

# *Melvin Pollner: A View from the Suburbs*

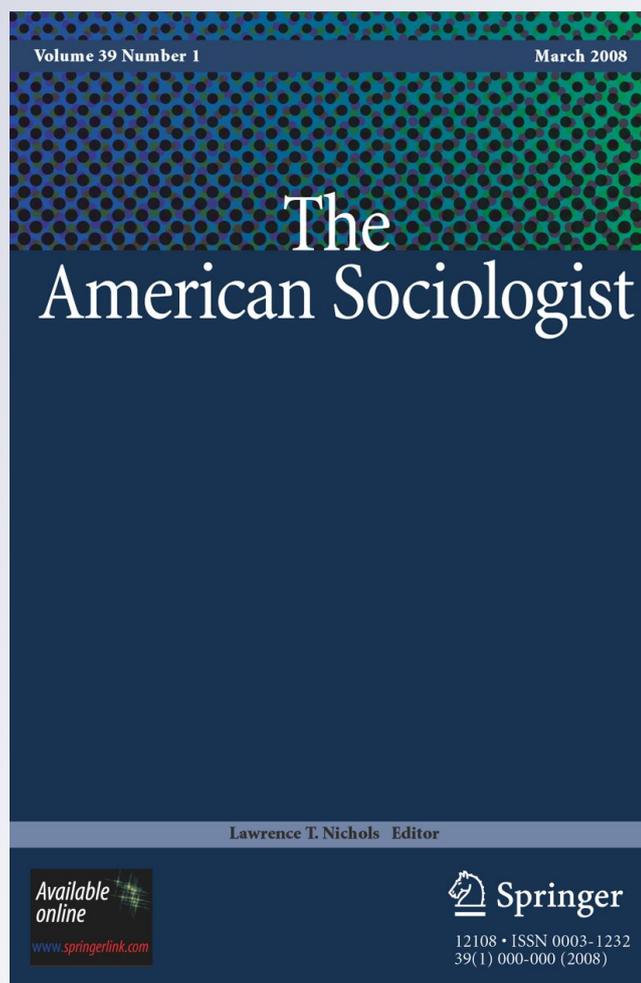
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## Melvin Pollner: A View from the Suburbs

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**Abstract** This paper considers the relationship between Melvin Pollner's sociology of mundane reasoning and conversation analysis. We suggest, first, that Pollner's revolutionary view of the role of accounts in everyday life provides a basic framework for understanding how norms of conversational organization are sustained across time periods ranging from the evanescent moment to the *longue durée* of historical time. Second, we argue his work on conflict and reality disjunctures is important for the light it sheds on conversational processes concerned with the avoidance and/or management of disagreement. Although Pollner was not personally engaged with conversation analysis, his theorizing is nonetheless of great significance in understanding some of its basic preoccupations.

**Keywords** Mundane reason · Accounts · Conversation analysis · Reflexivity · Reality disjunctures

It seems fair to say that Mel Pollner had mixed feelings about conversation analysis (CA). He had an appreciation for its details, but did not particularly contemplate practicing it. Perhaps this was because of his primary interest in identity and the dynamics of subjectivity, or his commitment to holistic 'big picture' topics, or for some other reason. In any event, while we were definitely welcome neighbors, marriage—whether dynastic or otherwise—was not in the cards (Pollner 1991:370). From Mel's perspective the development of CA was symptomatic of ethnomethodology's "move to the suburbs" (Pollner 1991) in its retreat from what he termed "radical reflexivity"—that form of the ethnomethodological program that includes the theorist as well as the theorized within its purview. CA, in his view, was an expression of "endogenous reflexivity" in which the sense making practices of the everyday world

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are analyzed while excluding the sense-making practices of the analyst (Pollner 1991:373):

The study of the sequential structure of conversation in everyday and institutional settings is resolutely empirical and realist. Programmatic statements portray the interactional or conversational order as a primary stratum of social order that is to be rigorously described. Accordingly, conversation analytic studies are directed to the empirical representation of conversational organization. Although accompanied by sophisticated methodological reflections, the reflexive analysis of conversation analytic findings is not prominent within conversation analysis.

