Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Studies in Ethnomethodology. by Harold Garfinkel
James S. Coleman


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-1224%28196802%2933%3A1%3C126%3ASIE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1

American Sociological Review is currently published by American Sociological Association.
reasoning as other sociologists-in-institutions—participant observation, interviews, coding, sampling, and statistical inference—Garfinkel and his followers are finding out a good deal about how people plan and explain their own behavior and how they figure out what other people are doing and saying. If there were less effort in Garfinkel’s pages to account for Garfinkel’s own ethnomethodology, it would be easier to understand the methods of ensuring accountability which are used by non-Garfinkels.

ANTHONY F. C. WALLACE
Dept. of Anthropology,
University of Pennsylvania

One may learn what ethnomethodology is about by reading Chapter 2 of this book. The chapter illustrates the essentials of the approach through a number of projects carried out by Garfinkel’s students. In one case, the students each engaged an acquaintance in conversation and insisted that the acquaintance clarify in great detail all that he said. In a second, students were instructed to observe and record, as if they were strangers, an hour’s activity in their own household without invoking their background knowledge of the participants. In a third case, they were instructed to act as strangers in their households, refusing to engage in the personal relationships they held with household members but maintaining a polite reserve. In another, each was asked to move his face increasingly close to that of some partner in conversation, to the point where noses nearly touched. In still another, each student was to start a game of tic-tac-toe, and after the naive opponent had made his first move, the student would erase the mark and re-place it elsewhere.

All these examples are designed to illuminate the “common background understandings” that exist in all relationships. The shock or bewilderment or anger experienced by the naive subjects when their expectations were violated shows well the extensiveness of these background understandings. This appears to be a major part of the general program of ethnomethodology: to uncover the unstated, implicit, common-sense perceptions held and acted upon by participants in a situation, often through disrupting the fabric of that situation. The program is, according to Garfinkel, a development of the work of the social philosopher, Alfred Schutz.

This said, it would be fortunate if the reader could leave the book (or, rather, non-book: it is actually a disconnected collection of papers, some previously published, others not) after having read only Chapter 2. For the same point can be made only so many times: beyond that, one must look for its fruits, either in theory or research. And Garfinkel simply fails to generate any insights at all from the approach. His other chapters constitute unrelated excursions into research, in some cases with disastrous results. Perhaps the program would be more fertile in the hands of someone more carefully observant or more analytically powerful, but it is strangely sterile here. An overview of some of the chapters that do report on empirical research will indicate the nature and extent of this sterility.

Chapter 3 discusses the “documentary method” of interpretation, used by members of society in interpreting their own behavior as well as by sociologists. The documentary method, as Garfinkel defines it, is one in which separate observations are taken as indicators of an underlying pattern, a pattern that derives from the whole sequence of observations as well as from knowledge or hunches about what the actor means by his action. Garfinkel argues that the sociologist, whether interviewer, coder, analyst, or whatever, must use this method in interpreting the responses of actors or in fitting together disparate pieces of information to arrive at a coherent and consistent interpretation of a situation.

But two things are confounded in the “documentary method.” One is simply that in any discipline observing behavior and making inferences, the development of a coherent “theory of” or “explanation of” or even “description of” the behavior requires use of a variety of observations to form, test, and modify the emergent explanation. As anyone who has carried out quantitative social research knows, this is just as true when data are quantitative as when they are not. Nearly always, the quantitative data are used to support qualitative inferences and as a contribution to an interpretation, not in the rigid fashion imagined by Garfinkel (and attempted by him in his abortive chapter seven). The second element in the documentary method is also well-accepted by sociologists: the idea that verstehen, or understanding from the actor’s point of view, is necessary for many types of sociological analysis. (I say many types rather than all types, because a considerable portion of sociology is concerned with processes that do not operate through the conscious intent of an actor, e.g., the effects of constituent heterogeneity on the types of Congressmen elected. There is another large portion of sociology as well in which the very question of whether the processes operate through consciously intended action is itself problematic.) We can accept both these elements of the “documentary method” as being true and important, but hardly new. In what sense, then, is the “documentary
"Method" really a method at all, if it consists merely of confusedly recognizing and using these two principles? Perhaps it does consist of more, but if so, Garfinkel has not shown what. Instead, the chapter is largely designed to demonstrate the documentary method by describing an experiment (in the broadest sense of the term) which appears to me quite irrelevant to the method itself.

