Becoming the Phenomenon** (Mehan & Woods, 1975). This model is more closely related to phenomenology, with the researcher studying their own sense-making work in the chosen scene, placing themselves in extraordinary situations. An example is David Sudnow's (2001) text describing his experience of becoming a jazz pianist. Other studies cover experiences of illness, special situations, etc.
3. **The Ethnographic Model**. This type of research can be simply applied by ethnographers, involving careful observation of activities in their natural context and discussions with experienced practitioners to identify the competencies involved in their appropriate, *artful* performance. Interviews are typically analyzed using qualitative analysis. Garfinkel (1967) uses this research model for studying the jury scene. The difference from ethnographic studies lies in the EM investigation's objective: identifying communication methods for establishing local truth, the body of norms governing situated activity, and making assumptions about how social order is produced.
4. **Conversation Analysis (CA)**, the most important method derived from EM, which focuses on how verbal communication produces local order. It uses meticulous recordings and transcripts of conversations, employing specific codes.

The drift of research models over time, as noted by ten Have (2004), has led to a fracturing of the ethnomethodological world, with ten Have simply stating that there are several research strategies, several forms of ethnomethodology, all seeking to identify the deep processes that sustain local order—processes that elude formal analysis or other forms of theorizing. On the other hand, the idea that there are several valid ways to conduct ethnomethodological research is important in practice, allowing researchers to choose the most appropriate mode of applying it depending on the research's object and purpose.

Finally, one of EM's weaknesses should be mentioned: its inability to produce "perfect" descriptions, scientific in the sense of natural sciences or even traditional methods used in sociology. This impossibility stems from the dual quality of the researcher, who is both an "instrument" for recording the social world and an analyst of their own description (Zimmerman & Pollner, 1971). Even if the researcher is aware of this and makes exceptional reflexive efforts, it is difficult to imagine how they could produce a description of reality that is not influenced by their own subjectivities.

Current use of ethnomethodology in sociological research

At present, the most commonly encountered form of applying ethnomethodology (EM) in sociological research seems to be the ethnographic model which involve the study of the local practices of a specific category of actors. This includes the identification of norms and beliefs related to the activities they perform—activities that aim to achieve the objectives of the scene. The studies typically result in an analytical description of these practices and ideas. The goal of such studies is to produce or modify *top-down* norms that organize the activity within the scene to achieve the desired outcomes, as perceived by, according to the ethnomethodological perspective, the actors of the elite's scenes. Such studies might focus on activities within the medical field (Berardinelli et al., 2014), nursing studies, the tourist services sector (de Souza Bispo & Schmidt Godoy, 2012), or worker protection on construction sites (Rusyda et al., 2021), to name just a few examples. In these investigations, the focus on the mechanisms of effectively negotiating norms through ethnomethods is relatively minimal; the primary objective is usually to produce a comprehensive description of the locally negotiated norms and beliefs. The data collected from various settings can be analyzed globally, producing a vernacular form of a given norm. The validity of the data, and its potential to inform policies or other structural ideas, is rarely questioned. The ethnomethodological character of the research is reflected in the data collection and analysis methods (particularly the researcher's position as an expert or possessor of *membership knowledge*) and the attention to details, to "visible-but-ignored" as elements for documenting background norms.

Example of EM research: The Nightclub Dance Floor

I began this discussion by stating that, in certain spaces, conventional qualitative research methods seem inadequate. These are spaces of human activity where the environment inhibits the ability to observe or interrogate actors, and where the context (the space's norms or the actors' states) differs from the context in which data can be collected. One such space is the nightclub, which, through a combination of sound, light, movement, and the use of psychoactive substances, becomes a very challenging research setting.

