Introduction of Harold Garfinkel for the Cooley-Mead Award

Douglas W. Maynard


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To introduce Harold Garfinkel, the 1995 recipient of the Cooley-Mead Award for lifetime contributions to the intellectual and scientific advancement of sociological social psychology, I wish to unearth a fundamental connection between the fields of social psychology and ethnomethodology. It might be said, to put the matter succinctly, that social psychology might well have been ethnomethodology. To establish this point, I will go back to gestalt theory in social psychology\(^1\) and divide the field in two ways.

The gestalt phenomenon is familiar enough: the whole is more than its parts. Following an observation of Ernst Mach, Christian von Ehrenfels called this phenomenon to the attention of psychologists in 1890, over 100 years ago. A favorite example was music, which we presumably receive as a series of sensory elements that we call notes (reflecting particular external stimuli such as the vibration of air). What we hear, however, is a melody that is in some sense greater than the notes on which it is based. The riddle is: How could this be? Since the whole is more than the parts, where does the rest of this whole come from?

Here I want to describe two different perspectives on this question. As I do this, conjure in your minds, if you will, the famous Rubin picture that oscillates between being two faces and being a goblet. The first social psychology, which I will call *stimuli-based* social psychology, features what is known as the constancy hypothesis. When we initially see a face and then a goblet, sensory stimuli—for example, the lines that form the borders of one figure or the other—stay the same and become rearranged in a new pattern either because we did not notice some sensations in the original perception or because our subjective processes introduced new sensations to add to the initial ones. For example, Benussi differentiated initial sensory facts from facts that emerge from extrasensuous psychical or mental operations as introduced to the perceptual process from outside; together these two kinds of facts constitute a given gestalt. The constancy hypothesis is called by that name because of a supposition that sensory stimuli are constant across oscillations in perceptual gestals. A further feature of this conception of gestalt is that it maintains a distinction between appearance and reality. What we see is an appearance; its reality is behind it in the form of noticed and unnoticed sensations as well as insensate minded acts.

Koffka, Köhler, and others who succeeded von Ehrenfels and Benussi proposed something different about gestalt phenomena. They dismissed the constancy hypothesis, arguing that the parts of the gestalt are not independent sensory data but derive from their relationships with the total structure. When the perceiver no longer sees faces and comes to apprehend a goblet in the Rubin picture, there is a corresponding change of constituents. Instead of being constant across perceptions, that is, the stimuli are phenomenally different and are remade for each and every perception, each and every gestalt. Furthermore, they are remade not according to outside factors but according to dynamic processes and actions within the perceptual stream of the observer. I call this form of gestalt theory *experience-based*. As contrasted with stimuli-based gestalt theory, the proposal is that nothing—no parts, no elements, no primary stimuli—*nothing* lies behind what is directly and immediately apprehended in intentional activities. Accordingly there is no distinction between reality (constituent parts) and appearance (gestalt), for the very ways in which we experience the totality also represent the source for isolating its constituents in relation to that totality.

Stimuli-based and experience-based gestalt theories have coexisted historically within the field of social psychology. To give just one example from the psychological side of social psychology, the line of work established in Kurt Lewin’s topological field theory, contin-

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\(^1\) In the following account, I draw on Köhler (1947) and most especially Gurwitsch (1966). Because this is a written version of an oral introduction, I dispense with notating the points at which I draw on these sources.
ued in Fritz Heider’s person perception theory, and culminating in Harold Kelley’s attribution theory exhibits stimuli-based and experience-based gestalt theories in rather uncomfortable juxtaposition. In the end, the stronger tendency in this tradition is toward stimuli-based social psychology, as when Heider discusses “distal” stimuli that a person may present, which are mediated according to the perceiver’s outwardly determined but internalized meanings. The result is a proximal sense of the perceived person being powerful and belligerent, on the one hand, or meek and passive, on the other. In perception, while original stimuli remain constant, proximal senses of the “same” person vary according to relatively inert mediating, preformulated meanings.

If stimuli-based social psychology has been stronger in terms of influence, I am also saying that experience-based social psychology nevertheless has been present in the field historically. The latter social psychology, in fact, has the potential for becoming what Garfinkel, in his Cooley-Mead address, refers to as an incommensurate, asymmetric alternate to the former formal analytic investigations. Experience-based social psychology is adumbrated in subterranean suggestions of Lewin and Heider that point toward inner rather than outer determination of whole perceptual objects, or in Aron Gurwitsch’s brilliant and overlooked works on gestalt psychology, which discuss functional signification as the self-generating source of gestalt perception:

The functional significance of each constituent derives from the total structure of the Gestalt, and by virtue of its functional significance, each constituent contributes towards this total structure and organization. Both formulations are but two expressions of the same phenomenal state of affairs. (1964:146)

And earlier than Gurwitsch, scholars such as Köhler and Koffka were arguing that there was a self-generating and indigenous organization of dynamic processes intrinsic to gestalt systems. These alternate formulations are ones with which ethnomethodology has declared its compatibility. Here is my point:

Had social psychology followed early insights about the self-generating and indigenous grounding of gestalts, it might well have eventuated in ethnomethodology.

I am not saying that there could have been ethnomethodology before Harold Garfinkel, however. It is he who, drawing on sources such as Parsons’s structural functionalism, Husserlian and Schutzian phenomenology, and Wittgensteinian ordinary language philosophy, is responsible for excavating and giving new life to experience-based social psychology, going a step beyond gestalt perception and respecifying the holistic phenomena of everyday life as something extant in the orderly concerted practices of actors in their actual, lived situations. Indeed, Garfinkel (1988) has proposed that there is “orderliness in the plenum,” which is a reference to the fullness of contingent detail that resides in mundane experience. The proposal that there is orderliness in the plenum means that the structuring of everyday society does not derive from anything outside, such as constant and objective stimuli or from mediations such as preconstituted and internalized meanings. Rather, the organization of everyday interaction is due to participants’ own contingently embodied activities and actions as those arise in and as the concrete plenitude of lived experience.