The curious substitution of demonstration for research is not peculiar to this chapter; it is evident throughout the book. Garfinkel appears unmoved by the pertinent intellectual questions, but instead designs his experiments to make a point. These demonstrations may be excellent pedagogical devices, but there is nothing whatsoever problematic about their outcome—or at least nothing that Garfinkel observes. Here, for example, the experimental subjects consisted of students, self-selected on the basis of "personal problems" on which they wanted advice. The student described his problem, then asked the experimenter a question concerning it that could be answered by a simple "yes" or "no." The experimenter gave a yes or no according to a table of random numbers. The student, who trusted the experimenter to be giving answers based on the content of the questions, then made further comments in an aside to a tape recorder on his problem and the experimenter's response. This went on for ten sets of questions, answers, and trusting comments. Garfinkel states that the student comments were based upon the "documentary method" as a way of discovering the experimenter's meaning; he argues that the method is similarly involved when sociologists infer meaning from the behavior or verbal responses of individuals. But the examples suggest that this is hardly so. The student was engaged in a monologue concerning his problem, and his questions concerned whether he should act in a given direction. Obviously, he had reasons for taking the action and reasons for not taking it, or the action would not have been problematic to him in the first place. Consequently when he receives a random yes or no, he continues the monologue (in the examples provided) as if it were a dialogue between his own reasons pro and con.

The experimenter's answers were "meaningful" because they corresponded to one of these two sets of reasons, not because they fit with a set of coherent, consistent inferences the student was making about the experimenter. In contrast, the sociologist's attempt to understand the "meaning" of a respondent's answers as a disinterested but culture-sharing observer is a very different kind of activity. The sociologist is continually searching for the respondent's motivation and definition of the situation, a matter which, for Garfinkel's experimental subjects, was incidental to their preoccupation with their own problems and motives.

Chapter 4 is a small chapter on decision-making rules that jurors claim to use in their deliberations. As elsewhere in the book, there is little or no good observation and analysis of the way jurors actually make a decision, but instead a reasonable though unsupported claim that a juror "alters the grounds of his decisions" as he goes along, learning the juror's role in the process. Again there is an absence of the cumulative interweaving of observation and inference that produces a coherent and documented thesis in good qualitative studies. A principal point appears to be that jurors' decisions, and by extension, decision-making in everyday life "would thereby have, as a critical feature, the decision-maker's task of justifying a course of action." But note that the evidence for the jurors' post hoc justifications comes from interviews in which the jurors were asked, in effect, to justify their actions. The authors make the elementary error of introducing an extrinsic stimulus into the situation, and then analyzing the resulting response as if they had not intervened at all. They report no evidence that such justification was a "critical task" in the absence of the demands they themselves imposed upon the jurors. Thus, the chapter's conclusion becomes merely that "reasons" given by an individual for his action are those that provide a legitimate explanation for the action to the hearer. This is certainly a time-honored sociological principle, and I doubt that many first-year graduate students would regard it as new.

Chapter 5 is based on a series of interviews with a male transvestite, who at age 12 began to take estrogens and thus succeeded in giving himself the secondary sex characteristics of a girl. From age 17 on, he lived as a female. He successfully fooled both Garfinkel and the medical specialists (with the exception of one suspicious urologist) into believing that the estrogens were internally produced. Consequently the physicians found a rationale that they needed in 1959 to justify surgical alteration of his genitalia from male to female. The chapter was written before either Garfinkel or the physicians had found out the truth, which appears in an appendix at the end of the book. Hence the chapter is based on the erroneous assumption that nature had faced this person with a choice between being male or female, thus making impossible the fulfillment of either role. It is interesting incidentally, that in this case the patient turned the tables on the trusting researchers and made them the deceived subjects, acting to fulfill his ends.