The nightclub is a dazzling arena of the social order of the night and a magnet for those seeking pleasurable experiences. Modern large clubs are clearly delineated spaces with controlled access and segmented interiors that allow clubgoers to alternate between activities throughout the night. From an ethnomethodological perspective, each of the club's segments is a scene with its own order and potentially even its own methods, and the actors—clubgoers—move between scenes multiple times in a single evening. From this set of scenes, I selected the dance floor—the club's "hot heart"—for analysis. This space is typically a generously sized circular or rectangular area bordered by bars, tables, or shelves for placing drinks, as well as a stage where performers entertain. The dance floor is perhaps the most challenging terrain in the club because verbal communication is reduced and impossible to record, and the ability to observe is severely limited by the scene's features: the overwhelming sound pressure of the music, the darkness

intermittently pierced by spotlights and flashing strobe lights, the continuous movement of dancers, and so on.

Choosing an ethnomethodological research model

On the dance floor, as in the entire club or other nocturnal scenes, the most useful ethnomethodological approach seems to align with the one described by Garfinkel in 1967, where the researcher maintains a certain distance from the studied group, uses their own experience with the space to make sense of observations, and seeks to identify the deep ideas and shared norms that produce local order. This application of ethnomethodology can be seen as a form of highly reflexive ethnography, with an emphasis on the empirical and the immediate, seeking the form of the norms that produce visible order while, at least in the research stage, ignoring pre-existing theories or concepts (Pollner & Emerson, 2007). Another important advantage of this method is that it involves ideas familiar to a researcher accustomed to the ethnographic mode of investigation specific to anthropology, who can easily follow the method's principles and specific guidelines: ethnomethodological indifference, the idea of members' shared and visible methods that continuously construct local social order, understanding the reflexive and indexical nature of actions, and paying attention to the "visible-but-ignored" as a means of understanding the scene.

Specifically, the research followed the ethnomethodological ethnographic model (ten Have, 2004; Pillay, 2019), with data collected through observation by a researcher familiar with the studied field. The analysis focused on producing categories of typical behaviors within the scene, with each category being technically accessed (i.e., detailed descriptions) alongside the probable form of norms, how they might be negotiated, and the apparent purpose of the behavior. Describing local norms is a central goal of EM because, although at first glance, ethnomethodology rejects pre-existing background norms, it does so only to (re)construct them indexically by analyzing the actors' methods (Maynard & Heritage, 2023).

Implicit difficulties in the studied scene

Data collection through simple observation and immersion in the nightclub scene is a slow method of data gathering. On the one hand, the meticulous recording and analysis of behaviors is difficult or impossible, not only because placing a camera in a club is legally and morally problematic, but also for practical reasons such as the noise level, low lighting, and the density of people. Additionally, competent engagement in certain behaviors requires sometimes biological, cultural, or personality traits not typically associated with sociological research work: openness to the use of psychoactive substances or alcohol, erotic availability, the existence of bodily projects, alongside age or gender. The norms of the scene also assign the researcher to a certain role that requires specific behaviors, and this role must be played as competently as possible to avoid alienating other members. For example, in my case, the role most frequently assigned to me was that of the "lecherous old man," a person past their youth seeking fleeting erotic experiences with younger

women. This implicit role assignment can create serious difficulties for a broader perspective, as the obtained data may be limited to those that characteristic of the assigned role, missing out on ideas and behaviors associated with other roles.

Presentation of data and analysis

The presentation of data begins with what is termed in ethnomethodology (EM) as "technical access," which involves a detailed description of the scene(s), including key segments (sub-scenes with different meanings, norms, and behaviors), and the props used in communication. While such details might add local color, they are important because EM focuses on communication that, following specific rules, leads to local normalization. After presenting the space and props, the primary behaviors of the actors, immediate norms (the hierarchy of norms, as we will see), and the methods of communication associated with these behaviors are described.