While it is certainly the case that radical reflexivity is not a significant part of the CA enterprise, nonetheless much of the analytic framework that Pollner fashioned in his studies of mundane reason (Pollner 1974, 1975, 1987) remains profoundly relevant to conversation analysis. Interactants are, after all, resolutely mundane reasoners. We pursue this theme by considering two major strands of Pollner's theorizing: the incorrigible character of norms, and the significance of empirical conduct in the avoidance of reality disjunctures.

### **Incorrigible Norms and Conversation**

*Mundane Reason* (1987) is a stunningly original reconsideration and generalization of Evans-Pritchard's (1937) concept of the 'secondary elaboration of beliefs.' In his classic study of *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard famously undertook an examination of the Azande's poison oracle, a system by which misfortunes and other contingencies in Azande society were explicated. The oracle involved administering poison to chickens and using the survival or death of these unfortunate animals to illuminate dichotomized questions such as "Did witchcraft cause my crops to rot?" Evans-Pritchard sought to account for how the Azande could preserve their commitment to the infallibility of the poison oracle despite the fact that events could be found that appeared to contradict its conclusions. His solution—the secondary elaboration of belief—rested on the Azande's use of exceptional circumstances to explain away apparent failures: for example, the wrong poison was administered to the chickens, the ritual taboos were not observed while gathering the poison or while interrogating the oracle, witchcraft has upset the oracle, the gods of the creeper from which the poison is collected are angry, the poison is too old, the ghosts are angry etc. (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 154–8). By these forms of ad hoc reasoning (Garfinkel 1967), a society-wide commitment to the infallibility of the poison oracle could be preserved regardless of the fall of events.

Most subsequent treatments of Evans-Pritchard's study, while respectful of its empirical findings, sought to distance the rationality of contemporary (western) societies from the kind of reasoning he described which was generally denounced as circular (Wilson 1970). Pollner's originality consisted in part in his insistence and documentation that this kind of reasoning is alive and well in the contemporary world (including law courts, scientific practice, and of course quotidian life). More radically, and before the rise of the 'strong program' in the sociology of science (Bloor

1976), he also asserted its centrality to the maintenance of the normative boundaries of cultural beliefs, of sanity, and of the real itself. In particular, he drew on Douglas Gasking's (1965) philosophy of mathematics to distinguish between corrigible and incorrigible propositions. Corrigible propositions, Gasking observes, give the recipient information about the world. They are propositions that persons would withdraw and admit to be false if certain things that are denied by the proposition turn out to be true. Incorrigible propositions, by contrast, are propositions that are never admitted to be false. Gasking gives the example of the proposition  $7+5=12$ . Whatever your experience of counting, this proposition is still true. What then is the point of such propositions? Gasking answers his question this way:

the proposition prescribes what you are to say—it tells you how to describe certain happenings. Thus the proposition  $7+5=12$  does not tell you that on counting  $7+5$  you will not get 11. (This would be false because sometimes you do get 11.) But it does lay it down, so to speak, that if on counting  $7+5$  you do get 11, you are to describe what has happened in some such way as this: Either “I have made a mistake in my counting” or “someone has played a trick on me and abstracted one of the objects while I wasn't looking” or “two of the objects have coalesced” or “one of the objects has disappeared”.

Incorrigible propositions, Pollner asserted, abound in the everyday world where they function as anchors for culture. Mundane reason correspondingly involves the secondary elaboration of belief to maintain and reinforce shared perceptions, cognitions, and descriptions of real worldly events in processes through which discrepancies are explained away. In the process of secondary elaboration, core cultural commitments are ‘protected’ from the erosive effects of counter-evidence over time. As a result they can remain relatively untouched by the Brownian motion of cultural shifts that swirl around them.