Because I have little experience in this area, I decided to ask the aid of John Money, a medical psychologist in the departments of psychiatry
and pediatrics at Johns Hopkins. Money has perhaps as great experience as any practitioner in studying the behavior of genuine hermaphrodites and transsexuals. He commented initially on the absence of any clinical write-up by a physician to accompany the social-psychological case study—as if the case could be wholly understood on the basis of interviews between the patient and a social psychologist who, like naive survey researchers, accepts the respondent’s opinions and descriptions as fact beyond questioning. But Money also made several comments concerning this particular case, the history of which he had already known. First, he pointed out that such sexual deviates, who have no identifiable physiological departures from a single sex but want to undergo a sex change, are among the most articulate and persuasive persons he has met. Just as in this case, they are able to convince their hearers why their histories should not be investigated (e.g., why the mother should not be contacted), and why the only true version of the situation is their own.

Secondly, however, a genuine hermaphrodite—with morphologically mixed sex—which this boy pretended to be, is most usually reticent and hesitant about the physiological accident that befell him and, in some cases, may be electively mute on the subject of sex and any related topic. In short, the genuine hermaphrodite’s behavior is ordinarily the exact opposite of this boy’s. This leads to a third point. In view of such behavioral deviation of this case from what is usual for hermaphrodites and because it appeared to represent a singular departure from all known physiological variations in that there was no anatomical evidence of hormonal abnormality in the fetal development, the investigators should have been especially sensitized to the possibility that they were being duped and certainly should have taken the minimal precautions of telephoning the mother or interviewing the male friend.

Apart from these points, Garfinkel missed an excellent opportunity to stand outside and observe the relation between the patient and the physicians, as well as the hospital decision-making process in which both patient and physicians used each other for their own purposes, with the patient slowly convincing the staff that surgery was justifiable. Had Garfinkel not been trapped into the confidence game, the case would undoubtedly have been fascinating. It may well have become evident that here, as in most confidence games, the victim cooperated in his own delusion, hesitating to raise questions that might destroy the validity of what appeared to be such an excellent first case for a new medical program in the organization. If Garfinkel had truly uncovered the implicit background understandings of the relationship, it might have been remarkably good social psychology, instead of a colossal deception.

In additional ways, this case shows most glaringly some of the defects of ethnomethodology itself. Garfinkel (along with his medical colleagues) defined the situation wholly in terms of the definition offered him by the patient. In insisting that the actor’s definition of the situation is meaningful, Garfinkel erred in accepting that definition as the only one, and of becoming so personally involved in the relationship that he could no longer stand outside it, could no longer view the world of the actor except through the actor’s own eyes.

But even if the performance had not been a deception, Garfinkel’s analysis raises serious questions at a more elementary level. Although it is unclear just what he is trying to show in this case or what social-psychological point he is trying to make, he argues in one place as follows: People like this patient find themselves in untenable positions because of the powerful mores of society that make it illegitimate to change sexes or to be of intermediate sex. The powerful hand of “society” is anthropomorphically invoked: “Thereby societies exercise close controls over the ways in which the sex composition of their own populations are constituted and changed.” (p. 116) But the evidence here suggests a different and simpler social mechanism by which biological sexuality is further polarized socially. Males and females stand in a pervasive functional complimentarity. A male needs a female to fulfill his sexual interests and to act as a spouse in everyday life; a female needs a male for the same purposes. Complementarity even exists in the social-psychological aspects of the role relationship, e.g., when the male expects to be dominant and the female submissive. Whenever the ordinary everyday expectations are not met, then the usual complementarity cannot obtain, and the interests of one or both parties are thwarted. Not only is it difficult to establish a relationship, but it is thereby difficult to gain one’s ends. In this case, a transvestite was unable to realize his ends in role relationships, and it was this which led to the deception of doctors in order to obtain surgery. It was not the moral weight of society that upset the relationship with the friend, but rather that the relationship itself was threatened. According to Garfinkel’s report, the times that were bad for the patient were when it was impossible to fulfill a male friend’s sexual expectations, thus frustrating the patient’s own goals, and when the patient, seen as a female with male genitalia by a female relative the same age, was regarded as an unfair competitor. (This, incidently, should have been a clue that the whole enterprise was a fake, because it is ordinarily transvestites, not hermaph-
roditites, who are seen by normally sexed persons as predators using unfair strategies.) Thus, it was in specific situations, when the mixed characteristics violated expectations and thwarted the patient's own ends, that problems arose. I would suggest that anguish was caused by the frustration of pervasive role complementarity rather than by the demands of society (such as those listed on pages 122–128) or by the hand of some omnipresent moral order. The very evidence of the chapter itself suggests that the patient had internalized very little of that moral order and was hardly upset by it.