The Dance Floor - spatial organization

In terms of construction, the dance floor is a generous segment of club space reserved exclusively for dancing. Often, it has its own room, and when it shares space, its boundaries are typically clearly visible. The floor might sometimes feature lighting installations or other specialized flooring, but it is often just polished concrete. The walls and ceiling are fitted with high-power sound systems and lighting specific to dance floors: disco balls, spotlights, various colored light sources, ambient lights, and trendy drink advertisements, among others. Somewhere in a discreet location overseeing the entire space is the console of the sound and lighting engineer, who directs—either manually or by loading a program—the entire spectacle of colors on the floor. The artists' podium is a key visual attraction, high enough to be seen from all corners of the floor, equipped with its own set of stage lights and sound monitors. The dance floor includes or is adjacent to a bar, an important "pilgrimage" spot for every clubber, and along the room's perimeter are tables or shelves where drinks or personal items can be placed—larger clubs may even have sofas or armchairs, resting places for dancers, often reserved or purchased, with access indicated by the color of the wristband worn. Despite the apparent simplicity of the dance floor, each of these components forms sub-scenes with their own norms and methods.

Beyond material objects, the space of the dance floor is filled with energy, particularly sound, at a level rarely matched in urban spaces. Clubs typically employ a limited range of music genres, with some choosing just one genre that defines their specific character, transforming them into a potential *mecca* for a particular subculture. Regardless of the genre, the sound pressure on the dance floor reaches extreme levels, so high that when you leave the club, the outside world can sometimes feel, for several minutes, like a silent movie in color. Dancing on the club floor is not complicated but must take into account certain constraints, the most important being the density of dancers. When the floor is empty, dancers have the freedom to move horizontally and can display their knowledge of formal dance styles, but on many nights, the density of dancers is so high that bodies are constantly touching or brushing against each other. Under these

conditions, dance movements are vertical: hands raised in the air, head movements, jumps if the music permits, and minimal lateral movement become the norms of dancing. Interactions under these conditions are simple and occur through a limited number of communication channels.

The Dance Floor - sub-scenes and interactions

For presentation and analysis, behaviors that are most likely to be standardized in the club space were chosen, in accordance with the ideas of ethnomethodology. These behaviors are those that repeat in relatively similar patterns and, at the same time, must be easily observable by members to allow the use of methods for negotiating these norms. Behaviors and interactions were delineated first by spatial and then by temporal criteria within the interaction space. This choice relates to EM's focus on communication, which the dance floor dramatically limits, thus producing sub-scenes where meaning is created and micro-arenas for the negotiation of situated behaviors. For analysis, the following scenes were selected: *the not-in-the-vibe-yet-area*, *our-place-to-return-to-throughout-the-night*, *front-stage-for-groupies*, and *the-place-where-we-dance-to-get-to-know-each-other-and-maybe-more*. On each of these scenes, legitimate roles with specific norms can be enacted, with only the most common ones mentioned here.

The not-in-the-vibe-yet-area

In the area farthest from the artist's platform stand, alone or in groups, the newly arrived participants who are still deciphering the local order of the dance floor, along with those who do not wish to dance. The latter, even if swaying to the music, keep their hands lowered, their gaze sweeping absently across the dancing crowd, pausing momentarily on the stage, the bar, or a face in the crowd. They seem to be searching for someone, and this behavior is communicated to other clubbers. Also located in the area farthest from the stage are groups that arrived together and have not yet "opened up"—they continue dancing in a circle, looking at each other. There can be several reasons for this spatial arrangement, but what matters is that they are not (yet) trying to communicate with the other participants, but only among themselves: glances, gestures, and movements are confined to the group, and intruders are quickly discouraged and excluded.

Our-place-to-return-to-throughout-the-night

The first actions of a clubber are to buy a drink from the bar and identify a resting spot that serves as a meeting point for the group throughout the night. Usually located along the edges of the dance floor, there are rest areas or simple flat surfaces for placing drinks or other personal items. Individuals claim these spaces by initially placing personal objects and (sufficiently full) freshly acquired drinks, and throughout the night, they refresh this marker—the rule being that an empty container does not secure temporary ownership, even in the presence of certain personal items. One technique for properly marking the territory in one's absence is to use opaque cans of juice, energy drink, etc., ideally with a straw. As the club fills up, rest or storage spaces become insufficient, and

newcomers must negotiate with the initial "owners." Negotiation, typically over the surfaces of tables or counters, occurs through eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures, and can be blocked by body positioning, occupying "exposed" corners with personal objects, etc. Another anchor point for the group is the *where-we-dance-with-friends* spot, a space on the dance floor also relatively claimed, with clubbers eventually moving between this, the *our-place-to-return-to-throughout-the-night spot* and other important destinations in the club for much of the night.