Pollner advanced the claim that these processes were fundamental to quotidian life. And indeed they can be discerned at work in the organization of conversational interaction, where they underwrite the normative logic of interaction and its empirical maintenance across the flux of interactional events that comprise historical time. Consider one of the fundamental building blocks of conversational organization: the adjacency pair sequence (Schegloff 1968; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). This sequence embodies a simple conversational norm that, upon the production of a first action (for example, a greeting, question, request etc.), a recipient should respond with a corresponding second action. This norm is one of the most enduring in human society, and is unquestionably treated as an incorrigible feature of social life. Departures from the norm are never treated as counter-evidence for the norm's existence and relevance, but rather as evidence that the respondent was unable to hear the first action, or was motivated to ignore it, or set it aside for reasons that are in principle educible and intelligible. Thus the failure to return a greeting may be understood as a product of the recipient's deafness, preoccupation, hangover, inherent rudeness, determination to inflict a snub, or to insult the greeter. Across all these accounts, the conclusion that is simultaneously ‘protected’ and presupposed is that the rule itself has a continuing existence and relevance. By these means the rule is preserved as incorrigible and a presumptive basis of social interaction, pristine and inviolate. It

may also be observed that the accountability of departures from the rule overwhelmingly involve negative ascriptions to the recipient. Recipients who wish to avoid such outcomes may be the more inclined to respect the provisions of the rule in the first place, thus adding the weight of empirical conformity to the rule's provisions as a source of stability that reinforces its presuppositional incorrigibility.

Of course this pattern of accountability, and the mundane reasoning that undergirds it, applies far beyond the organization of elementary action sequences. Consider, for example, the ordering of alternative responses to a first action. A robust norm of conversation is that while accepting responses to a first action (for example accepting an invitation) should be done as soon as possible, rejecting responses should be delayed (Pomerantz 1984; Davidson 1984; Sacks 1987; Heritage 1984; Levinson 1983). Mundane reasoning yields the conclusion that when this norm is departed from, it is done 'for cause.' Thus 'early' rejections may be construed as expressions of social distance or hostility, while 'late' acceptances are perceived as 'reluctant' or half-hearted. Once again, these inferences serve as motivations to do the appropriate thing in the appropriate way, while also providing an infrastructure for both the enactment, and the detection, of underlying sentiments towards the action in question, towards any obligations that the action engenders, and towards the relationship between the parties involved.

Similar reasoning informs the use of descriptive terms. For example, given a norm that one should refer to third persons by name or using terms that are optimally recognizable to the recipient, referring to "that woman Miss Lewinsky" when talking to someone who otherwise knows her as "Monica" will be understood, not as a sign that the norm for referring to persons is undergoing erosion, but rather as a means for conveying a specifically distant stance towards the person in question (Sacks and Schegloff 1979; Stivers 2007).

Conversational interaction is informed by an enormous and interwoven body of norms that are strikingly stable. Indeed it is remarkable that, whereas the language of Shakespeare's day has altered to the point that numerous explanatory notes are required to explicate his plays, the actions and their sequencing are readily recognizable to us 400 years after their creation. It is clear to us that the fundamental processes that Pollner described in *Mundane Reason* are central to the mechanisms through which interactional structures are maintained, protected from erosion, and stabilized across centuries and even millennia.

## Reality and its Disjunctures

In "The Very Coinage of Your Brain" Pollner (1975) explores the darker side of the secondary elaboration of belief. For the use of mundane reason becomes a source of trouble when two persons (or social groups) each use secondarily elaborative accounts to reinforce their own version of events and to discredit the other's. A simplest version of this process might run as follows:

Him: There's someone following us.

Her: You're imagining things.

Him: You're in league with them.

Her: You're paranoid: go see a doctor.

