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Goffman, Garfinkel, and Games

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This is a note about the relationship between the sociologies of Garfinkel and of Goffman. Although this note was prompted by Denzin's (1990) article on Garfinkel, my purpose is to deflect attention from that article because I believe it distorts the concerns that Garfinkel (1967) formulates in the chapter on "Agnes" the transsexual. Therefore I will revisit the Agnes chapter on its own terms because, despite the "classical" stature of *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, important aspects of those studies have been neglected, as shown by a passing comment of Denzin's (to be quoted below). Denzin's comment will serve as a springboard for clarifying how a major difference between Garfinkel and Goffman, two great sociologists of everyday life, explicates a problem in social theory more generally. That problem involves incorporating temporality as an element of social theorizing (see Giddens 1984, 1987).

Because ethnomethodology is concerned with the phenomena of ordinary, mundane, concerted human activity, it would appear close to Goffman's (1964, 1983) preoccupation with the "neglected situation" and its "interaction order." (Imputing a close relationship between Garfinkel and Goffman is probably symptomatic of a more general tendency to subsume both ethnomethodology and Goffmanian sociology as forms of symbolic interactionism.) Indeed, the "passing comment" to which I referred is Denzin's suggestion that ethnomethodology fits a "game model of interaction" (1990, p. 204). If true, this characterization of ethnomethodology would make the field close to Goffman's dramaturgy, which does fit such a model. In fact, however, Garfinkel's study of Agnes establishes something very distinct. Among its other contributions, the study develops an important critique of the game as a metaphor for actual social interaction. This critique generalizes to social theory in which games and rules and "rational choice" define the parameters of face-to-face behavior.

In Goffman's (1983) view, people spend most of their daily lives in each other's presence; therefore such social "situatedness" should have consequences. The domain of copresent interaction is a ceremonial one, organized by elaborate rituals that are not a mere effect of "social structure" traditionally conceived, whether the referent of such structure is social relationships, informal groupings, formal institutions, or formal categorizations such as age, ethnicity, gender, and class. As an example, Goffman (1983) refers to a "contact" ritual, such as any service encounter where customers may form a queue as they await their turn at being helped. Although the queue could be organized according to externally structured attributes of involved parties (e.g., age, race, gender, or class), normal queuing "blocks" or filters out the effects of such variables in favor of an egalitarian, first-come, first-served ordering principle.

Now Goffman (1983, p. 15) suggests that there are complexities to the interaction order, especially in the ways in which parties can covertly breach and thereby exploit its "normal forms." Actors do this to display their attitudes toward and to define their "selves" in relation to the society's conventions (Goffman 1964), and even to express otherwise irrelevant social structural identities (Goffman 1983, p. 15). Thus, of crucial

importance to understanding the difference between ethnomethodology and Goffman's sociology is that the interaction order consists of "systems of enabling conventions, in the sense of ground rules for a game, the provisions of a traffic code, or the syntax of a language" (Goffman 1983, p. 5). Rules are ordinarily upheld, but if violations occur, they do not threaten the game or the language as much as they serve as resources for accomplishing the very projects that adherence itself involves, including the definition of self and the creation or maintenance of social meaning. Therefore Goffman's actors do not range between naive conformity and blatant rule breaking. Rather, their orientation to the interaction order is a deeply moral one,¹ resting on commitments that in one way or another (through adherence or violation) enable the self to emerge and be preserved (see Rawls 1987, pp. 42–44).