The front-stage-for-groupies

As previously mentioned, the dance floor is either inclusive of or bordered by a stage/podium on which an artist or band performs. Close to this stage, there is often a group of dancers who are completely absorbed in the presence of the artist. These are the fans, the groupies, who follow the artist to the venues where they perform and have the privilege of sharing, at certain moments, the stage or podium with the star. This is a group in which most members know each other, but on the dance floor, their gazes, body orientation, and gestures are directed almost exclusively towards the artist.

The-place-where-we-dance-to-get-to-know-each-other-and-maybe-more

This area covers most of the dance floor and includes nearly all dancers. Here, too, we can identify a certain structure, with the density and energy of dancers increasing as the distance to the artist decreases. However, the density of bodies is generally too high for the formation of friendship groups to be maintained. In this zone, dancing occurs in elementary groups of two to four people, sometimes formed from the fragmentation of a larger group, and the exchange of members between these groups is more frequent. Membership in such an elementary dance group is indicated by gaze direction, body orientation, and movement synchronization. Here is where eye contact is made, dancing alongside unknown-yet-desirable individuals occurs, and whispers are exchanged—whispers that, in other spaces, would be considered shouts. Gradually, a larger group forms in which everyone has seen everyone, and each person relates to the others. This zone seems to be the best place for identifying and courting a potential erotic partner.

During the dance, the gaze is usually fixed above the heads of other dancers, on the floor, or on other neutral points—the artist's stage, the bar, advertisements. From time to time, dancers quickly study the faces of those around them. When the gaze is fixed on another dancer, it follows their eyes and serves as a clear signal of interest and openness. Competent use of the gaze, for example, involves not looking at someone, particularly in the eye area, when there is no intention to communicate. The duration of the gaze, the focal point, saccades, gaze sequences, facial expressions, the angle of the gaze, the position of the head relative to the body, and so on, constitute a language that clubbers must master if they want to create the desired social order. Moreover, this language is specific to each sub-category of clubbers: men and women have different "vocabularies," as do the young and the mature, those seeking company, or those who came solely to immerse themselves in sound and light. However, all of these forms of communication remain intelligible to the other members. This knowledge, referred to as *membership*

knowledge, along with the mastery of methods for negotiating norms, are the means through which individuals skillfully or less skillfully construct the local order.

Props on the Dance Floor – The Club Body

Studies employing the ethnomethodological approach place special emphasis on the use of props by members, either present in the space or brought by them. Props include any object that can aid in achieving clearer communication, applying methods, and producing local order. In the case of the dance floor, the introduction of props is minimal, usually limited to the clubber's body—the body prepared for the club—and, in the case of women, possibly a small backpack or handbag.

The body *qua* prop, the *club body*, is a careful production by members, designed to communicate intentions and roles, with the focus often placed on the upper part, which is more visible in the club space. Before clubbing, the body is washed, and hair, makeup, accessories, or other forms of skin decoration are carefully selected by women—while men also groom their beards or hairstyles. The eye area is very important for women who, in addition to strong, contrasting makeup, sometimes use other skin accessories, piercings, and so on. Communication in the club relies heavily on interpreting the gaze, and attention to highlighting the eyes helps facilitate competent communication. Perfume is also an important mode of communication, and members who master the methods know how and where to apply it. The presence of visible tattoos is considered to significantly enhance attractiveness in the club environment, ensuring the success of romantic advances[2]. On the dance floor, the body is used in motion, communicating the individual's energy, age, physical and mental adequacy to the club's norms, as well as the pleasure derived from the experience—the dance floor requires a strong, flexible, and active body, while bored dancers with conventional, lackluster movements signal a lack of understanding of the order and lose access to the stakes of the scene.