Here in a series of moves, each party has used their own experience as a basis for discounting the other's, and each party adduces increasingly totalizing grounds for their position. By the end, each person has not only discounted the other's position, but also undercut the grounds for the formation of any possible consensus about the reality involved. The process involves what Pollner called an ironicizing of experience, in which each successive claim undercuts the one that went before it, culminating in what Pollner terms a reality disjuncture. In the full-fledged reality disjuncture, he says,

each participant treats his experience of the world as definitive and, hence, as the grounds for ironicizing his opponent's experience. If consensual resolution is to be achieved, one of the protagonists will have to abandon the use of his experience as the incorrigible grounds of further inference. Of course, the abandonment cannot be secured on empirical or logical grounds alone. Competitive versions equally satisfy (and, with respect to one another, fail to satisfy) the demands for empirical validation and empirically correct conclusions. Thus, a choice between them cannot be made compelling in empirical or logical terms alone for the choice is between empirically and logically self-validating and self-sustaining systems. Consequently, relinquishing the faith in the validity of one's own experience may have the flavor of an existential leap. It is a leap without logical or empirical foundations because it is a leap from and to such foundations (Pollner 1975: 419).

Given that reality disjunctures threaten serious consequences for individuals, groups, and communities, it would not be surprising to find institutionalized conversational practices that reduce the likelihood that they will emerge. Indeed, such practices have been identified.

One strikingly recurrent feature of the expression of disagreement in conversation is the tendency to preface such expressions with at least a modicum of agreement (Pomerantz 1984). For instance, in the following exchange two women are discussing whether a sense of humor is learned or innate. What is noticeable about this exchange is that each expression of disagreement is prefaced by a statement that acknowledges the other person's perspective.

[SBL:2:1:7] (Pomerantz 1984: 70–71)

- 1 A: ( ) cause those things take working at,  
 2 (2.0)  
 3 B: -> (hhhhh) Well, they [do, but-j  
 4 A: [They aren't accidents,  
 5 B: -> No, they take working at but on the other hand,  
 6 some people are born with uhm (1.0) well a sense of humor,  
 7 I think is something yer born with Bea.  
 8 A: -> Yes. Or it's c- I have the- eh yes, I think a lotta people  
 9 are, but then I think it can be developed, too.  
 10 (1.0)  
 11 B: -> Yeah, but [there's-  
 12 A: [Any-  
 13 A: Any of those attributes can be developed.

While these practices generally involve mitigated disagreement, the onset of which is delayed, perhaps their most central feature is that they acknowledge the validity of the other person's perspective before offering an alternative. As a result, the ensuing disagreement is not permitted to escalate to the point of a flat-out argument (e.g. "You're wrong!" or "You don't know what you're talking about!"), and, in turn, there is no flat-out argument to escalate into the kind of reality disjuncture that Pollner describes.

The significance of these practices is straightforward. Persons will inevitably have differing beliefs, sentiments, and judgments, the expression of which may well be central to the pursuit of goals, the expression of identity and, at the limit, the maintenance of autonomous personhood (Goffman 1959; 1971). The expression of distinctive personal judgments will ordinarily introduce small-scale cracks in social or group cohesion. The practice of prefacing disagreement is a means by which these cracks can be sealed up or at least prevented from widening. This in turn permits the 'safe' expression of disagreement. Thus, in the aggregate, the practice both facilitates and limits the production of discordant perspectives.

Discrepancies in perspective do not only threaten social relationships and social cohesion. As Pollner (1975, 1987) also noted, when they are sufficiently discrepant from a consensus, they threaten the credibility and competence of their producers. This threat and its management has also been a theme in CA, beginning with Sacks (1984) and subsequent work (Jefferson 2004). Sacks observed that persons are oriented to community standards of what is the case, and what is empirically likely to be the case. Expressions of belief that are flagrantly incompatible with these standards can attract just the kind of negative attributions and sanctions that Pollner discusses. Sacks documented these orientations in reports of extraordinary events, such as the John F. Kennedy assassination, airline hijackings and the like. These reports frequently contain what he called 'first thoughts' in which the speaker first presents a more usual, likely, or prosaic interpretation of the event, before proceeding to describe the realization that something extraordinary had actually happened. The following are two reports from witnesses of the JFK assassination (emphasis added):