It is an understatement to say that Garfinkel’s ideas about the indigenous orderliness of activities and actions, as articulated in the classic Studies in Ethnomethodology (1967) and subsequent publications, have had an enormous influence in social psychology and sociology. When scholars of the twenty-first century write the history of twentieth century sociology, Harold Garfinkel will stand out as one of the towering figures. Presently a large company of ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts (Heritage 1984; Maynard and Clayman 1991) are pursuing a variety of in-depth studies at universities and colleges in this country too numerous to name. Internationally, ethnomethodology may be the most widespread of sociologies, with collections of investigators in Canada, western Europe (notably

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2 For an earlier statement regarding the “incommensurable asymmetric altervativity” represented by ethnomethodology in relation to classic sociological studies of order, see Garfinkel and Wieder (1992).

3 Indeed, as early as his PhD dissertation, titled The Perception of the Other, Garfinkel (1952:590–96) argued, in regard to person perception, a position consistent with what I call experience-based social psychology and contradicting the constancy hypothesis and stimuli-based social psychology.
England, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden), Eastern Europe (Hungary and Poland), Japan, Korea, and thus all over the globe. A bibliography of ethnmethodological works published in 1990 (Fehr and Stetson 1990) contained more than 1,400 entries in six languages, and the field has continued to grow since.

Ethnomethodology also has emerged from the university and has made its way prominently into medical environments. And by way of a set of pioneering scholars in corporations such as Xerox and AT&T, ethnomethodology has helped develop the study of human-machine and other interactions in business settings, including airline terminals, telephone service centers, assembly-line work stations, and the like. Outside the company of ethnomethodologists, the influence has also been very hardy, not only in social psychology but in theory (Bourdieu, Collins, Habermas, and Giddens are a few of the more prominent figures who deal with ethnomethodological issues), in the sociology of social problems, in the sociology of science (Garfinkel, Lynch, and Livingston 1981; Lynch 1993), in disability studies, and just possibly in any subarea of sociology that we would care to name.

I’ve said some things about the ideas and influence of ethnomethodology. Given the occasion, permit me one anecdote about the man. Late in the fall semester of 1989, we had invited Harold Garfinkel to give a series of lectures in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin. When he arrived in Madison, it was a cold December day. I picked Harold up at the airport in the late afternoon, we joined some people for dinner, and then I brought him to Union South, where he was going to stay for the duration of his visit. By this time it was perhaps 10 or 10:30 at night, very dark, and it was cold and beginning to snow. Harold got out of the car, grabbed a very large briefcase that I’ve seen him carry everywhere, filled with manuscripts, notes, lectures, materials for demonstrations, pens, pencils, felt pens, and other paraphernalia, and he hoisted this heavy case onto a foldable luggage cart in order to pull it up the steps and into the Union. Meanwhile, as I was taking his other piece of luggage out of my car trunk, some young man walked up to Harold, declaring how wonderful this luggage tote seemed to be.

Now I have no idea where this person came from or what he was he was up to. I mean, I don’t know if he was from a place where they had only recently discovered luggage, and the idea of a cart was yet to enter his culture, or what. The carrier that Harold was using was the sort of object that to one’s untaught eye is like hundreds that you see when walking through any major airport, and would hardly merit any special attention. So I was surprised at this inquiry. However, I have subsequently thought that if there were a cosmic Harold Garfinkel, and he wanted to assign a payback to the real Garfinkel for the famous demonstrations he carried out in his early career, then maybe this person would have been the ideal vehicle, exclaiming to and questioning Harold about a most ordinary and otherwise unnoticeable-seeming piece of equipment in the midst, moreover, of an impending snowstorm. Harold, delightfully, was taken in. He stood there, fielding inquiries, exploring the tote’s properties, telling the young man where he had gotten it (I believe he said it was a mail-order place in Chicago), and saying that surely the man could get one too.

As they were approaching an exchange of addresses and telephone numbers to carry this matter further, I stood there, transfixed. Partly, I was concerned. It had been a long day, it was getting late, Harold had come from the warm climate in Los Angeles; he was now standing in the cold and snow; he had lectures to give the next day; he needed to get inside—to get warm, registered, and settled in his room. On the other hand, I was thinking to myself, how emblematic and characteristic. This is a man whose professional inquiry is into the everyday world and, who, in his own life, has a marvelously intact sense of wonder and awe about the most taken-for-granted matters. Never mind that it’s late, he’s tired, it’s cold, it’s snowing, he’s got a long day tomorrow; for he enters the moment with the fullness of his attention and intellect when something in the ordinary world is up for appreciation, and he attempts to lay bare just what and wherefrom that something is. This orientation to explicating the ordinary in radical sociological detail is anything but ordinary in another sense. We might say, indeed, that it is his extraordinary orientation which is his gift in a professional sense to sociology in general and to social psychology in particular. We are privileged to recognize Professor Garfinkel with the
Cooley-Mead Award for his monumental contributions to the field.

REFERENCES


Douglas W. Maynard was a student of Harold Garfinkel’s student, Don H. Zimmerman, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is now a professor of sociology at Indiana University, Bloomington. His current research draws on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis in studies of good-news and bad-news events and their relation to the structure of everyday life. He is also examining interaction in the survey interview, attempting to comprehend the ways in which the surveyable society garners its abstractly posed characteristics in and through the textual artifacts that interviewers and respondents assemble collaboratively in their concrete joint activities.