In turn, the club provides a limited set of objects through which clubbers can communicate a narrow but important range of states. The first and most common objects used in clubs are, unsurprisingly, drink containers. These indicate not only general clubber status but also the category in which the individual wishes to be placed. The type of glass, the presentation of the drink, the presence or absence of liquid—all these details are codes through which individuals can signal their state and intentions to other competent members of the scene. What you drink, how you drink, the people with whom you synchronize, and your gaze while consuming—all are important elements of communication that a competent clubber must know.

Here, I conclude what in ethnomethodology is called *technical access to the scene* (ten Have, 2004), which involves the description of interactions occurring on the scene, although the selected set is not exhaustive, and each of the mentioned sub-scenes can be further described and analyzed in depth. In ethnomethodology, knowledge of the scene is the prerogative of the expert-researcher, who ultimately decides which parts to bring to

[2] The ideas regarding the effect of tattoos and the belief that they ensure success emerged from a series of interviews conducted in 2018 with young students who engaged in clubbing.

the reader's attention to support the theoretical description they wish to make of the discussed scene.

Negotiation, methods, norms

The hierarchy of norms

In the previous section, we identified and briefly described the most visible interactions within the scene (briefly, because any behavior there can be described in far greater detail, though it could never be fully exhausted). In this section, I will attempt to focus solely on elements present in all these norms—important, but not specific ones. Here, I am referring to general ideas that permeate and inform the indexical norms throughout the space, something akin to what we commonly refer to as "values" (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). For ease of analysis[3], we can consider a normative space with three levels: the most general level contains the core norm or central value, which is almost never violated—and when it is, the entire scene may disintegrate. The second level contains a set of derivative norms, which are more visible, and the third level governs specific micro-behaviors. Norm negotiation occurs at this immediate level and can sometimes rise through the hierarchy, potentially modifying or even overturning the background norm in extreme cases[4].

The most fundamental background norm, perhaps the core value behind the hierarchy that governs behavior on and around the dance floor, is that *all participants must experience only positive emotions within the club space*. Ensuring this state is the continuous task of every clubber. Well-being is not a product of the club as a commercial organization but of the participants themselves, with the club serving only as an arena where they simultaneously consume and produce positive emotions. Everyone must actively contribute to generating these feelings in others. This norm is not easy to follow, as it requires internal interpretative frameworks for interactions that differ from daily life, with other rules and different outcomes. Ultimately, this way of conceptualizing the club scene leads to the transformation of painful social interactions (embarrassment, shame, or guilt) into pleasant, amusing moments. Negative emotions, if present, are never apparent.

At the intermediary level of the hierarchy, three norms seem to govern behaviors on the dance floor. The first such second-level norm is *the prohibition of any form of aggression or violence*, regardless of the reason. The club's order does not permit the expression of negative emotions—from mild impatience to anger or aggression. It is a delicate balance, as alcohol and sexual stimuli are known to encourage the emergence and expression of such emotions (Lankford, 2021). The fact that individuals can almost always suppress them is likely due to the effect of mirroring or emotional resonance (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), where all other participants display and respond to positive emotions. This

[3] The image of a hierarchical pyramid is somewhat didactic, as the relationship between values, norms, and behavior is more complex and continuous (Schwartz, 2012).

[4] An example is the case of violent conflicts in clubs, which require the intervention of bouncers—extremely rare events in downtown Bucharest clubs, where the norm of positive interaction is evidently annulled or indexically modified.

aspect highlights the ongoing accomplishment of the club, as it requires continuous emotional labor from its members. Of course, participants may not perceive this labor since it becomes evident only under what Garfinkel terms breaching, the flagrant violation of norms—a situation that, as mentioned earlier, is almost non-existent.