Secret Service Agent driving the car: "Well when we were going down Elm Street, *I heard a noise that I thought was a backfire* of one of the motorcycle policemen.... And then I heard it again. And I glanced over my shoulder. And I saw Governor Connally like he was starting to fall. Then I realized there was something wrong." (Jefferson 2004: 134)

Street Witness Report: "I heard the first shot and I saw the President lean over and grab himself like this (holding left chest area)... *For a moment I thought it was, you know, like you say "Oh he got me"*... you've heard those expressions, and then I saw-... his head open up and the blood and everything came out and I started- I can hardly talk about it." (Jefferson 2004: 133)

And, in the following, a passenger reports his experience of a hijacking:

"I was walking towards the front of the airplane and I saw by the cabin, the stewardess standing facing the cabin, and a fellow standing with a gun in her

back. And *my first thought was he's showing her the gun*, and then I realized that couldn't be, and then it turned out he was hijacking the plane." (Jefferson 2004: 147)

Sacks observes that these witnesses present themselves as the kind of person who, as a first resort, sees things in a 'life as usual' way. Their reports sustain this orientation by presenting the normal interpretation as the primary one, and the outlandish alternative as one arrived at sometime later, by implication from the accumulation of evidence. This orientation is preserved in the reporting as well as the report: rather than presenting the outlandish interpretation first, the reporter leads the listener to it via a common orientation to what would be the normal way of understanding the event. Personal competence and rights to arrive at surprising interpretations are also evidenced in these data. In another account from the JFK assassination, a witness credentializes his immediate recognition of gunshots:

As the motorcade went down the side of Elm Street toward the railroad underpass, a rifle shot was heard by me; a loud blast, close by. I have handled firearms for fifty years, and thought immediately that it was a rifle shot.

Here the witness's previous experience with guns is offered as the exceptional circumstance that allows him to arrive at an exceptional first thought.

In the absence of normal, and normalizing, first thoughts, reporters run the risk of being met with disbelief:

Police Commissioner Howard R. Leary apologized yesterday to a Bronx clothing store owner who called the police on Thursday evening to tell them that a man was shooting at people on East 138<sup>th</sup> Street outside his shop. His call was met with disbelief. Three men were killed in the shooting.

Leo Llonch, the store owner, said that when he called the police on the new citywide 911 emergency number, the policeman he spoke to asked, "Are you pulling my leg?" (Jefferson 2004: 132–133)

And at the extreme, the reporter's competence may be at stake, Pollner's accounts of hospitalized schizophrenics are replete with extraordinary representations of events that are presented as unvarnished 'first thoughts'. The "at first I thought" practice is thus a means by which speakers can simultaneously portray themselves as subscribers to the normative order of everyday empirical reality, and leverage this subscription into a credible report of an extraordinary event.

Caution in the presentation of extraordinary but putatively real states of affairs has many manifestations beyond the "at first I thought" practice. A person who is concerned that there may be a burglar in the house may, instead of saying "There's a burglar in the house", offer "I think there's a burglar", "There might be a burglar", "It sounds like a burglar", "Could that be a burglar" etc. These, and yet more practices, are densely present in citizen calls to 911 emergency. In the following case, for example, the caller is at pains to avoid any possibility of being understood as "on the lookout" for trouble (lines 8–9), offers an 'at first I thought' and essentially normalizing interpretation of what she originally heard (lines 9–10), and only

cautiously hypothesizes that the car she describes may have been stolen (lines 21–22) when her narrative receives minimal uptake from the 911 operator (line 20) (Heritage and Clayman 2010: 76–7):

[MidCity Call 30 20:18]

