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Unravelling personality: a case for reflection

In ethnomethodology, we are offered an alternative social research methodology that can overcome some of the problems that standard cognitive psychological research presents us with. Cognitive psychology, as a science of the individual, understands the person as an object that can be unproblematically investigated using the scientific methodology adopted from physics. However, in locating the individual person as the basic building block of the social, cognitive psychology faces a difficulty in how to account for the social world. By contrast, ethnomethodology understands people as cultural members and investigates the ways in which members make sense of their everyday world. Hence, since the starting point of ethnomethodology is based on the understanding of members as social beings, in the first instance, it can account for the social world in which we live. In this paper I will use ethnomethodological methods to investigate the use of personality in psychotherapeutic practice to demonstrate the usefulness of ethnomethodological research and its limits. I will suggest that phenomenology has been surpassed too quickly by ethnomethodology as a result of the mistaken understanding that it is mentalistic. I will show that phenomenology's main concern is to investigate the ground of our knowledge claims by pointing out that our human capacity to reflect upon the world is central to understanding the world in which we live. Following from this insight, I will argue that neither ethnomethodology nor cognitive psychology can account for the ground upon which their proponents make their knowledge claims because neither can account for our human capacity to reflect.