It may be that in denouncing the weight of the moral order, Garfinkel had another point in mind. He may implicitly have been arguing: Why don't the laws of society allow people to have the sex role they find most congenial? If this is the argument, then he seriously weakened it by basing it on a biological assumption which was subsequently proved false—the assumption that nature had faced this person with morphologically mixed sex characteristics. The argument is as valid in the absence of biological deviations as in their presence; and to use the biological deviation as a false front for the argument is to allow the argument to be destroyed on false grounds.

In all of this, I found myself wondering why the chapter was included in the first place since, quite apart from its substance, I could find no serious contribution to "ethnomethodology." There are passing references to "game-analyzable" and "non-game-analyzable" behavior, but only a cursory discussion of game behavior itself. Garfinkel lists some appropriate elementary points about games, but in contrast to the belabored points elsewhere in the book, these occupy only one paragraph. There is no indication of how to recognize when behavior is "game-analyzable," nor any indication of what is gained through such analysis. If it is useful to analyze behavior in a game perspective (as I believe it is), then the analysis must be careful to extract that usefulness and not merely refer to it in passing. I have studied these matters at some length and would like to see sociologists devote further serious treatment to games as a contribution to the methodology of their use. I found no such treatment here. In sum, this chapter appears to be not only an ethnomethodological disaster in itself but also evidence of the more general inadequacies of ethnomethodology.

Chapter 6 is based upon the discovery that the records of a psychiatric clinic contain systematic deficiencies, deficiencies uncovered while seeking to use the records for other research. The chapter describes the organizational sources of the problem; for example, the medical staff regards the case history not as a potential document for research, but as a "reconstructable record of transactions between patients and clinic personnel." It is, of course, useful to recognize such matters as related to record-keeping, but the contribution could have been made in a page, or possibly two. On the other hand, if Garfinkel had intended to distill such observations to yield something new about organizational structure, it might well have taken the full chapter. But here again, he is interested in demonstrating a general point, not in carrying out a specific analysis.

Chapter 7 first offers a review of studies concerning the process by which patients are selected in psychiatric outpatient clinics; it then attempts a quantitative study of such processes in the UCLA clinic. The review of previous research is poor for it ends by rejecting everything in all studies, rather than attempting to build from the literature. One gets almost no information about the cumulative results—and conflicts—of the reviewed studies. In any event, this is followed by a simple methodological point which takes six pages and a "statistical appendix" to describe, using language like "lattice," "domain," etc. The point is that some of these studies attempted to examine selective bias (by social class, for example) by comparing statistically the proportion of those from each social class that terminated after the first step, the proportion that terminated after the second step, etc.; instead, the correct comparison is made by obtaining the proportion, at each step, of those remaining at that step, rather than of the total entering population.