A second intermediary norm is *the suspension of conventional social rules regarding erotic interactions*, particularly flirting, and their replacement with those specific to the scene. The club is one of the few places where romantic advances are allowed, accepted, and negotiated quickly, without the heavy layers of socio-cultural norms that usually govern such actions. Flirtation or explicit erotic advances, which in other spaces might be unpleasantly and harshly rejected, are common interactions in the club. The rejection of advances is equally common, done with a smile, a turned glance, and an ambiguous gesture. The flirting norm is clearly understood by clubbers, who typically stop frequenting nightclubs once they are in a stable romantic relationship[5].

Finally, a third norm involves *flattening hierarchies*. Although some clubs allow for a certain degree of economic hierarchy among clients—through reserved tables or visible status consumption—the dance floor is a space where individuals are equal. Power or the production of an ad hoc hierarchy on the floor may arise from knowledge and adherence to scene norms—dance style, the confidence of movements, or body appearance—but not from attributes of conventional order.

Communication techniques: Gaze, body, and props

Gaze

The norms described above produce, at the third level, local indexical norms that are continually signaled and negotiated through techniques that involve the use of gaze, body movements, and props. The gaze is, by far, the most important mode of communication in the club. It (alongside facial expressions) indicates interest, appreciation, the desire for communication, acceptance, or refusal of interaction, and so on. While in everyday settings, the meanings of gazes are usually clarified with words, on the dance floor communication begins with the gaze and can remain at that level for a long time. This necessitates that dancers correctly interpret the exchange of glances. However, since simple eye contact, even when contextualized with facial expressions, has limited specificity, clubbers must understand the set of topics the gaze can address within a particular context.

Body

Beyond its role as a prop, a sort of calling card, the body can communicate interest, disinterest, or suggest intentions in certain contexts. On the dance floor, the body plays an important role in courtship rituals through dance, where potential partners compare movements, rhythm, confidence, as well as general appearance or the use of psychoactive substances, which may hinder synchronization. Once again, a young, mobile, athletic body

[5] This observation was confirmed to me by several clubbers, and direct observation shows that only a very small number of stable couples seem to enter clubs.

appears to be preferred, but confidence in movements and posture are crucial for successful interaction.

Props

Besides the body, few objects are typically brought onto the dance floor. Sometimes, dancers can be seen holding glasses, cans, or cigarettes, which often indicates that they are not dancing but evaluating others on the floor, or, in the case of women, that they have accepted an approach. Drinking vessels remain important props in resting areas, marking the group's territory or generically indicating the status of clubber and possibly the intentions for the evening.

Methods

The methods by which scene members establish local norms are simple. Typically, behavior is signaled by focusing the gaze on the corresponding element in the scene, and the set of simple desires is indexically identified—movement, interaction, the need for space, etc.—while acceptance or negotiation of these intentions is conducted through gaze sequences or bodily techniques. The most complex communication sequences occur on the dance floor when a dancer attempts to initiate interaction with another dancer. In such cases, gaze, body, and their techniques are employed in artful sequences over a longer period. For example, in erotic interest—an interaction almost exclusively initiated by men—communication opens with the gaze (following rules involving the number and duration of glances), followed by body movements for brief touches, and if accepted, longer touches or caresses. The final form of communication is verbal, concise (where men usually offer resources or pleasant experiences), and if this is also accepted, a couple forms, which may leave the club to continue the night elsewhere[6].

Example: Pathways through the crowd

A good example of how body and gaze techniques are used together occurs when dancers on the floor must create space to allow the flow of people to pass through—this provides a clear illustration of how norms are negotiated and materialized in an indexical manner. The act of opening a corridor is similar to ethnomethodological descriptions of pedestrian flows in major American intersections (Livingston, 1987). Once the corridor is created, it takes on a fluid reality, constantly negotiated between the boundary-dancers and the passing flow. Those who are part of the flow, in motion, remain anonymous, surrounded by the backs of the dancers. They move by looking as conspicuously as possible over the heads of everyone, toward their destination, thereby signaling that they do not wish to dance in that spot and that they are merely a temporary inconvenience. Simultaneously, they try to avoid unintentionally crossing the boundary between the dance space and the flow areas. In turn, the dancers naturally form a passageway, typically facing away from the corridor, excluding the passers-by from their category and avoiding eye contact. The corridor is opened and maintained in response to the touches of those passing