- 1 CT: .hh Midcity emergency.  
 2 Clr: .hhh Yeah uh(m) I'd like tuh:- report (0.2) something  
 3 weir:d that happen:ed abou:t (0.5) uh(m) five minutes  
 4 ago, 'n front of our apartment building?  
 5 CT: Yeah?  
 6 Clr: On eight fourteen eleventh avenue southeast,  
 7 CT: Mm hm,=  
 8 Clr: =.hh We were just (.) uhm sittin' in the room 'n'  
 9 we heard this cla:nking y'know like (.) someone was  
 10 pulling something behind their ca:r. = 'N' we  
 11 looked out the window'n .hhh an' there was (this) (.)  
 12 light blue: smashed up uhm (1.0) .hh station wagon  
 13 an',=.hh A:nd thuh guy made a U-turn,=we live on  
 14 a dead end, .hh an:d (0.2) thuh whole front end of  
 15 the- (.) the car (is/w'z) smashed up. .hhh And (.) > he  
 16 jumped outta the car and I (r)emember < 'e- (.) he tried  
 17 to push the hood down (with/er) something and then he  
 18 jus' (.) started running an' he took o::ff.  
 19 CT: Mm hm,  
 20 Clr: .hh A:nd we think that maybe 'e could've (.) you know  
 21 stolen the car and aba:ndoned it. er something,

By all these means, actions that subscribe to the essential normalcy of the everyday world, simultaneously and inevitably entail presentations of self. Agreement-prefaced disagreements, together with 'at first I thought' and other forms of carefully formulated descriptions, are simply some of the elements in a large plenum of practices that are appropriately understood as methods of reducing the likelihood of major fissures in the fabric of social relations and of social reality itself of the kind that Pollner describes as reality disjunctures.

## Conclusion

Pollner was a Durkheimian to the extent that he took seriously Durkheim's notion that a society is defined by the extent to which its members share a set of ideas in common. He conceived that our world is experienced inside a kind of cultural ecosystem, a bubble like the earth's atmosphere only made up of cultural stuff: ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and assumptions, together with maxims and practices for working with them. Taken as a whole, the ideations that make up this bubble define what we consider to be real or unreal, true or deluded, right or wrong. He thought this was true of organizations as large as a society, a religion, a worldwide community of scientists, or an economic market, and as small as a family or even—or perhaps

especially—a folie a deux (Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 1985). One could think of this bubble as something like the world depicted in the Jim Carey movie *The Truman Show*. Except that, as may be remembered, Truman was eventually able to step outside his bubble, and that's difficult in the context of a culturally defined reality where to step outside is to move beyond what we take to be reality itself. This bubble, as Pollner conceived it, is a condition of our co-existence one with another.

Mel's work examined the fabric of this cultural bubble. He considered its robustness: how it stretches to accommodate discordant circumstances and events, how it recruits us to defend its precepts, and how it sits at the heart of our sociality as a species. He also considered its fragility: how splits and fissures can arise to tear this fabric and the human communities that depend on it, and he looked closely at places—like the law courts, research science, and the psychiatric clinic—where this fabric is under perennial strain. Underlying all of this is our incorrigible commitment to the objectivity of the world itself—the central topic of *Mundane Reason*—and the multitudinous ways in which the secondary elaboration of belief is recruited to its maintenance.

Just as important, in our view, is the possibility that the whole interaction order (Goffman 1983), perhaps the most dense and complex achievement of human culture, is similarly underpinned by the circular practices of mundane reason that Mel delineated. It seems likely that the most basic processes of human sociality involve forms of action and inference that profoundly rest on Pollnerian foundations (Grice 1975; Levinson 2000). In this regard, Mel's work converges with another great microsociologist who, in 'Felicity's Condition' (Goffman 1983), similarly asserted the connections between the pragmatic foundations of human action and sanity itself. This was Mel's essential contribution to conversation analysis: a vision of the very grounds of conversation itself.

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