In embarking upon his own quantitative analysis, Garfinkel asks two questions: Are there differences in selected social characteristics of those who survived at each step in the contact-and-treatment process? And what criteria were used to select patients for treatment? The analysis moves through tedious and belabored stages to solutions which are, here as elsewhere, trivial. In addition, there are conceptual errors, which I mention only because they are more easily isolable from the morass of words, not because they differ from the general level of analysis. But the most pervasive and fundamental problem is by now familiar: Garfinkel never seems interested in the intellectual questions—in what the correlates of selection really are, how they may differ in the UCLA clinic from others, how they may differ at different stages of the selection process, and how they may derive from the nature of the process. Instead of seeking to understand what is happening, he is more interested in the mechanics of hypothesis-testing and in setting up rigid logical or mathematical schemes. Some of the more specific technical errors are these:
1. Use of a variable (sex) which was uncorrelated with the dependent variable (survival at each stage) for correlating against non-response on other items to give evidence that the elimination of non-respondents did not bias the results. The lack of correlation between sex and non-response on a given item, as demonstrated by Garfinkel, tells nothing about the bias introduced by non-response.

2. An elementary error in the use of statistical inference: instead of using a non-significant \( \chi^2 \) only to reject the hypothesis of selective bias, it is used to accept an hypothesis of no selective bias, as embodied in this "Rule": "Reduce the survivors of the nth step of some fraction while holding the ratios of the persons on the characteristic invariant to the size reduction." In fact, 23% of those aged 16-20 survived the first contact, compared to 41%, 39%, 44%, and 43% for other age groups. But because a \( \chi^2 \) test on the table as a whole shows that this distribution could have occurred by chance between 5 and 10% of the time, Garfinkel then accepts the hypothesis that the selection at this stage is independent of age. The error can lead to ridiculous results: if Garfinkel had sampled two cases out of five rather than one out of five from his original population, and if the results had been identical to these, he would have reversed his inference and said that selection is not independent of age.

3. Confusion between the statistical correlation of observed differences between survivors and persons terminated, and possible factors used in termination decisions. In fact, at one point Garfinkel discusses at great length (see pages 242-253) possible decision processes on the part of the clinic personnel in selecting patients at each stage (assuming in all cases that the clinic personnel, rather than the prospective patient, controlled the termination), concluding that it is impossible to determine the selection factors from the data. The data are simply statistical correlates of selection, such as age and sex. Obviously, one needs more direct information about the interactions that occurred between clinic personnel and prospective patients to make inferences about the selection factors themselves. In this case as in many others, Garfinkel emerges with a reasonable but trivial conclusion, here after twelve pages.

4. Failure to distinguish, either in data or discussion, the source of termination by separating his identified stages into those terminated at the interview and those self-selectedly terminated by the patient's failure to show up at the next stage. The glaring case of the fourth stage (which is wholly the failure to show up) was not treated, nor was the distinctive character of this stage noted.

In short, this chapter is another major disaster, combining the rigidities of the most mathematically enraptured technician with the technical confusions and errors of the soft clinician, and without the insights or the technical competence of the creative and trained sociologist.

Finally, Chapter 8 attempts to indicate what sociologists might mean, or ought to mean, by the term "rationality." Garfinkel lists fourteen "behaviors" (by which he apparently means properties of action) as aspects of rationality, and he states that the last four of them, are characteristic only of scientific endeavor and not of the "rational behavior" of the subjects of social theories. These four properties of action are:

11. Compatibility of ends-means relationships with formal logic.
13. Clarity and distinctness "for its own sake."
14. Compatibility of the definition of the situation with scientific knowledge.

I think it is useful to make the general point that the social theorist's definition of rationality on the part of an actor must be based upon the actor's state of knowledge and the actor's perception of the means-ends relation. But this having been said, the chapter provides us with little more that is of use. Once again, Garfinkel elaborates very greatly points which are so commonplace that they would appear banal if stated in straightforward English. As it is, there is an extraordinarily high ratio of reading time to information transfer, so that the banality is not directly apparent upon a casual reading.

JAMES S. COLEMAN

Johns Hopkins University