[6] The description of interaction is valid for clubs in downtown Bucharest during the period 2018–2023.

through—but this is an almost automatic action, with bodies and gazes remaining oriented toward the dance space. The boundaries hold firm when the flows are strong, yet understanding the rules governing how the passage narrows or widens rhythmically during dancing remains crucial. Of course, sometimes contact is unavoidable—a drink spills, a foot is stepped on—but aggression is not permitted in the club, nor is the expression of negative emotions: people look at each other, smile, and offer exaggerated gestures of apology—to ensure visibility—and everything passes as if nothing had happened.

Results of the ethnomethodological research and discussion

This text aimed to discuss the utility of ethnomethodology as a method for obtaining data in social spaces that pose challenges for conventional qualitative research. To this end, a specific investigation was designed in such a space—the dance floor of a nightclub. This approach produced two categories of results: on the one hand, the findings derived from the investigation of the dance floor through an ethnomethodological lens, and on the other hand, an evaluation of this investigative model's ability to produce useful data for a conventional qualitative analysis aimed at describing the social code, the ideas that govern social life—values, beliefs, or norms—or enriching the conceptual description and theory of a particular social phenomenon. The following outlines the most important aspects of the research used as an example.

The Dance Floor's normative hierarchy

The ethnomethodological study of the dance floor revealed several interesting aspects. First, the norms that produce its observable characteristics are arranged hierarchically, with negotiation occurring only at the level of norms that directly govern action and very rarely, if ever, this negotiation permeate to the background level. The general, non-negotiable norm in practice is that of positive interaction, present in all behaviors and producing derived norms. Three of these derived norms being more easily visible: the taboo against violence, including symbolic violence; the replacement of conventional norms related to flirting and eroticism with a reduced, club-specific set; and finally, a norm demanding the production and acceptance of a flat social order, akin to Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* (1969), where distinctions have only a temporary, situational, and indexical character. These three norms, which are also rarely negotiated, inform the design and execution of all actions performed by actors in the dance floor space, as well as in the other spaces of the nightclub. In line with the ethnomethodological perspective, what is negotiated, using member's methods and *membership knowledge*, are only the third-tier norms that deal with the concrete details of interactions. For example, what are the conditions that allow someone to sit on a partially occupied couch, or how many exchanges of glances are sufficient before moving to the next stage of interaction?

In terms of phenomena of interest to ethnomethodology, we can say there is a set of norms specific to the club, known by all members, norms they bring from outside the scene and which exhibit remarkable permanence and uniformity across all scenes of this type. What is negotiated is the immediate form of interaction, not the underlying ideas.

This apparent limitation or invalidation of ethnomethodological theory, which proposes a ground-up model for the formation of social order, may be a characteristic result of the club environment—and possibly other difficult arenas mentioned at the beginning of this text—spaces that do not allow for complex exchanges of ideas capable of altering deep-seated beliefs, values, or norms (leaving open the question "how did these norms come about in the first place")

The Dance Floor: a somatic, hedonic arena where women hold power

Moreover, ethnomethodological research goes beyond merely identifying the methods of producing local order and provides a valid, albeit indexical, description of the ideas governing the space and the behaviors of actors/members—this description could serve as the foundation for generalizations, with the recommendation being to study as many scenes where the phenomenon is present (Pollner & Emerson, 2007). Lastly, the researcher ultimately selects—from the almost infinite complexity of any social scene—the argument they wish to present to the public, choosing which phenomena to highlight and how to interpret them to support the argument.