In all this discussion, Goffman's emphasis nevertheless remains on the "rules of the game" and on using them in various ways for purposes of establishing social meanings. Against Goffman's view, Garfinkel (1967) argues, in his chapter on "Agnes," that there are vast differences between games and everyday life. For instance, games are public enterprises with objective and calculable outcomes that are not dependent on private definitions. Furthermore, while playing a game, players suspend their ordinary assumptions about the world. They can choose to leave the game, however, and to reinvoke ordinary life. Furthermore, the rules of a game are neither discovered nor altered over the course of play. They are known from the outset and stay intact until the game is complete. In actual life, on the other hand, parties are embedded in courses of action that present them with unanticipated circumstances and contingencies which must be managed in real time as a "texture of relevances" (Garfinkel 1967, pp. 166–67). This is to say that actors, as they are within social situations, may have to learn what is required of them to uphold the environment's normal forms. Their sense of the social environment, including its being "rule-governed" and therefore capable of strategic management, depends upon adhering to the taken-for-granted elements or *a priori* set of routines that provide for a sensible social environment in the first place.

From a Goffmanian standpoint, a transsexual's social task would be to manage impressions strategically so that others would see her as a normal female. She could do this, perhaps, through imaginative rehearsal of expected interactional episodes, through deliberate anticipation of the problems she might meet, and through calculating how to employ strategies that would handle these problems. Yet as Agnes actually sought to achieve the visibility of her "gendered" status, she found that things did not work in that way. She regularly encountered deviations from her expectations and anticipations. Moreover, her success at "passing" did not derive from abstract and normative criteria of impression management, such as "if you do that, then this will happen." Instead, every moment could be replete with the unremitting necessity of assessing, according to the actual, singular, situated responses of others, just how her actions and experiences accorded with the status of the natural, normal female she sought to be. For instance, it was no guarantee of success in passing that Agnes make herself available to other females (such as her boyfriend's mother) to discuss

¹ Individuals can "break" interactional rules even while upholding the morality implicit in them. Goffman observes:

Given that a rule exists against seeking out a stranger's eyes, seeking can then be done as a means of making a pickup or as a means of making oneself known to someone one expects to meet but is unacquainted with. Similarly, given that staring is an invasion of information preserve, a stare can then be used as a warranted negative sanction against someone who has misbehaved—the misbehavior providing and ensuring a special significance to overlong examination (1971, p. 61, Note 59).

“female” things such as dressing, shopping, and cooking. Instead, Agnes learned in the very midst of those discussions what she needed to know in order to carry them off as “any” female would.

The chapter on Agnes contains other illustrations of the in-course mastering of strategic action, but the point is this: everyday life is not a game. It is not a matter of using preestablished skills and “methods” to outwit other players. If wit is important, it is because, in the unfolding of concerted endeavors, parties must stay alert to what the action-so-far teaches them is required next to realize some scenic feature of the setting, where any feature is also subject to derealization or where one’s status as a member of society is subject to question, if one cannot muster proper procedure. Unlike games, that is, real life offers no time out; nor is there even a period of relaxation while one contemplates alternative strategies. An actor’s stopping and contemplating renders just that feature, which is in the course of being brought to objectivity, vulnerable to being unconsummated. Again, the hesitating actor might be seen as incompetent because other members will read his or her lapse as morally accountable. Thus it is extremely important for studies of everyday life to analyze the “in-course” accomplishment of everything that paradoxically confronts members as preorganized social facticities, including the pervasive, dichotomous genders of human beings.

If ethnomethodological theorizing shares with Goffman a concern for analysis of the intrinsic organization of everyday life, therefore, it incorporates in addition a sensitivity to the contingencies that actors experience according to the temporal unfolding of actual events. Although remedying efforts are afoot (for discussion see Boden 1990, pp. 199–201; Clayman 1989; Giddens 1987, Ch. 6), social theory has long neglected the temporality of everyday life, perhaps in part because of an indifference to the writings of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and others. This is particularly true of rational choice theory (Coleman 1990), to take one current example in which game theory is the basic metaphor, and in which individual actors, on the basis of disembodied cost-benefit analyses and abstract interests, “play” in the market or other systems of free and reasoned exchange. One of the nuggets of sociological wisdom to be found in Garfinkel’s chapter on Agnes is that if human beings are rational at all, it is because they are practical, and practical rationality involves, among other things, managing mundane affairs according to intrinsic and embodied durations.

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