For example, in the dance floor scene, a simple argument to sustain is that it is a somatic, hedonic arena, a place where erotic appeal is validated, courtship and erotic advances are greatly simplified—this being its very purpose, the goal that actors aim to achieve when accessing the scene and following its norms. However, deciphering the norms and analyzing behaviors can also yield new, seemingly paradoxical ideas, such as the observation that, in mainstream nightclubs, power belongs to women: the ability to satisfy desires, to offer access to the stakes of the space, grants power, and women, who hold a monopoly on the paths to erotic satisfaction—central to the club space—hold the greatest power to influence the concrete form of living norms, ideas, and behaviors permitted in a given context. Furthermore, since exercising and projecting power in the club depends on the capacity for communication and negotiation, women are again clearly superior to men: their bodies are more expressive, they possess a more complex language of accessories and tattoos, and, above all, they employ the magic of club makeup, which functions as an amplifier for communication through gaze. In comparison, the average man in the club is a dull, inexpressive presence, incapable of wielding the forms of power he may possess—aside from economic power, which allows him, if accepted, to offer tributes to the indisputable queens of this space, the women.

Conclusions: The utility of ethnomethodology (EM) in studies of challenging spaces

Beyond the example of ethnomethodology's application, we arrive at the fundamental question that initiated the entire research endeavor: can the data thus obtained be used alongside conventional qualitative research? The answer seems to be clearly affirmative, though with attention to the phenomenological aspects implicit in the method, which could indirectly introduce psychological or biological determinants in explaining the formation of ideas and behaviors. The process of achieving agreement on local, situated, indexical social reality using methods specified by *membership knowledge* is a real and

omnipresent phenomenon. However, its ability to quickly, substantially, and permanently alter individuals' background norms seems limited—and these background norms can be inferred from the analysis of the first-order norms. Of course, in spaces without norms, in new spaces, this process of negotiation will produce norms that may later become generalized. But in spaces entangled in the complex network of values, beliefs, and norms specific to life within a stable society, the capacity for altering foundational norms is, I believe, reduced.

Indeed, the places where such a mechanism might function and have a rapid and decisive impact on general social norms are elite's scenes— where social elites can negotiate, using etnomethods, new forms of norms, norms that can later be distributed and imposed top-down, using tested communication methods and channels, using state mechanisms to ensure their enforcement and internalization. The ethnomethodological studies of the last period also seem to emphasize the identification of the way in which externally imposed norms are accepted or modified in concrete situations with the aim of improving their form so that the intentions of the organization's management or the legislator are put as correctly and completely as possible into practice (Berardinelli et al., 2014; de Souza Bispo & Schmidt Godoy, 2012; Rusyda et al., 2021; Maynard & Heritage, 2023).

On a practical level, ethnomethodology introduces to the qualitative research toolkit a model that theoretically and practically justifies the idea that valuable data can be obtained through observation interpreted and analyzed by a single researcher possessing *membership knowledge*—the practical understanding specific to the scene under study. Moreover, data collection does not require interviews with members of the studied group, as the researcher, as a competent member of that scene, is already familiar with these common and well-known aspects. This somewhat simplifies the research process and allows the study of areas where interviews or document analysis would be impossible or produce distorted data. On the other hand, the results of ethnomethodological studies—which involve detailed descriptions and attention to the continuous negotiation of situated, indexical norms—can, at the same time, produce and justify a complete hierarchy of norms, starting with immediate ones and, in the analysis phase, continuing to background norms, values, and beliefs.

This approach is possible because, while EM emphasizes the indexical, the local, and the non-repeatability of a situation, the simple observation of the social world reveals a remarkable uniformity of norms across various arenas. The importance of the ethnomethodological approach here lies in its capacity to identify the real, current form of these higher-level norms in a specific scene—not just a theoretical discussion of how they should exist. In other words, the results of ethnomethodology not only reveal the continuous work individuals do to produce visible social order, but from this point, they can lead to the identification of mechanisms, values, beliefs, or background norms present in the studied scene, in the local social reality—structural ideas whose real form is difficult to discern through other methods.

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